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Reporting Armistice: Authorial and non-authorial voices in *The Sydney Morning Herald* 1902-2003

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Proceedings of ISFC 35: Voices Around the World

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Table of Contents

ISFC 2008 Sponsors	vi
ISFC 2008 Organizing Committee.....	vi
Preface	i
Table of Contents.....	iii
Author Index	vii
A Comparative Study of Interpersonal Metaphors in English and Chinese Call Centre Discourse Xu Xunfeng, Wang Yan and Gail Forey.....	1
A Systemic Functional Micro-Grammar of Spanish Clitics Victor M. Castel.....	7
On the importance of ‘showing’ Frances Christie and Chris Cléirigh	13
Grammatical Intricacy – the pedagogical significance of counting by word, clause or idea Howard Doyle.....	19
Nouns in School Children’s Science Writing: A Functional Linguistics Perspective Zhihui Fang	25
Reviewing reading pedagogy through the lens of a stratified model of language Susan Feez	31
University examination questions in the context of an international student cohort Susan Hoadley	38
A ‘good enough’ grammatics: Developing an effective metalanguage for school English in an era of multiliteracies Mary Macken-Horarik	43
Self- Assessment of Foreign Language Speaking Skills: With a Focus on Gender Difference Nasrin Hadidi Tamjid.....	49
Transitivity Profiles as Indicators of the Development of Student’s Narrative Writing: a Corpus-based Study Wang Shanshan and Guo Libo	55
Question-answer as a genre in students’ academic writing in Spanish Natalia Ignatieva	61
Ideational Perspectives on Feedback in Academic Writing Angelia Lu	67
Reports in Spanish writing: generic features and text quality Ana Martín-Úriz and Susana Murcia-Bielsa.....	72
Hetero-balancing Approach to Curriculum Planning using the Systemic-Functional Analysis K. Ram Chandra.....	78
Speaking to Write and Writing to Speak: A case study of university students in Japan Jonathon Adams and Andrea Orlandini	83
The effects of teaching Hasan’s Semantic networks in a reading class in a Japanese university Andrea Orlandini and Jonathon Adams	89

A Correlation between the Systems of Taxis and Projection in Newspaper Articles	
José Manuel Durán	95
Social Representations and Experiential Metafunction: Poverty and Media Discourse	
Denize Elena Garcia da Silva	100
The explanatory power of the SFL dimensions in the study of news discourse	
Annabelle Lukin	106
Representing Crime in Contemporary Cambodia: <i>The Phnom Penh Post's</i> Police Blotter	
Stephen H. Moore.....	112
Ideational projection and interpersonal projection in news reporting: patterns of evaluation in English and Japanese	
Ayako Ochi	119
Reporting Armistice: Grammatical evidence and semantic implications of diachronic context shifts	
Claire Scott	125
Reporting Armistice: Authorial and non-authorial voices in <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> 1902-2003	
Claire Scott	131
Interacting voices: ‘mother’ as token and topic in psychotherapy	
Caroline Henderson-Brooks	137
Patient Safety: a tri-stratal interpretation of communicative risk in the Emergency Departments of public hospitals	
Maria Herke, Christian Matthiessen, Jeannette McGregor, Marie Manidis, Hermine Scheeres, Diana Slade, Jane Stein-Parbury and Rick Iedema	143
Using SFL to Understand and Practise Dialogue Interpreting	
Helen Tebble.....	149
Agency in Cardiff and IFG: Competition or Collaboration?	
Tom Bartlett.....	155
Leech and the Limits of Functionalism	
Peter K Wylie	161
Process and Grammatical Metaphor in Wordsworth’s <i>The Prelude</i> and Niitsi’powahsin (Blackfoot) Grammar	
Andrew Goatly	167
The Person Deixis in Bagri and Punjabi	
Gopal Ram.....	173
A Contrastive Study of English and Japanese Transitivity: The Kyoto Grammar Approach	
Masa-aki Tatsuki	178
A Profile of Òkó Voice	
Ernest S Akerejola.....	183
Exploring the experiential meaning of the Chinese nominal group	
Jing Fang	189
Ideational and Interpersonal Manifestations of Projection in Spanish	
Jorge Arús Hita.....	195
On Honorifics	
Abhishek Kumar Kashyap.....	201
Using honorific expressions to ensure addressee compliance with commands: a case study of Japanese texts in the organisational context	
Yumiko Mizusawa.....	207
A systemic functional analysis of Topic NPs in Korean	
Gi-Hyun Shin and Mira Kim.....	213
Thematic Structure and Theme Variation in the Language of Javanese ‘Ludruk’	
Susanto	219
Projection in Modern Greek	
Chrystalla A. Thoma.....	225

Representations of Women in Six Japanese Folk Tales	
Elizabeth A. Thomson.....	229
Eight English Noun Phrase Types as Indicators of Genres (News and Novels) in ICE-SIN	
Yang Kun.....	235
Russian Poems and their English Translations: Is there crime in a rhyme? Is there reason in rhythm? Is metaphor a poem's core?	
Ivan Berazhny.....	241
Promoting Beijing in English: an interpersonal exploration of online tourism texts	
Hua Guo.....	247
Translation of the Transcripts of Audio Recordings	
Jieun Lee.....	253
Clause Boundary Shifts in Interpreting: Chinese-English	
Sunny Xiaoying Wang.....	257
Direct Vs Indirect Preparation for Technical and non-Technical Interpreting	
Qiaolian Zhu and Nan Zhang.....	263
Intention, obligation, effect: Categories of the Verb in an Oceanic language of Papua New Guinea	
Alan Jones.....	268
Relating Lexis to Culture: First Nations' Loan Words in Early Canadian Texts	
Derek Irwin.....	274
From Chinglish to Chinese English as One of the World Englishes	
Eden Li, Han Yang and Percy Wong.....	280
World Standard English: Reflections from a Multilingual Perspective	
Poonam Sahay.....	285
Construing an Airline Destination: English Clause in a Network	
Ivan Berazhny.....	290
Heteroglossic Harmony: Multimodal ENGAGEMENT Resources and Their Gradability in China's EFL Context	
Yumin Chen.....	296
Us vs. Them: A Critical Analysis of Superman - Peace on Earth Comic Book	
Francisco Osvanilson Dourado Veloso.....	302
Playing with "femininity": Multi-modal discourse analysis of bilingual children's picture book <i>The Ballad of Mulan</i>	
Ping Tian.....	308
Multisemiotics of Conferencing: Challenges to researching and training presentation skills	
Eija Ventola.....	316
Critical Discourse Analysis of a Political Text: Using Appraisal Theory	
Shohreh Bolouri.....	322
Two Characters in Search of an Ending: A Linguistic Approach to an Ancient Egyptian Story	
Camilla Di Biase-Dyson.....	328
Investigating ideological relations in McDonald's <i>Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) report (2006)</i>	
Joanne Jung-wook Hong.....	334
Making sense of place: Further descriptions of Circumstance of location	
Shoshana Drefus and Pauline Jones.....	340
Truth and contexts in Brazilian immigration policy	
Rachael Anneliese Radhay.....	345
Evaluative Metaphors: logogenetic development of appraisal in Pacific War discourses	
Ken Tann.....	351
Lexical Density in Japanese Texts: classifying text samples in the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ)	
Motoki Sano and Takehiko Maruyama.....	359

A Corpus-based Approach to the Role of Nominalization in Registers Xinzhang Yang	365
Analyzing Philosophical Discourse Joe Fincham	371
Theoretical Framework of the Genre of Academic Writing: A Social-Cultural Perspective Yinghui Sun	376
The Stylistic Value of Grammatical Metaphor in English Metalinguistic Texts: A Functional-Cognitive Stylistic Perspective Liu Chengyu	383
Systemic Functional Grammar applied in the Stylistic Analysis of D.H Lawrence's <i>The Prussian Officer</i> Zhongshe Lu	390
Appraisal Theory: A Functional Analysis of Sarojini Naidu's Poem K. Ratna Shiela Mani	396
Fuzzy grammatics and fuzziness tagging: a temporary approach Chen Jiansheng ^{1,2} and Xu Xunfeng ¹	400
Evolution and the system of AGENCY Kathryn Tuckwell	406

Reporting Armistice: Authorial and non-authorial voices in *The Sydney Morning Herald* 1902-2003

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Abstract

Media discourse is dialogic in nature (cf. Bakhtin, 1981; Zelizer, 1989), frequently including information or opinions sourced from beyond the reporter (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 252; Waugh, 1995). The way reporters include other voices in the dialogue, as well as the range of meanings permitted in the dialogue, are crucial factors in the issue of 'grounding' news reports (Carey, 1986; Waugh, 1995: 132). This paper presents findings from an analysis of non-authorial sourcing in armistice reports from the Sydney Morning Herald over a century (1902-2003), and considers how the uptake of resources for attributing this kind of information has changed in relation to changes in context, particularly technological and institutional context. A downward shift in the degree to which authorial responsibility is articulated and circumscribed seems to coincide with increasingly advanced and diverse technology for gathering and disseminating news. This suggests that advancements in technology do not necessarily lead to more accurate, balanced or grounded reporting, even when the technology potentially makes available a much greater range of information sources. Findings such as this have implications for understanding the changing character of news as a product of changing production processes, and for understanding the social purpose of news as a dynamic, changing social activity.

1 Introduction

News discourse is dialogic in nature (Martin & Rose, 2007: 49; Zelizer, 1989: 370); as with Bakhtin's observations of the novel, we can observe of the news report that it makes use of 'the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it' (Bakhtin, 1981: 264). A number of scholars, both from linguistics and media studies backgrounds, have acknowledged that the issue of direct and indirect reported speech in media and other discourses is an important one (Fairclough, 1995; Hsieh, 2008; Leech & Short, 1981; Waugh, 1995; Zelizer, 1989), and have argued that news texts tend to reproduce asymmetrical power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991). Hall et al further argue that this reproduction occurs not necessarily through conspiracy, but because of the kind of relationship that has developed over time between the media and the most powerful voices in society (e.g. Hall, Crichton, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). In over 500 years of newspaper history, this practice of incorporating a variety of voices into the news appears to have been a consistent feature. The practice was indeed part of the origins of the newspaper, as postmasters in 16th century Europe wove into brief newsletters the latest news received by courier from their counterparts in other major cities of trade. In the 21st century, where press releases, press conferences, digital voice recordings, agency copy, and the internet are all part of the journalist's professional toolbox, the range of voices that might be included is even greater.

One of the major shifts in the language of press news in the twentieth century, according to Waugh (1995: 152), was the way external voices were incorporated into the text, from long tracts of direct speech quoted in narrative style to a greater use of reported speech, paraphrased and woven into the journalist's professional interpretation of the news events. This coincides with the period that Matheson argues saw a significant shift in the professional practices and social function of journalism (Matheson, 2000). One of the characteristics of 'pre-modern newspapers' (before the 1930s), as a legacy of the early European newsheets or corantos (cf. Stephens, 2007: 139), was that journalists largely

operated as “relayers of documents” (Zelizer, 1989: 373). After the 1930s, journalists took on a role of interpretation and recontextualisation of news information, such that news became “a form of knowledge in itself, not dependent on other discourses to be able to make statements about the world” (Matheson, 2000: 559).

In this paper I focus on the journalist’s role in articulating, circumscribing, interpreting and recontextualising news information, as realized through non-authorial sourcing. The discussion is based on a selection of findings from an analysis of the way non-authorial material is identified and incorporated into seven *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) news articles reporting the conclusion of war during the period 1902-2003. Shifts in the dialogic nature of the discourse construe contextual shifts, particularly related to technological advances and assumed reader expectations.

2 Findings and Interpretations

The seven texts, each taken from the first day of reporting of the end of war or a phase of war, are listed in Table 1 below. Of the 5863 words in the set, 35.5% are attributed either directly or indirectly to a source other than the author, and of the 625 clauses, around 16% are Verbal or Mental projecting clauses. Table 1 presents some general statistics related to the issue of non-authorial sourcing in the texts. ‘Attributed words’ includes all words presented as originating either directly or indirectly from a source beyond the writer, e.g. the underlined portion in *Mr Bush said the outcome was a victory for Kuwait, the coalition partners, the United Nations, all mankind, the rule of law, and for what is right*⁴³ (Gulf War text). Direct quotations (cf. Fairclough’s ‘direct discourse’, Leech and Short’s ‘direct speech’) include only words orthographically presented (through quotation marks or other punctuation) as the actual words of an external source, e.g. the underlined portion in *he announced that he would observe the truce for “a limited time”* (Korean War text).

The Gulf War text contains the highest proportion (54%) of words attributed to sources other than the author of the article, followed by the Boer War text (47%). However, these two texts use the attributed material quite differently in terms of the kinds of meanings attributed to other voices, and the way these voices and their meanings are circumscribed. These contrasts will be explained in sections 2.2 and 2.3 below.

	Words	Clauses	Projecting clauses (Verbal/Mental)	Attributed Words	Direct quotations
Boer War Text (3rd June)	1181	149	23	555 (47%)	137 (12%, 25% ⁴⁴)
World War I Text (12th November)	545	58	11	169 (31%)	43 (8%, 25%)
World War II Text (16th August)	320	3	4	44 (14%)	0
Korean War Text (28th July)	948	98	8	136 (14%)	24 (2.5%, 18%)
Vietnam War Text (1st May)	843	92	17	263 (31%)	81 (10%, 31%)
Gulf War Text (1st March)	1268	109	28	684 (54%)	390 (31%, 57%)
Iraq War Text	758	86	12	239 (32%)	208

⁴³ Extracts from *The Sydney Morning Herald* are reproduced here with permission.

⁴⁴ The first percentage represents the proportion of directly quoted words in relation to the total word count of the text, the second percentage represents the proportion in relation to the total attributed words in the text.

(10th April					(27%, 87%)
Total	5863	625	103	2085 (35.5%)	881 (15%, 42%)
Average	837.57	89.29	14.71	297.86	125.86

Table 1. General statistics

2.1 Persistent voices

There is no consistency across the set of texts in terms of how each text as a whole is attributed to an author. The Boer War, WWI, Korean War and Vietnam War texts carry space/time indexes indicating a time and location as the origin of the information (e.g. *London, Saigon*). The Korean War text also bears an attribution to the agency A.A.P. as well as a space/time index to *New York*. The WWII text bears no attribution at all. The Gulf War and Iraq War texts are the only texts that name the journalists through the use of bylines.

However, there is one striking consistency throughout the whole set of texts in relation to the use of external sources: the Sayers and Sensors to whom information is attributed are overwhelmingly sources of the Thing type ‘simple: conscious: person’ (63%) (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999: 190), with coalition allegiance, e.g. *President Bush*. Figure 2 shows the proportions of different kinds of sources across the corpus. Sayers of the type ‘coalition person’ fall into four categories based on social role: national leaders (39%), military leaders (37%), politicians (13%) and other civic leaders (e.g. mayor) (11%). The enemy’s voice is rarely heard: Sayers allied with the enemy occur less than 20% of the time. Most of these instances occur in the Boer War (30%) and Vietnam War (40%) texts. The allegiance ‘other’ includes neutral parties as well as, for example, Iraqi civilians, who are emphatically construed as ‘not enemy’ in the Gulf War text.

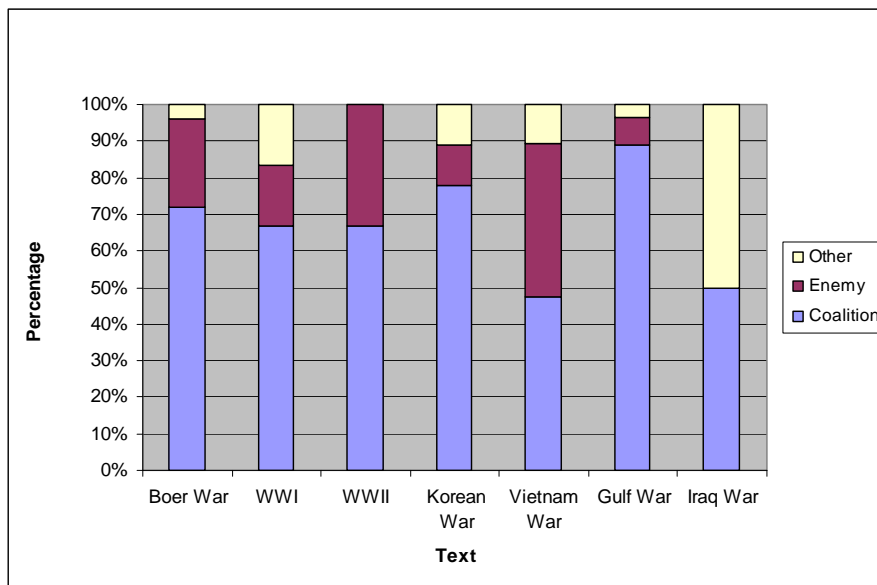


Figure 1. Proportions of Sayer Allegiance

The dialogue of this news discourse, therefore, primarily involves the SMH journalists’ voices and the voices of those in power on the coalition side. In this respect, each report follows the semantic pattern of the ones before, where coalition officials were construed as the most newsworthy voices and valid sources of news information. However, given the Australian context of this newspaper, there is a notable absence of Australian voices. Only two Australian sources are quoted, both in the Vietnam War text, showing the Australian government’s response to the end of the Vietnam War: *The Leader of the Opposition, Mr*

Fraser, and a spokesman for the Foreign Affairs Department. It is interesting, also, that it is the Leader of the Opposition and an unidentified spokesperson for a government department who are represented, not the Prime Minister. This may be explained by reference to both co-text and context: an adjacent article reports that the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, was out of the country and was also at the centre of some controversy over communications with North and South Vietnam. This is an example of how the study of discourse can identify anomalies that point to issues in the social, political or historical context.

2.2 Boundaries around voices

A crucial issue in relation to who holds responsibility for the views presented is how clearly that responsibility is articulated and circumscribed textually. If news discourse is dialogic, in the Bakhtinian sense, then in order to be accountable as a source of information about real events with human significance, it has a responsibility to readers to ensure that the various voices in the dialogue are easily distinguishable. However, increasingly, this is a responsibility that has not been fulfilled, as demonstrated by comparing the Boer War (Sydney Morning Herald, 1902) and Gulf War (Walker & Stephens, 1991) texts.

The Gulf War text carries a byline identifying the correspondents as *Tony Walker in Riyadh and Peter Stephens in Washington*. These correspondents are thus identified as carrying responsibility for the statements made unless otherwise attributed (Bednarek, 2006: 60). But meanings originating from other sources are not always clearly circumscribed, as shown in the following paragraph, which appears about half-way through the Gulf War text:

So complete was the victory that in the last hours of the battle fewer than 20,000 Iraqi troops of the more than 500,000 sent to confront the coalition were still fighting. More than 40 of the 42 divisions sent to defend Kuwait were put out of action, according to a US spokesman.

The information in the second clause is attributed to an unspecified *US spokesman* through the Circumstance of Angle at the end of the clause, and one is left wondering whether this attribution is also supposed to apply to the information in the first clause complex. This is similar to what Fairclough codes as ‘unsignalled’ free indirect discourse (Fairclough, 1995: 58), where the boundary between the information the journalists take responsibility for and that which they distance themselves from is blurred. In this instance, the information in question is factual and is potentially falsifiable by checking with a source of official statistics, so at one level this is perhaps not too serious. This kind of blurring with ‘factual’ information also occurs to a lesser extent in the Vietnam War text. A more concerning example of the blurring of authorial responsibility occurs a few paragraphs later in the Gulf War text:

"We must now begin to look beyond victory and war," he said. "We must meet the challenge of securing the peace."

There could be no solely American answer to the challenges of the region, but the US was ready to assist and to be "a catalyst for peace".

The first two sentences are clearly attributed to President Bush (who was Sayer in the previous projecting clause) through the projecting clause *he said*, but what of the following sentence? Certainly the end of the sentence is attributed to someone else as it is in inverted commas. The unusual use of *could* in the earlier part of the clause complex, which is probably a ‘backshift’ from *can* in an original utterance (cf. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1972: 786-7), also implies that it should be interpreted as Bush’s view. Fairclough refers to this as ‘slipping’ (1995: 55); the responsibility for the statements made in that sentence is not explicitly claimed by the journalists, nor clearly made the responsibility of someone else, and the result is that the reader must guess their way through the tangle of voices, rather than being able to accurately interpret the wordings according to whose voice they represent. This instance is of more concern than the one presented above because the

information whose source is unclear is a matter of opinion rather than falsifiable information. The journalists have presented an evaluation of a state of affairs in a way that suggests they endorse it, even if it was not their opinion originally.

In contrast, the Boer War text is, in the first instance, entirely attributed to sources other than SMH writers. Following the convention of the time, each 'coranto' article (see Stephens, 2007: 139-143) in the Boer War text is headed with a space/time index indicating the time and place of origin of the telegraphic intelligence, e.g. *LONDON, June 1*. London was the primary source of non-local news for Australia from European colonization (1788) at least up until WWI⁴⁵ (John Fairfax & Sons, 1931). All instances of non-authorial sourcing in the Boer War text (as indicated by the London telegraph source, at least), whether direct or indirect quotations, are explicitly attributed to a Sayer or Senser, e.g.

King Edward VII, in a message to the people, says:- "The King has received the welcome news of the cessation of hostilities with infinite satisfaction..."

The "Express" states that Mr Kruger, upon learning that peace had been proclaimed, exclaimed, "My God, it is impossible."

This text also attributes content to a range of other British newspapers, including the *Express*, as in the above example, as well as a Berlin newspaper, the *Tageblatt*. Many of the meanings attributed to these sources are evaluations of what has gone on, presumably from the editorials of those newspapers, e.g.

The "Standard," in commenting upon the conclusion of peace, says that as long as the drama unfolded itself the feelings of the spectators underwent change, and that the closing act will add to Great Britain's prestige and weight in the councils of the world.

Thus there is a slightly different blurring of the boundaries between reporter and commentator voice: in this text, the editorial opinion of other newspapers is presented as news. But because it is explicitly circumscribed as such, the reader is able to know to interpret the evaluation as being not the opinion of the SMH (although perhaps endorsed by the SMH). The SMH journalist relays the documents at its disposal in a responsible and accountable way, with minimal interpretation or recontextualisation.

3 Concluding Remarks

This brief presentation of findings demonstrates some of the differences and similarities I have found between texts reporting the end of a war or phase of war across a period of time. As instances of the greater potentiality, each text contributes to the system potential for reporting armistice, displaying variation in a principled way according to the pressures of context, e.g. censorship, media competition, and technological facilities. The legalistic gravity of the context of armistice has put pressure on the system such that it has tended to favour the selection of official coalition individuals as the sources of much of the evaluation and evidence in armistice reporting over the past century.

As argued by scholars such as Matheson (2000) Waugh (1995), and Zelizer (1989), news production practices over the last century have seen a shift from journalists as "relayers of documents" (Zelizer, 1989: 373) to journalists as independent, warranted interpreters of events. This is reflected in the contrast between the explicitly circumscribed attribution in the Boer War text and the very loosely circumscribed sourcing of the Gulf War text, which is oriented towards the integration and recontextualisation of sources into a unified style of prose (Waugh, 1995), at the expense of grounded, accurate interpretation by readers.

⁴⁵ The WWI text, for example, begins with intelligence attributed to New York and Vancouver, then London, and finally Melbourne, the then capital city of Australia.

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