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ABSTRACT

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A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis of the Newspaper Editorial

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The dissertation is oriented towards a domain of great relevance today (mass-media) and it intends to raise some questions in the domain of written press. The novelty of this analysis consists in the examination of a specific type of media discourse, that of the editorial in the written press, more exactly in some publications in the American press. The paper tries to bring into relief the means by which the editorial writers, representing the voices of the paper, conceive the articles of opinion (editorials) in a period marked by social and political problems with the obvious intention of influencing the process of message decodification, which, eventually, steer the readers in a certain direction.

In our study we first try to establish the theoretical background for the analysis of the editorial and that is why we concentrate upon defining discourse analysis and genre analysis, at the same time motivating our choice. Rhetorical styles, types of discourse, adequate procedures of describing and investigating discourse and discourse community are some points we discuss in this dissertation. Specific text types or 'genres' (as the editorial) serve conventional social uses and functions. In other words, specific types of texts intend to do things in social institutions with predictable effects.

That is why the approach here tries to be interdisciplinary. The editorial discourse was tackled both from a rhetoric perspective and that of the Critical Discourse Analysis. Within linguistics, particularly within discourse analysis, discourse is used to describe a structure which extends beyond the boundaries of the sentence and this is important for editorialists. Critical discourse analysis focuses on sentence and word-level analysis, but it also goes beyond the sentence drawing analytic methods from systemic functional linguistic. By establishing reading positions, texts can challenge readers, situating and positioning them in identifiable relations of power and agency in relation to texts. We remarked that critical discourse analysis employs interdisciplinary techniques of text analysis to investigate how editorials reflect representations of the world, social identities and social relationships.

The editorial can be analyzed in terms of how they structure and identify social and political relations between human subjects. Critical discourse analysis, thus employs interdisciplinary techniques of text analysis to look at how texts construct representations of the world and identify social identities or relationships. The comparative cultural analysis resorted to pragmatic and semantic elements. Without them an analysis of the discourse of

opinion in the press would be impossible. In addition to describing the cultural assumptions that are part of the editorial macrostructure, we tried to describe particular lexical choices as well as the grammatical representation of action and agency because editorials can be analyzed in terms of their structure and the way in which they present relations between human subjects. The analysis of different editorials referring to the same event showed beyond any doubt that the same reality can be presented from different perspectives, which proves that language becomes an efficient tool in the hands of the editorial writers who formulate their discourse so that it may serve institutional or even personal interests (those of the press barons). Thus the word is given an undeniable strength.

By using this intra-cultural approach we did not intend to identify and differentiate between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ language used in editorials, nor to identify publications that do a better job than others, but to identify the manipulative strategies which editorial writers use, especially in the periods of conflict, with a view to winning the trust and respect of the audience. In this way they try to lead them towards the intended interpretation of the content of the editorial. This means convincing them to situate on one side or the other of the conflict as the editorial policy requires them.

It is interesting that the editorial was not analyzed in detail in spite of the importance and of the special position it has within a publication, in contrast with other journalistic types, especially the news articles. The analysis of the editorial discourse has still a long way to go, and this dissertation is, we hope, a small step forward. The great majority of previous studies analyzed and interpreted the typology or the functions of editorials in contrast with other texts that appear in the press. Here we try to identify the rhetoric structure, that is the linguistic strategies used by the editorialists in order to build the discourse with the maximum impact on the audience. In addition to these, we discuss the special case of editorials published in periods of tensions and conflicts because the discourse changes dramatically, as the editorialist has to ‘win’ the audience to the side represented by the newspaper in which the editorial appears.

The period of time chosen for this study (the war in Iraq) is not done at random because the social and political impact it had, proved to have an even greater importance for the medium and long periods of time than it had been expected at that particular moment. An open conflict between the US and Iraq led to the start of a war between the two countries, involving politically other countries, members of NATO, which created social tensions in the respective countries (demonstrations, protests, even violent manifestations) and also generated some political changes in the respective countries. The initial conflict was widely debated in

the American press, but also in the press of the rest of the world, both in news items and editorials.

It is interesting that it was not only the American society, but the mass-media as a whole that was divided in the interpretation given to this conflict. Whereas some publications showed enthusiasm and pathos in their editorials siding with the American Government, others promoted a more moderate attitude in expressing their point of view, appealing both to the readers' emotions and to reason. In such periods of conflict the public becomes more preoccupied by the social and political aspects shown by the press, and that is why the importance of the articles of opinion, especially editorials in their position as institutional articles (i.e. articles that express the official point of view of the respective publication), grows in importance and the fight between different points of view becomes more obvious, and also more interesting for those who want to study them.

The editorialists use the linguistic resources in a way similar to that in which politicians use them with a view to convincing the audience. They make use of an efficient perlocutionary effect. This effect is a dimension of any speech act which can be understood when decoding the intentions of the emitter. The analysis proposed in this study tries to interpret the other two dimensions of the speech act, the locutionary and, especially, the illocutionary force of the statements. Pragmatics can be described as a quality of the mind, a system that can process information, a system that can interpret a specific phenomenon in the world, i.e. human communicative behavior. That is why for the communicative activity to be meaningful, both the speaker and the listener should be careful to the way in which they express themselves. According to this tenet, in producing utterances speakers/writers try to anticipate the background assumptions the listeners/readers are likely to use, what inferences they are likely to draw.

In periods of great tensions, of conflict, there exists the tendency to focus the attention on the binary dimension of the editorial, with the stress on the two extremes "we/us" and "they/their". We have also noted that some publications structure their editorials around some negative aspects with the stress on "they/their" and the elements of persuasion are achieved by exaggerating negative synonymy.

Having accepted the power of the press in influencing the public opinion, the paper brings into discussion several editorials published in the US and Canada with different ideological orientations: *denverpost.com*, *Le Quebecois Libre*, *The Washington Times* and *The President's Forum*. The qualitative analysis of a several editorials gave us the possibility of establishing some specific features that characterize this type of discourse. We approached the

problem in this way so that we could demonstrate that language becomes a tool in the hands of editorial writers who conceive their discourse so that it serves the institutional, or, sometimes, even personal interests. In this way the force of the word in the public sphere becomes an undeniable asset.

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The paper is developed on two essential complementary coordinates, a theoretical one and a practical one, an analysis of the corpus. The logic of assembling parts together follows the two aspects from a detailed presentation of the theoretical concepts specific for the study of media (discourse analysis, speech acts, presuppositions, the connection between media and the concept of ‘power’) to the analysis of the corpus which includes three parts: the rhetorical structure of these editorials, relevant features that determine the process of interpreting the message and, obviously, the strategies used to intensify the message of the text in the first and last part of the editorial. The ideological orientation of a newspaper is given not only by the manner in which the events and the persons involved are presented, but also by the linguistic strategies employed. Everything has an ultimate goal: that of serving some institutional interests. We have tried to decipher the ideological orientation of an editorial as long as it helped us describe a number of structural and linguistic options of the editorialist.

The paper consists of seven chapters, plus an introduction, conclusions, bibliography and the annexes that comprise the editorials analyzed in this paper. The first four chapters represent a theoretical presentation from linguistic general concepts and theories used in the media studies (we laid stress on the critical discourse analysis) as well as a discussion on editorials (definition, history, editorial vs. news item, characteristics, objectives, functions). The next two chapters are meant to be a connecting link between the theoretical part and the practical part of the paper. The qualitative analysis is preferred to the quantitative analysis as it satisfies better the goal mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

We have established that the production of the editorial discourse is determined both by intrinsic elements (the constraints imposed by this genre) and extrinsic to the journalistic process (the political/ideological orientation of the publication/its owners). Specific text types or ‘genres’ serve conventional social uses and functions. That is, particular kinds of texts attempt ‘to do things’ in social institutions with predictable ideational and material effect. These include functional written texts (the editorial is one of them), spoken face-to-face interactions, visual or gestural texts. The purpose here is to define the editorial as genre and within this genre the specificity of the editorial. They influence both the contents and the structure (form) in which the editorial is shaped. The structure we have come to consists of

five rhetoric levels, of which three are compulsory (title, theme, argument) and two are optional (solution, position). It is obvious that in the case of the editorial the strict identification of all these levels is not as simple as it is in the case of news items where they are preceded by subtitles. However, the identification and analysis of these levels in the case of editorials might be relevant especially for researchers, as the ordinary readers take into consideration the whole rhetoric which is what really matters. From the point of view of the rhetoric structure the article of opinion (editorial) can be considered a unitary journalistic genre, but we cannot say the same thing when we take into consideration the way different points of view in which a problem widely debated is expressed, ideas evident from the first lines of the editorial, which brings more substance to the idea that the political and ideological orientation of the editorialist is hard to hide.

Within the public space of discourse, the linguistic choice is strategic because it can lead the audience in the direction wanted by the author. It is true that the analysis starts from the graphic aspect of the text and then moves to the semantic, pragmatic and syntactic levels following a well-known model of discourse analysis in general. Each editorial writer has a number of linguistic options which reflect his/her view on the society we live in. These options are organically connected to the representations of actions, events as well as the actors involved. They are also connected to the representations of the information, but reflect options referring to the vocabulary and the grammatical structures. They incorporate the representation of other 'voices' in the editorial discourse. In difficult moments, the language used by editorials becomes a subject of interest as both events and persons involved can be described from different angles, they can be brought to the fore or can be lost in the background as it suits the author who wants to guide the audience in a certain direction of interpretation.

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Next we move to analyze in detail the role that the first and the last paragraph in an editorial have in stressing the main message of the text. Sometimes these parts seem to be redundant or even irrelevant for the message to be conveyed. However, they serve a very specific function, that of producing a persuasive effect on the audience by highlighting a special point of view (which can be different from one publication to another depending on the ownership and the editorial line imposed by them).

Describing the specific persuasive rhetoric of the editorial, we tried to make a contribution to a better understanding of the complexity of the manipulative writings. In periods of conflict the editorialist and through him/her the newspaper becomes an active actor

because the details referring to the structure and the content shows beyond any doubt the active involvement in such events, trying to make the audience react according to the suggestions made in the text.

We have also noticed that events and persons can be represented in different ways in the editorial as each language has at its disposal a great number of expressions from which the editorialist chooses the ones that best serve his/her goal. Taking into consideration the major role played by editorials in shaping the public opinion, this study may contribute to a better understanding of the message expressed by editorials simply because it identifies the basic elements of manipulative rhetoric. We have noticed that in a difficult socio-political context the manipulative dimension overshadows the argumentative dimension in the editorial discourse. The appeal to emotions and feelings overshadows the appeal to reason.

The editorial is a faithful recorder of the events that happen on the social and political stage, it incorporates ideological and political messages which promote a special type of discourse whose interpretation requires an approach beyond language as it implies action in a context loaded with ideologies. It is a very complex element, especially in difficult social and political moments, and that is why a good interpretation asks for an analysis of all levels: syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and rhetoric. The relationship between the editorial discourse and the political context is very tight as this type of news discourse influences and is influenced by social changes, which it reflects in its content.

The editorial represents a specific genre having its own features which we tried to highlight in our study. We analyzed, from the applied point of view, to what extent the editorial can be better used in the benefit of those reading it by showing them how to interpret it. We also aimed at raising awareness of the existence of a well-established editorial discourse community that makes use of its own genres and sub-genres in order to communicate and accomplish its professional purposes. One of these genres is represented by the editorial.

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