

News Reporting, World Crises, and Ideology

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Introduction: Ideology and Ambivalence

The papers that follow have been grouped together under the title *News reporting, world crises, and ideology* in order to indicate not only a departmental unity in that all the authors are closely connected to the Department of English at the University of Helsinki,¹ but also a thematic unity in that the analyses presented deal with a prominent area of interrelation between language and context, a relation which we feel needs methodologically to be approached in a pragmatic perspective.

Pragmatics is here conceived of in terms of adaptability and implicitness. Following Morris (1938), we can for analytic purposes distinguish between (a) the structure of language, (b) its coded meaning (to be studied within semantics), and (c) the use or function of language (pragmatics). Pragmatic functionality in turn is understood in terms of what Verschueren (1987) calls bidirectional 'adaptability'. In this view, language adapts to the world, and the world adapts to language: speakers adapt their language to fit in with the demands of the situation at hand, at the same time as they construct (a perception of the relationships in) that situation. This process takes place synchronically, diachronically, ontogenetically, and on both a micro- and a macro-level.

With respect to the studies that follow, adaptability links up directly with how the culture and ideology underlying a newspaper article is communicated and experienced; how news report-

¹ At the time when we made our presentation at the *Language and Context* symposium organized by the Linguistic Association of Finland in Helsinki in November 1992, all the students were working on their MA theses under my supervision. Some of them have now finished their theses and are either teaching, or continuing their studies in the department. We are all very grateful to the audience at the symposium for their useful comments. We are, naturally, individually responsible for the remaining shortcomings. I would also like to thank the others, and Anna Solin, for comments on this introduction.

ing adapts to the culture around it; and how this culture and the people (in societies) that count themselves as belonging to that culture can change accordingly and in turn adapt to the ideology that is portrayed in the media.

The concept of ideology is central to what we are concerned with in these papers. Ideology is clearly tied to cultures and societies, to perceived contexts of situation. No functional analysis of linguistic manifestations can disregard contextual frames of reference, different ideologies, different cultures, different ways of living and thinking. Briefly, we think of a particular ideology as a collection of (mostly implicit) common sense notions that members of a group share about the world.² Such ideologies will influence our ways of expressing ourselves and communicating, our ways of thinking, and even the way outsiders express matters in a form adapted to fit what they conceive of as our sub-culture. For instance, a popular evening newspaper will tend to address itself in a very informal way to what the editors probably see as a group of 'light-minded' readers.

Another notion of central interest is that of implicitness. According to Östman (1986) pragmatics aims at describing and explaining features of language that are implicitly communicated — and implicitly understood. Aspects of a message that cannot be understood without contextual inferencing are said to be implicit in language. Such aspects can be explicated via three pragmatic parameters, those of Coherence, Politeness, and Involvement. For our present purpose, the parameter of Coherence is particularly important, since it attempts to specify the requirements and needs that a particular society, culture, or ideology ('consciously or unconsciously') impose on communication. Still, in addition, a news report like any message is implicitly anchored in interactive aspects of Politeness — via the relationship between reporter, editor, writer and reader, and through issues having to do with credibility and evidentiality. Furthermore, Involvement and affect

² The notion 'common sense' is used here in a technical sense. For a detailed discussion, see Östman (forthcoming).

also come into focus as we bring in analyses of persuasive elements relating to attitudes, feelings and prejudices.³

Aspects of all of these issues will be tackled and mentioned to differing extents in the empirical presentations that follow. The papers are intentionally very empirically oriented, attempting to test the impact of ideology in news reports. Most of the papers investigate situations where reporters can be expected to (implicitly) fall back on the values upheld by their own ideologies. World crises and international conflicts, like the Iraq-Kuwait crisis in 1990-1991, are presumed to offer potential clashes of ideologies, and it is expected that reporters — as human beings — will (consciously or unconsciously) take a stance with respect to such crises. Thus, we argue, although news reporting is never neutral, but a manifestation of implicit ideologies and potential ideology clashes, linguistic realizations of ideological stances will be most clearly expressed — though typically in an implicit manner — in topics of this sort.

One aspect that has constantly recurred in our research is that of ambivalence. (Cf. e.g. Leech & Thomas 1988.) That is, not only can particular surface manifestations have ambiguous functions, but also, and in particular, such ambiguity can be deliberately made use of for purposes of persuasion and for the purpose of imposing one's own ideology (the newspaper's, the culture's ideology) as a filter through which an activity is depicted. An ambivalent message — and most messages are ambivalent to some degree — is like an amoeba which changes shape as it moves about between speaker, addressee, audience, and through time. It is an expression that is (consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously) construed so as to be variably interpretable in several perspectives. In fact, messages with definite, once-and-for-all fixed meanings are rare.

Pragmatic ambivalence touches on a number of central issues. It is a reflection of both the variability and indeterminacy of language, and it is crucially related to the effect that a message has on an addressee in addition to whatever intention a speaker

³ For an analysis of persuasion in these terms, see e.g. Östman (1987).

might have had in producing that message.⁴ Briefly, choosing an interpretation for a message is not an either-or matter for the hearer — nor is it an either-or matter for the speaker: several interpretations can be held active simultaneously, by both. Neither are speakers' and writers' intentions always that clear-cut and 'rational'. Thus, to take but one example,⁵ if a politician has made a statement of the form *This piece of information was not meant for the public*, it is easy to accuse him/her of having deliberately left out the Agent of the passive construction. And the analyst can go on to argue that the Agent that has been left out is consequently to be interpreted as being the politician him/herself who was trying to cover up whatever s/he was doing. Issues of indeterminacy and communicative effect — resulting in ambivalence — come to the fore when the politician in his/her defence points out that it is simply not according to good writing style to use the verb *mean* in the active voice in this context. To this an observant reporter or critic can ask why the politician did not use the verb *intend* in the first place; and so on.

The point is that it is not enough to simply point out to readers and listeners how certain words, constructions, prosodic patterns and gestures are used to stir readers in a particular direction or enhance certain views they might already subconsciously hold; in other words, how certain linguistic manifestations are exploited in order to manipulate readers' understanding of events in the direction of a certain ideology. People can well be educated to pay attention to the use of agentless passives, nominalizations, and different presupposition triggerers. The problem is that, first, language changes: what is used as an implicit manipulative device today may not be useful and usable for the same purpose once it has been explicated (e.g. by linguists). Thus, linguistic awareness education, for it to have more than a temporary effect, has to involve the teaching of the processes involved, of the dynamic and adaptable nature of

⁴ For an overview of these issues, see Östman (1988).

⁵ For a more extensive discussion, see Östman (1986: 262-265).

language. Secondly, as a corollary of what has just been said, the more ambivalently construed a message is, the more difficult it will be to argue that it is manipulatively construed, and the easier it will be for the writer/speaker to hide behind a web of ambiguities and communicative filters.

Communication takes place on an abundance of levels simultaneously — and not even the speakers/writers themselves can be in command of all effects their messages carry.

To varying degrees, instances of all these aspects, and in particular how they relate to news reporting, are directly or indirectly dealt with in the papers that follow.

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The first paper deals with a more general topic in the sense that it does not focus on any particular crisis situation. Anna-Mari Mäkelä discusses the functions of headlines in a quality newspaper as compared to headlines in a popular newspaper. Headlines are what first catches one's eye in a newspaper and Mäkelä illustrates how similar surface manifestations (the shortness of words, Noun + Noun combinations, and quotation marks) can have different functions, and that the ambivalence thus created can be explicitly or implicitly made use of for persuasive purposes.

The next three papers, one jointly written by Jaana Pöppönen and Pirjo-Liisa Ståhlberg, one by Päivi Autio, and one by Heli Huttunen, have two things in common. First, they all deal — directly or indirectly — with news reporting from or around events relating to the Iraq-Kuwait crisis and the ensuing Persian Gulf War. This conflict situation started with the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and Autio's paper deals with news reports in British and American newspapers relating to those first days of uneasiness felt in the world. The UN condemned the annexation and President Bush and President Gorbachev met to discuss the situation in the summit meeting held in Helsinki on September 9, and then issued a joint statement demanding that Saddam Hussein withdraw. Huttunen's paper deals with British and American news reports of the Helsinki summit meeting. The

deadline set for the withdrawal of troops by the UN was January, 15, 1991; war broke out two days later, on the 17th. Pöppönen and Ståhlberg discuss news reporting in Britain, the USA, and Finland during the war.

The second thing these papers have in common is that they all deal with different aspects of who is in control of, or responsible for, the activities reported on. Pöppönen and Ståhlberg start by boldly addressing the question of whose war it was, using critical linguistics methodology. They show how different newspapers and different cultures have different conceptions of who is in charge of the war. Autio tackles the implications of how reporters indicate their sources, and how this can be used for persuasive purposes. Both Autio and Pöppönen & Ståhlberg also indicate how much coverage is given in different newspapers to the different parties involved. Huttunen focuses her attention on the function and use of agentless passives in reports from the Summit Meeting. In particular, she shows how expressions with implicit agents can be used ambivalently for persuasion and/or in order to avoid responsibility.

The last report is of an analysis of news reports from the internal crisis in Moscow at the end of August 1991 between President Gorbachev and Soviet conservatives. Tomi Palo has looked in detail at some aspects of the ways American newspapers reported on this incident. His analysis focuses on the use of metaphors and in particular the metaphor *POLITICS IS A GAME* in these news reports.

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It seems to me that a focus on the relation between language and cognition — although undoubtedly extremely important as such — cannot account properly for human behaviour without simultaneously and constantly taking into account social and cultural aspects. Programmatically, one could say that linguistics and we linguists — although our field is rooted in the arts with respect to its subject matter — should not avoid taking on the challenge of attempting to be socially relevant at all times.

The humanities are often accused of spending funds on research that could be more usefully devoted e.g. to cancer or AIDS research. An admittedly oft-quoted (and cliché-ridden to the sceptics), but extremely reasonable response to this view would be to wonder what the use of a healthy body is if one's psyche is unhealthy and exploited. In this vein, it can be argued to be just as important to investigate the causes and manners of linguistic manipulation, e.g. through news reporting, as it is to investigate the causes of cancer. Both enterprises are maximally socially relevant.

The papers that follow, and their authors, attempt in a very modest way to take on the challenge of being socially relevant.

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