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Reporting Armistice: Grammatical evidence and semantic implications of diachronic context shifts

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Publication Details

Scott, C. (2008). Reporting Armistice: Grammatical evidence and semantic implications of diachronic context shifts. In C. Wu, C. MIM. Matthiessen & M. Herke (Eds.), *Proceedings of ISFC 35: Voices Around the World* (pp. 125-130). Sydney: The 35th ISFC Organizing Committee.

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Proceedings of ISFC 35: Voices Around the World

Edited by

Canzhong Wu
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Published by
The 35th ISFC Organizing Committee

Sydney 2008

Editors

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Published by the 35th Organizing Committee, Sydney

ISBN 978-0-9805447-1-8

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Reporting Armistice: Grammatical evidence and semantic implications of diachronic context shifts

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Abstract

Journalists reporting war have increasingly been embedded with military units, especially in the recent Iraq War (e.g. Cottle, 2006: 76; Tumber, 2004). Being ‘on the ground’ amongst the action might suggest that the news produced is more strongly ‘grounded in reality’ than reports constructed in the newsroom from news ‘off the wire’. However, this investigation of seven armistice reports from the Sydney Morning Herald spanning a century (1902-2003) suggests that there has been a gradual shift away from strongly grounded, accountable reporting towards engaging, crafted prose. Across the archive of these texts, the patterning of circumstantial elements reflects shifts in the priority placed upon specificity of time and place. These grammatical patterns are indices of contextual differences in the demands of technology and process through which news reports have been produced. An example is the shift from lists of telegraphic corantos to ‘integrated’ articles published under a specific reporter’s byline. One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that as the reporter’s ‘voice’ mediates between reader and events, there is some sacrifice of the readers’ ability to reconstruct the unfolding of events. This conclusion prompts us to problematise the mediation of war in the news about armistice.

1 Introduction

The end of the Gulf War in 1991 was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) as the result of a declaration of victory by the US military:

The Gulf War ended last night when President Bush declared that "Kuwait is liberated; Iraq's Army is defeated; our military objectives are met"... (Walker & Stephens, 1991)⁴².

Almost 90 years previously, in June 1902, the end of the Boer War had been reported in the same newspaper thus:

LONDON, June 1. The terms of peace have been signed at Pretoria. June 2. After signifying their acceptance of the British terms all the Boer delegates arrived at Pretoria on Saturday and signed at half-past 10 o'clock at night the document containing the terms of surrender... (Sydney Morning Herald, 1902).

From these extracts, it is on the one hand very easy to gather where and when the Boer War ended and on what general basis (i.e. a mutually accepted peace treaty formalised in a legal document), and on the other hand rather difficult to say where or exactly when or on what grounds the Gulf War ended. These two extracts form part of a set of seven reports of the end of war from the SMH over more than a century. My initial readings of the texts left me with the sense that there had been a shift over time in the degree to which the time and location of events was specified. In the earlier texts in the corpus (from the Boer War and World War I) it was clear where and when the armistice had come about. But in general, as I continued to read through the World War II text, then Korean and Vietnam War texts, and finally the Gulf War and Iraq War texts, the explicit anchors in time and space realised by such grammatical options as Circumstances of temporal or spatial location became fewer and/or less specific. This resulted in a feeling of being adrift in the flow of information about what went on, rather than having a clearer understanding of how the end of war came about.

In the literature on news discourse, the location of news events in time and space is often

⁴² Extracts from *The Sydney Morning Herald* are used with permission.

assumed as an obligatory element (e.g. Bell, 1994: 112), and so linguistic resources for expressing time and space are duly identified and explained (e.g. Bell, 1998: 93) but not problematised. The importance of location in time and space is also implied by the recognition that news stories are ethereal, being superseded daily (Fowler, 1991: 225-226), and that modern news stories in particular are meant to be understandable independent of their context of delivery (unlike earlier texts that were to be read aloud in coffee houses) (Matheson, 2000: 570). Australian television producer Stephen Rice, responding to the overwhelming flux of media discourse on the Iraq War, also recognised the necessity of giving adequate contextual information, saying: "...if the purpose of journalism is to give context, then this is its antithesis... the volume of words and images is dazzling. We may never have been told more, and understood less" (Rice, 2003: 12). The problem as he saw it was that the globalisation of news and the speed of communications meant that information from news sources was decontextualised and never properly recontextualised for publication, and consequently contributed more to misunderstanding than understanding.

According to other literature on the media, the role of journalism includes providing fast, reliable information (Harrison, 2006: 3), providing topical and entertaining information based in the here-and-now, as an antidote to rumour (Conboy, 2004: 3, 6), and helping consumers make sense of both the 'small picture' of particular events and the bigger picture of events in a wider context (Boyd-Barrett, 2004: 26). These notions about the role of journalism in today's society implicate the inclusion of contextual anchors as a crucial element in fulfilling that purpose. If readers are unable to glean basic information from a news report about where and when the reported event occurred, it is of limited use to them as a source of information about real events going on in the world.

In this diachronic study I am attempting a systematic approach to hermeneutic investigation of journalism in the SMH (a cultural benchmark for Sydneysiders), by maintaining relative topical consistency (the conclusion of war) and working towards a way of keeping control of systemic variations at all strata, using the systemic resources of the Hallidayan model. My analysis of this set of seven texts reporting the end of war raises questions about the social and professional significance of differences in specificity of contextual details of time and space over the century. If this kind of information is lacking, that must indicate something about the semantics and context of reporting armistice and how the semantic options are realised in the grammar. In this paper I present findings from my analysis of the selections of Circumstances of temporal and spatial location in the grammar of Transitivity, acknowledging that there are other grammatical resources for encoding these meanings also (e.g. tense selection and temporal conjunctions).

2 Findings and Interpretations

The seven texts I investigated totaled 5863 words in 625 clauses. The space limitations of this paper prevent me from including extracts from each of them, so I will present a general discussion of the patterns, referring to examples where appropriate. A summary of general statistics for the texts, including frequencies of Circumstances of time and place, is presented in Table 1. Circumstances of time and place in the World War II and Korean War texts occur at around twice the rate of the other texts, and there is a significant difference in the frequency of Circumstances of time and place in the Iraq War text, with Circumstances of place occurring at more than four times the rate of Circumstances of time.

Text	Clauses	Per Clause		
		Circ:Time	Circ:Space	Words
Boer War Text (3 rd June, 1902)	149	0.11 (17)	0.15 (22)	7.93
World War I Text (12 th November, 1918)	58	0.16 (9)	0.09 (5)	9.40
World War II Text (16 th August, 1945)	33	0.24 (8)	0.30 (10)	9.70

Korean War Text (28 th July, 1953)	98	0.26 (25)	0.23 (23)	9.67
Vietnam War Text (1 st May, 1975)	92	0.13 (12)	0.29 (27)	9.16
Gulf War Text (1 st March, 1991)	109	0.07 (7)	0.13 (14)	11.63
Iraq War Text (10 th April, 2003)	86	0.08 (7)	0.35 (30)	8.81
Total	625	85	131	
Average	89.29	0.15	0.22	9.38

Table 1. General Statistics for the set of texts

A close examination of Circumstances of time and space reveals significant contrasts in their degree of specificity. I identified four sub-categories of varying specificity among each kind of Circumstance; these are explained in Table 2. The sub-categories are shown in order of decreasing specificity, from the specific to the relative. The general trend across the texts is towards relative Circumstances of time (relative date and event-relative time), and towards specific Circumstances of place (map-based or concrete location), as shown in Figure 1. The sub-categories are represented in order of decreasing specificity from the y-axis up (i.e. clock-based time and map-based location at the bottom), with the darker shading representing the more specific sub-categories and the lighter shading representing the more relative sub-categories. In the case of the most recent two texts (Gulf War and Iraq War), specific Circumstances of time drop out altogether in favour of relative times.

I will mention here some contrasting findings from three of the texts, Boer War, Korean War, and Iraq War texts, before presenting a general discussion of findings and intentions for further study. The Boer War text has only one specific clock time reference but, significantly, this occurs in the opening move of the text (see extract above), giving a clear point of reference in time for the crucial event of the truce signing. In this analysis I have excluded the datelines of each article as they relate to the reporting process rather than the reported events. This text is generally oriented to the days of the week relative to the week of utterance, e.g. *on Saturday*, rather than specific dates or times. This may be due to the time lag between event and report as a result of the state of the communications technology at the time (telegraph); in this case the main event took place three days before this issue of the newspaper. Following the conventional ‘coranto style’ of the time (Nanri, 1993), the newspaper construes the social activity of reporting armistice as a process of passing on the cables from London (and elsewhere) each day, just as they are received, without conflating them into one cohesive article or giving them local contextualisation. The Boer War text is also strongly oriented to map-based locations at the level of towns and cities, e.g. ‘at Pretoria’, focussing on sites of conference, celebration, commemoration, and declaration, so reporting armistice is construed as a record of official actions and statements, as well as public response. The audience, who is geographically and probably also psychologically distant from the events, is kept at a distance from the events through this patterning of Circumstances of location.

Sub-category	Explanation and Exemplification
Time	
Clock-based Time	a time that could be represented on a clock face, e.g. <i>At 9.40 a.m.</i> (Korean War text)
Calendar Date	a date that could be shown on a calendar, e.g. <i>on August 17</i> (Korean War text)
Relative Date	a date (realised in the nominal group) that must be interpreted with respect to the 'here-and-now' of the text, e.g. <i>on Monday</i> (Iraq War text)
Event-relative Time	a time relation with a particular event (realised in the adverbial group) or a phase of time, or time relative to, an event (realised by in the nominal group), e.g. <i>at the close of the service</i> (Boer War text)
Space	
Map-based Location	a geographical place name that could be found on a map (realised in the nominal group), e.g. <i>In Sydney</i> (World War II text)
Concrete Location	a tangible place (realised by concrete, inanimate Thing in the nominal group, which may or may not be a Proper Noun), e.g. <i>at the Mansion House</i> (Boer War text)
Abstract Location	an abstraction (semiotic or material), institution or human collective as Thing, identified as location by the use of a locative preposition, e.g. <i>beyond victory and war</i> (Gulf War text)
Aspectual Relation	spatial aspect, e.g. movement towards or away from (realised by adverbial group), e.g. <i>back</i> (Korean War text)

Table 2. Explanation of sub-categories of Circumstances of time and place

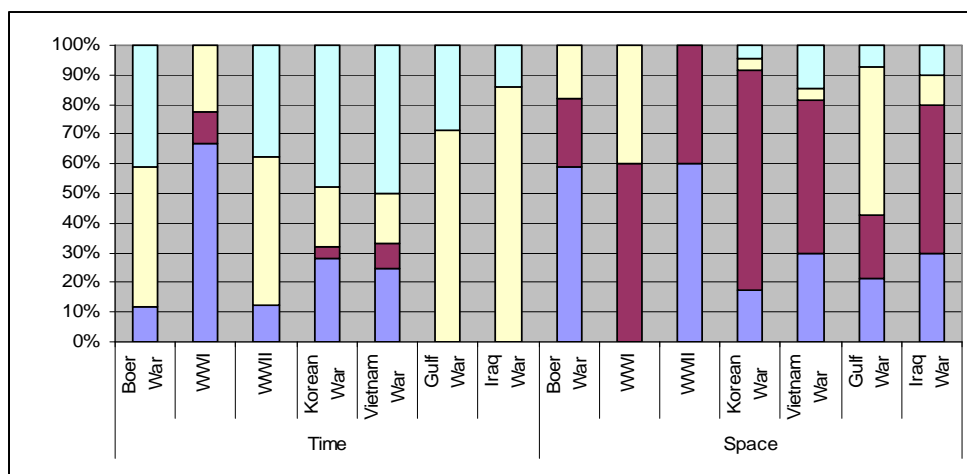


Figure 1. Distribution of sub-categories of Circumstances of Time and Space

The Korean War text foregrounds a pattern of clock-based time. It is concerned with locating the armistice events in precise moments of time, guiding the reader through the timeline of events, e.g. through Circumstances as Marked Theme: *At 5.40 a.m.*, *At 9.40 a.m.*, and *At 10 a.m.* Event-relative time Circumstances, e.g. *Later*, *immediately*, *a few minutes later*, also help to create a strong sense of the sequence of events. In terms of space, this text is strongly oriented to general concrete locations in the immediate material context of events, e.g. *into a wooden building*, *at tables*. The audience is thus brought right in to the material context of the signing ceremony, but is not given a wider perspective on the sites of struggle such as the 38th parallel, which was at the heart of the conflict.

The Korean War text is one of only two texts in which there are more instances of

Circumstances of time than of place, the other being the WWI text. Both wars involved the surrender of one warring party to another and the high-profile, controversial negotiation and signing of a treaty. Therefore the foregrounding of specific moments in time at which events took place may serve to emphasise and reinforce the legal process and implications of the signing of a peace treaty. The Korean War text construes reporting armistice as the creation of a public historical record, giving the specific times of various stages of the armistice process (but, notably, not the conditions of the truce) as a safeguard against potential attempts to break the truce, which is construed as precarious or uncertain in this text.

The Iraq War text is notable for the scarcity of Circumstances of time and total lack of specific Circumstances of time. The reader is told when the events occurred relative to the time of reading, e.g. *yesterday*, but nothing more specific than that. This construes a context in which such specific grounding in time is not a high priority, perhaps because the audience may access specific time information from other media sources, e.g. TV, radio, or online newspapers. The technological and media context has shifted over the course of the century, such that newspapers are in competition with these other kinds of media and must maintain relevance by making their reports complementary to the other news available. They no longer occupy the privileged position of monopoly on dissemination of news that the newspapers of 1902 and 1918 did. In contrast to the non-specific representations of time, the Iraq War text frequently uses Circumstances of location, particularly very specific locations at the level of suburb and landmark, e.g. *past the Martyrs' Monument, three kilometres east of the central Jumhuriya Bridge over the Tigris*. This systematic selection of detailed Circumstances construes a writer (here, identified as the SMH's Middle East correspondent, Paul McGeough) who has strong local knowledge of Baghdad, and it has the effect of making the city of Baghdad seem familiar to the reader: a city like any other, with a city centre and familiar landmarks. At the same time, the level of detail prompts questions about what relevance it would have to readers in Sydney, most of whom would presumably not have visited Baghdad. The text has the effect of a timeless 'montage', giving snapshots of apparently simultaneous events occurring in different locations. In this sense it resembles more verbal art than news report, and so it differs in style from the 'hard news' traditionally found reporting important events in this focal position in the newspaper.

3 General Discussion

The analysis briefly described here demonstrates the complexity of the semiotic event, such that even just the selection of one kind of grammatical option, the Circumstance of time or of space, must be interpreted in light of the configuration of parameters of context. If there is a slight shift in the mode of discourse (e.g. competition with other kinds of media), the field of discourse (e.g. the legal status of the war and/or its conclusion), or the tenor of discourse (e.g. the degree to which the correspondent's voice becomes part of the text), then the semantics of time and space also shift slightly, and the grammatical selections must reflect this. There appears to have been a gradual shift in professional and societal perceptions of the role of journalism and expectations of the degree of understanding required. The laboured style of the earlier texts, with their separate datelines and compartmentalisation of information under sub-headings, made for more precise representation across a number of considerations, and the reader had the opportunity at least to work backwards from the datelines to decode the sequence of events. The more recent texts, in creating dramatic, engaging descriptions, have sacrificed the ease with which the reader might piece together a clear understanding of the unfolding of events.

Furthermore, there is no intrinsic reason that a dramatic piece should neglect to encode details of time and space, or that a less engaging piece should tend to encode them precisely. What also seems to have happened, then, is that the personality of the correspondent or

journalist, not just the processes of news gathering and production, has become the mediator of the experience of war. This is demonstrated further by the fact that, of the seven texts, only the Gulf War and Iraq War texts are attributed to named journalists. All other texts are either unattributed (WWII text), or attributed to a location (e.g. London in Boer War and WWI texts, Saigon in Vietnam War text) or an agency (A.A.P. in the Korean War text). Thus a paradox becomes apparent: even if the journalist is, and is construed as being, 'on the ground' at a particular time and place, the events of the conclusion of war are not necessarily more temporally or spatially 'grounded'.

This study presents just one narrow, but nonetheless revealing, angle on the similarities and differences between instances of news reporting in the SMH over a century. The crucial contribution of the wider project is the move towards an understanding of the legacy of news reporting in history, recognizing that

the way news is produced, what it concentrates on, how its stories are put together and who takes an interest in it, all depend to some extent on the habits and conventions - not to mention technology - which were developed in a previous historical period... In other words, the language of news culture is grounded in a historical process which makes certain choices easy, others more difficult (Hartley, 1982: 8).

The cumulation of angles of comparison of text instances in the study will enable a description of the system of meaning potential for reporting armistice and the complexity of the semiotic event of news reporting, and will likely challenge assumptions about the habits and conventions of the media.

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