Discourse approaches
Language in use and the multidisciplinary advantage

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3.1 Introduction: text, context, and media linguistics

Linguistics traditionally has encompassed the study of the rules, patterns, origins, and acquisition dynamics of human language on multiple levels. These levels can be summarized in terms of sound (phonetics, phonology), form (syntax, morphology), and meaning (semantics, pragmatics). Sociolinguistics examines the linguistic units of sound, form, and meaning to understand their provenance and organization in social contexts, thus encompassing the study of language in society, in interaction, in social settings, and in use—in multiple social domains. Discourse analysis, looking at longer stretches of talk and text, also examines how language is used in context, how we get things done with it, how we structure it, and how we assign judgments and values that language as it is used by human beings then encodes. Together, buttressed by ethnographic, functional, critical, cognitive, and multidisciplinary insights, these are the primary linguistic frameworks that deal with language, communication, and interaction in society. In their application to media, these approaches can be seen as constructing a “media linguistics” (see Perrin, this volume, Chapter 1).

This chapter describes the development of research into media language and discourse in relation to foundational linguistic approaches to language in society (Sections 3.3 and 3.4), as well as topics that have more recently come to bear with the evolution of digital media (3.5), and concludes with reflection on future directions for productive pursuit (3.6).

3.2 Definitions: key terms across frameworks

Sociolinguistic and discourse analytic approaches to the study of media are quite varied, with definitions of key terms such as “style,” “function,” or “discourse” varying as well—usually because the terms themselves are theoretically determined. (See Krzyżanowski and Machin, this volume, Chapter 4 for the theoretical distinction between “discourse/Discourse,” as one example; subsection 3.4.2 below for a framework-specific understanding of “function”; and for reference to linguistic “style” see Section 3.3.) Thus we will define specific terms as they become relevant to our discussion of the frameworks in subsequent sections, although their generic meaning can suffice in the short term as working definitions: “style” refers on many...
linguistic levels to different ways people talk or write; “function” refers to the actual utility of language and how we get things done using it; “discourse” refers to stretches of spoken or written language and how and what people communicate. “Talk” and “text” refer to spoken and written discourse, and are used in a shorthand way to refer to types of primary data.

3.3 Disciplinary perspectives: contrasting focus

Most linguists consider media or news data from the perspective of discourse structure or linguistic function. These can be related to the impact of media as a representation of the social world or bearer of ideology, as this and subsequent sections will describe. The models for this relation can arise from any of a number of linguistic and social scientific disciplines or approaches, each with its own theoretical assumptions and methodologies that shape different questions about the material. Among these approaches, the “sociolinguistic,” “discourse analytic,” and “ethnographic” deserve particular mention.

“Sociolinguistic” refers to work that involves close analysis of variation and style in language alongside socially motivated processes that impact language form and social responses to it (e.g., language prescription and standardization; see Stuart-Smith, this volume, Chapter 2 and Androutsopoulos, this volume, Chapter 25 for research on community norms, media effects, and language change using variationist and critical sociolinguistic methods). Sociolinguistic insights are also used to inform work on discourse-level aspects such as genre (e.g., news story vs. interview) and register (e.g., the serious tone of “hard” news vs. the light-hearted tone of entertainment). “Discourse analytic” approaches relate to stretches of language beyond the word or sentence level, taking into account the factors of participant, topic, and discourse structure; as well as media discourse phenomena that include reported speech, conversation, register, positioning and framing, stance, graphic display, visual communication, and so forth (as discussed in Cotter 2015). How the news story or broadcast interview and its component parts combine to structure the news narrative and convey its meaning is part of the discourse analytic remit, as is understanding what journalists consider in their practice (Cotter 2010; ben-Aaron 2005a). “Ethnographic” as a term pertains to fieldwork-based methodologies and assumptions that prioritize context and direct observation (for example, in a newsroom over an extended period of time) as well as interaction with participants who produce media language. This involves an “emic” perspective that brings into focus the values of news practitioners and how they differ from those of linguists (Cotter 2010, 2014). Ethnographic approaches query language use from the practitioner’s point of view, which can vary from the linguist’s, to better understand the underlying routines and value systems and to enhance the validity of analytical claims (see Cotter 2015; van Hout 2009; Vandendaele et al. 2015; Perrin 2013; ben-Aaron 2005a; Peterson 2003).

While linguists trained in sociolinguistic methodologies or discourse analysis have long blended these frameworks in the study of media language, providing a productive multidisciplinary approach, it is important to understand how they derive from different analytic traditions and how they have been applied in media contexts. (See Stuart-Smith, this volume, Chapter 2, and Androutsopoulos, this volume, Chapter 25 for a discussion of language change in and through the media; ben-Aaron, this volume, Chapter 16 for a detailed look at news production and linguistic approaches to media data and genres; and Cotter (2015) for an overview of media discourse frameworks in a sociolinguistics and communication studies perspective.)
To start with, Allan Bell’s (1991a) seminal work on media language was rooted in both sociolinguistics and narrative analysis. He focused on phonological and syntactic units of analysis and sociolinguistic variables pertaining to socioeconomic class to examine style and register variation in radio and print. That linguistic variation indexes social variation was made clear in the media contexts he studied (e.g., determiner deletion in print correlating with the socioeconomic status of newspapers in the UK, in Bell 1991a; national radio indexing overt prestige while local radio indexes covert prestige, in Bell 1983). Bell’s “audience design” framework (1984, 1991a, 1991b) showed how language style in the media was either responsive to an audience’s linguistic norms or referred instead to a “third party, reference group or model” outside of it (Bell 1991a: 127), demonstrating that style strategies are a significant indicator of the dynamic of the media–audience relationship, which he was familiar with as a former media practitioner. Another primary contribution was on the discourse side, detailing the narrative reframing of news stories as they are produced, charting their digression from Labov’s narrative schema (Labov and Waletzky 1997 [1967]) and productively incorporating Goffman’s participant framework (1981) to show how news texts are intrinsically connected to complex but structured linkages of addressors and addressees.

Concurrently, other linguists used pragmatics (Verschueren 1985; Blommaert and Verschueren 1998) and conversation analysis (Clayman 1991; Clayman and Heritage 2002) to look at how language can “work” or operate in terms of social and political meaning in print media texts, and how institution and participant structure constrain interactions in broadcast contexts. At the discourse level, pragmatics has evolved to look at aspects of inference, relevance, politeness, information structure, and deixis in news texts and in the multiple interactions between practitioners, participants, and audience that comprise their production – now including social media and its communicative permutations as well as traditional forms, as discussed below. Other discourse analytic and ethnographically informed frameworks have also evolved to take these into account (see Cotter 2015 for an overview).

Work on media discourse by the Glasgow University Media Group beginning in 1976 had already looked critically at content, lexical choice, and positioning of information to uncover what were characterized as ideological biases embedded in news texts. Simultaneously with Bell’s work and the development of systemic-functional linguistics, this led to a highly multidisciplinary range of research characterized by the functionalist-oriented frameworks associated with the UK and Australian research schools (see Graddol and Boyd-Barrett 1994). The critical examination of media, which also aimed at raising the consciousness of readers and mobilizing them for social responsibility, is still alive and well in critical discourse analysis (see Krzyżanowski and Machin, this volume, Chapter 4; Lyons, this volume, Chapter 18; and Jaworska, this volume, Chapter 6) and is aligned with multimodality, social semiotics, corpus linguistics, and corpus-assisted discourse analytic approaches, as well as media anthropology and media studies.

The multidisciplinary focus that is a hallmark of media language research means that discourse-based disciplinary perspectives tend to cluster by method and theoretical focus as much as they operate independently. For example, critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, social semiotics, and systemic-functional and multimodal discourse analysis often work together. The narrative, pragmatic, and stylistic approaches to the analysis of media language also tend to cohere, as do practice-focused and interactional approaches, which rely on ethnographic methods, interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982), and newsroom observation, and work variously with ethnolinguistic, anthropological, and sociocultural frameworks.
3.4 Current contributions: language in use

Existing frameworks for the analysis of language in use have provided the foundation for current work, as noted above. This section spotlights research into the analysis of media language that incorporates paradigms from pragmatics (Section 3.4.1), systemic-functional linguistics (3.4.2), and discourse analysis (3.4.3), the last of which includes methods from conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, and (media) linguistic anthropology.

3.4.1 Pragmatics

Pragmatics was the earliest approach to broadly encompass the study of language in use and particularly the accomplishment of interpersonal work: “how to do things with words,” as Austin (1962) put it. This approach is significant for the study of the social and persuasive functions of news language, as well as the construction of credibility by news authors and news actors. Topics generally agreed to belong to pragmatics begin with speech acts (Austin 1962), such as questions, requests, and apologies; and maxims or principles of cooperation by which we judge the sincerity and straightforwardness of conversational contributions. The most important are the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner (Grice 1975; Leech 1993), applied to news reporting and writing by, for example, Cotter (2010). Talk or text that is seen to be too wordy, too terse, untrue, irrelevant, or poorly structured violates these maxims, and the most common evidence of violation are the reactions of others and the subsequent conduct of the conversation. Politeness phenomena such as deference and mitigation of face-threatening requests (Brown and Levinson 1987), the in-situation references known as deixis that position a speaker in relation to time and space (Fillmore 1997), and the ordering considerations known as information structure (Chafe 1994) are also treated within pragmatics; Thomas (1995) provides some mass media examples, as does Verschueren (1999).

Since all language is used purposefully, pragmatics can also be considered as a general approach to language. Attempts to structure and apply a broad-based pragmatics include Verschueren (1999), using key concepts of variability, negotiability, and adaptability; and Östman (1989), using coherence, politeness, and involvement. Östman further specifies pragmatics using the concepts of implicitness and deniability, which can prove useful in unraveling the ways in which even apparently straightforward recitations of facts remain open-ended and multiply interpretable as we find with news. One important kind of implicit information in terms of journalistic practice is presuppositions about the audience and what it knows, which in news may be encoded in insider lexis or word choice as well as selective presentation of facts. Another is implicatures, or inferences made when information is given in a way that is not obviously (or obviously not) straightforward, for example when Grice’s maxims are obviously flouted. Journalists may create implicatures deliberately or inadvertently when trying to be “fair” when covering divisive or hot-button topics.

3.4.2 Systemic-functional linguistics

Research on news often makes explicit or tacit reference to the framework of systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), which seeks to build a theory of language with reference to speaker choices and the social meanings made from them. A condensed description of the approach by its founder appears in Halliday (1970), a highly elaborated version in his
Introduction to Functional Grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013), and intermediate versions in third-party treatments such as Thompson (2014). SFL divides the linguistic message into dimensions of ideational meaning (roughly, how the message represents the world), relational meaning (how the message produces and reproduces social relations), and textual meaning (how the message is organized). The mostly congruent term experiential is often used in place of ideational for the first metafunction.

Thinkers within the SFL tradition argue strongly for an ethnographic or at least contextual element, treating language as a “social semiotic” (Halliday 1978). It is the enlarged role of the social in relation to semiotics that is new in this term: “it attributes power to meaning, instead of meaning to power” (Hodge and Kress 1980: 2–3). SFL is also a social constructivist approach, holding that language does not merely reflect social structures but instantiates and reproduces them. The symbiosis of language and the social might seem obvious now, but at the time it was radical, for the ascent of Chomskyan linguistics had marginalized social analysis of language (see Gumperz and Hymes 1972 for a similar counter-claim from anthropology and the ethnography of communication model). Further, while SFL accounts for phenomena traditionally categorized as syntax, morphology, semantics, and phonology, it takes a more holistic approach.

Ideational meaning includes such useful systems for news analysis as transitivity and metaphor, both of which have also been examined in other areas of linguistics without reference to SFL. Transitivity in its ordinary sense concerns whether the verb is in active voice (“the politicians proposed the law”) or passive voice (“the law was proposed [by the politicians]”). SFL uses the term somewhat differently, expanding its attention to the general question of participants and roles in the clause. For example, killed requires two participants, the killer and the victim, while died requires only one, the deceased. Obviously the constraints of connected writing and news story structure mean that the relation is not as simplistic as occasionally suggested (see Fowler et al. 1982; Toolan 2001: 206ff.; Cotter 2010). Processes (including finite verbal forms, but not limited to them) can be divided into six classes: material, mental, verbal, behavioral, relational, and existential, each bearing its own requirements for other elements of the clause. This type of analysis is also fruitful for examining semantic classes of news verbs, and differences in news language arising from the grammar of different languages.

Relational meaning is perhaps the most interesting as it encompasses matters of voice, stance, status, alignment, affiliation, and evaluation, all concepts that other functional or context-based linguistic approaches also utilize and relate to the meanings that emerge in communicative dynamics. It includes modality or mood elements, such as verbs expressing possibility, desirability, and obligation, as well as stance adverbials like “normally.” One of the most interesting systems within relational meaning is Appraisal, which offers a system for categorizing evaluations (White 1998a; Martin and White 2005). The basic dimensions of attitudinal meaning are Judgment (referring to standards of human behavior), Appreciation (referring to aesthetic qualities), and Affect (referring to emotions evoked or instantiated); these can be instantiated explicitly or implicitly, and upgraded or downgraded. The framework was partially developed on news data (White 1998a, 1998b) and applied to media in Martin and Rose (2003), Martin and White (2005), ben-Aaron (2005a and 2005b), and Hommerberg (2011).

Textual meaning bears on the order of elements in the clause, mentioned as information structure under pragmatics. The first element of an utterance is called the theme on which the rest of the message (rheme) is predicated. For example, the headline “Britain prepares for elections” is seen to be a message about Britain and this organization makes it easy to distinguish
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from similarly structured messages about other countries and entities. Alternatively, it might be fruitful to consider the first element as given or known to the reader, with new information appended to it; or to consider it as a topic on which there is comment. Not all new information is completely new: relevantly for news, there are different types of newness (for a discussion of this in pragmatics, see Prince (1981); for examples of how “newness” is realized in recurring and ongoing stories, see, respectively, ben-Aaron (2003, 2005b), and Cotter (2010)). Another aspect of the textual metafunction is cohesion, the internal systemic relations that hold a text together (for example, conjunction or adjacency, reference, ellipsis, and lexical relations; see Halliday and Matthiessen 2013: 603ff.). These together with coherence (interactions with text-external meanings), register, and register-specific patterns of information structure contribute to the distinctive texture of a text (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 23).

SFL uses the term register for a language variant associated with particular situations and communities, and genre for the forms that texts take in particular uses by those communities. Thus we can speak of standardized news registers and news genres, broad or narrow. In SFL, the immediate situational context is described using terms analogous to the three metafunctions, namely field (topic or subject matter), tenor (social roles), and mode, a vague concept covering the “role of language and other semiotic systems,” including aspects such as medium, channel, turn-taking, and rhetorical mode such as didactic or entertaining (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013: 33–34; Matthiessen et al. 2010: 144). An alternative definition of mode in SFL, closer to the usage in ben-Aaron, this volume, Chapter 16, is the “symbolic organization of the text” which is “involved in the selection of options in textual systems, which relate to the overall texture of the text, including choices involving cohesion, and thematic and information structures” (Webster 2009: 7).

In practice, SFL is often joined in a single theoretical complex with critical discourse analysis (CDA), with the theoretical reach of CDA complementing the grammatical precision of SFL. CDA is consciously socially critical and seeks to relate the text to its context through both the discourse and larger political, economic, and cultural formations. (See Krzyżanowski and Machin, this volume, Chapter 4 for a discussion of CDA.) CDA analysts working in English mostly draw on a combination of SFL and schoolroom grammar for their textual terminology, and have also coined useful terms to do with text production, notably technologization of discourse to signify the formalization of communicative practices into expert knowledge that can be codified, taught, and monitored (Fairclough 1992; 1993: 141), and conversationalization of discourse (Fairclough 1993: 140) to refer to the entry of vernacular, talk-based features in domains previously characterized by formal written registers. These two imperatives can often be seen in opposition in the newsroom (see also Cotter (2010) for an interactional sociolinguistic account of these discursive dynamics). Under the CDA paradigm, Fairclough also coined synthetic personalization for the simulation of individual treatment or friendship in institutional interactions (1989: 62), and has called attention to the “colonization” of public discourses such as news by both private and promotional discourses (see also Johnstone 1998).

3.4.3 Discourse analysis

Methods and theoretical orientations from pragmatics, SFL, and CDA all fit under the broad umbrella of “discourse analysis” which covers a great deal of media language analysis; each approach aims to better understand the media and how it operates in society. There are other frameworks, such as conversation analysis (CA), that examine the text itself in a fashion that might be quite detached from the interlocutors and contexts of delivery, and interactional
and ethnographic approaches to discourse analysis that actively integrate these components in analysis of data. The discourse analysis frameworks used to study media language vary in the extent to which they employ context and extra-situational social factors in analysis, with pragmatics and CA (see below) tending toward the language-focused end, and CDA and SFL clustering at the macrostructural and social semiotic side. It should be noted that CDA is broadly interpreted to mean any discourse analysis with a social, even activist, conscience and the term is employed by a number of theorists with their own frameworks and techniques. In this domain, a strand with significant work on news was pioneered by van Dijk, who used concepts from cognitive science to make sense of linguistic macrostructures (e.g., 1988a, 1988b, and 1996 for a useful “toolbox”). Another strand uses psychology and social psychology to follow ideas across political and news texts (e.g., Wodak 1996; Wodak and Meyer 2009). Fairclough’s version remains the most extensively integrated with other branches of linguistics for purposes of detailed news analysis.

On the more empirical, “micro”-focused end we have insights from CA (see Loeb and Clayman, this volume, Chapter 27), alongside interactional discourse analysis frameworks, all of which aim to enhance our understanding of how talk and text are structured in interaction; how textual components are ordered, rule-governed, and contingent; and how textual elements are used, exchanged, filtered, and expanded over time (as seen through the broad notion of “intertextuality,” cf. Bakhtin 1986 [1979]). This research has had significant impacts on the understanding of broadcast media, where structural aspects of interaction are prioritized.

At the most general level, broadcast talk may be monologic (Goffman 1981) or dialogic; and it can seem disorderly, particularly if more than two participants are involved. CA has shown talk to be orderly on many levels including timing, turn-taking, openings and closings (that is, the beginnings and ends of conversational exchanges). Some of its concepts such as transition relevance points (TRPs), where turns may be passed to other interlocutors, and preferred and dispreferred responses, where a response expectation comes into play, provide theoretical entry points for analyzing interviews and other news talk. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) set forth the root theory of turn-taking as follows: when a TRP is reached, the next speaker may self-select, be selected by the first speaker, or the first speaker may continue. On a more functional level, they proposed a spectrum of situations from informal interpersonal conversation, where turns are normally the freest, to public ceremonies where turn-taking is maximally constrained by expectations of order (Sacks et al. 1974: 729ff.; Hutchby 2006: 1–35). Like Labov’s (1972) narrative framework, CA can be adapted to media analysis. A major strand of CA has specialized on the ways institutional speech is shaped or constrained, with particular attention to interviews (Clayman and Heritage 2002; and see Weizman 2008: 4). Audience reaction has also been studied using CA, for example by Atkinson (1984) on how political speeches are designed to elicit a response from hearers, and Glenn (2003) on laughter.

Particularly in talk-based news such as radio and television, the relationship between speaker and audience is complex. More than one audience might be present in a broadcast interview. In his work on radio talk, Goffman distinguished ratified participants who take full part in the conversation and are addressed more or less directly, and the overhearing audience in the studio and beyond (1981: 132ff.). Speakers might also address themselves to an imagined recipient (p. 138) or audience. Goffman further problematized the speaker position in broadcast: The physical speaker or animator may be voicing someone else’s words or sentiments (the author) on behalf of yet another person’s position (the principal), which Bell (1991a) describes in relation to news language. Some correspondence can be seen with
inter$textual chains in print (Fairclough 1995; Solin 2004) where information is re-authored and re-contextualized for different purposes.

Audience reaction has both a feedback and a feed-forward effect on the news; that is, media producers tailor their language to elicit continued attention, and, especially in online media, measurable feedback. Style shifting for different audiences was termed audience design by Bell (1984, 1991a, 2004), based on studies of two New Zealand radio stations employing the same newsreaders to address different demographics with different linguistic outputs. Similar phenomena have also been studied with reference to accommodation, the general tendency of speakers to match one another (Bell 1991b). In discussing dialogic talk such as interviews and online exchanges, a number of terms are commonly used based on the metaphor of physical positioning; these include footing, stance, positioning and alignment (see Davies and Harré 1990). Footing relates to the complex speaker and audience relations discussed above, such as animator and overhearing audience (Goffman 1981), while stance is used to mean “subjective attitude toward something” (Haddington 2004), and positioning is two-faced, relating the line taken in an interaction to an ongoing role (Weizman 2008). Alignment tends to be used informally to signify agreement or affiliation with the line taken by another.

3.5 Critical issues and topics: highlighting practice and change

Sociolinguistic and discourse-level analyses cover a great deal of ground that includes but is not limited to the dynamics of the text, audience considerations, narrative structure, style and register, and comparative historical work. Evidence from media data has demonstrated the multifunctionality of discourse – that the correspondences of talk and text to meanings in the social world are not necessarily straightforward – and shown how linguistic tools can help to make that point more visible. Media data also shed light on the nature of the role of the audience and the importance of understanding what goes into the production of media texts. In this regard, ethnographic and practice-based studies of news/media language have been developing slowly, but steadily, and it is these approaches – and a concentration on emerging social media forms as well as the changes in the economic and business models of the media – that are of critical interest now.

This list of critical areas is by no means exhaustive and includes as starting points the transmission of news (Section 3.5.1) from origin through production all the way to readers and viewers; the form of the news story (3.5.2); and the remediation, or the interaction of channel and form, for example what happens to the story online (3.5.3). These are general enough to remain identifiable through different technological eras and thus remain relevant touchpoints for the blogs, microblogs, live-text commentary, and “digital textuality” we discuss in Section 3.6. We identified these components as meaningful for future research from our own perspectives as former journalists, through our training as linguists, and as teachers and researchers of both journalism and linguistics.

3.5.1 News transmission

Within the news trade, instant transmission has been available to some extent since the telegraph in the nineteenth century, although only to connected elites such as other news bureaus and financial markets. The instant experience now extends all the way to readers. From the beginning, the trend in news language production has been toward presenting events as more immediate. Reflective letters and verbatim transcripts in the early days of
print journalism were superseded by crisp reports that could be read quickly and acted on promptly if needed. As Bell notes, “[t]echnological developments in the pursuit of timeliness continue to impel news coverage towards ‘present-ation’ – that is, closing the gap between the event and its telling, with the goal of displaying events in ‘real time’” (1996: 3–4), something realizable now with smartphones, cameras, and social media platforms. Broadcast and electronic media have produced still faster update speeds which could be said to blur the difference between speech and writing at the communicative level. As Bell points out, the pace of newsgathering has been constantly accelerating; a century ago, news of the Scott expedition’s achievement in reaching the South Pole took a year to break (delayed by the fact the explorers died on the return journey), whereas in 1958 the arrival at the Pole was reported on radio the same day (Bell 2000). With satellite links, expeditions can now be reported live, and news from more central locations is routinely narrated or transmitted in real time. At the same time, portable information technology has multiplied the amount of material available from participants and observers of all kinds, including professional reporters, amateur and citizen reporters, and news-generating institutions and actors themselves.

3.5.2 News story form

The inverted pyramid news style has proven durable over a century (see ben-Aaron, this volume, Chapter 16; Cotter 2010), but it is not immune to further change, as our examples below will show. In the early 1990s the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) tested reader style preferences by publishing some stories in four parallel versions in local editions of a Florida newspaper. The four versions were the traditional inverted pyramid, a more chronological narrative style, a “radical clarity” style that was more explanatory and sometimes addressed the reader directly, and an advocacy style that favored one side of the story and clearly underlined its intended point. Readers in this test generally preferred the narrative stories, felt the inverted pyramid did not work well, and rated the point-of-view stories lowest on quality (ASNE 1993). The study, along with consciousness of competition with television documentaries, contributed to a revived awareness of the power of narrative news and “longform” features; a popular model for these was the Wall Street Journal feature formula described in Blundell (1988). The appeal of narrative forms is also reflected in the growth of podcasts, particularly those that “tell stories” such as This American Life. The other two styles also have their place. “Radical clarity” style can be seen, for example, in “explainer” stories giving consumer advice or details of recurring processes, such as how politicians prepare for television debates. It is also a staple of the newspaper USA Today, which was launched in 1982 to compete with the more conversational style of television. Advocacy style is used in political party-affiliated newspapers around the world.

3.5.3 News remediated

Print media have been remediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Bolter 2001) or redisplayed online since the 1980s to steadily widening audiences and with steadily increasing technical possibilities for changes in format. Interestingly, most traditional news stories still appear textually little changed in their online guise. The most widespread difference is the use of hyperlinks to give readers direct access to source materials; these links function as both attribution and direct evidence, permitting more background to be presented in the space. Hyperlinks can also be used to keep readers on the site by pointing them to related and past stories, rather than to outside evidence. Despite the possibility of writing hypertexts that
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branch into multiple paths or loop back on themselves, the texts of online features are also still mainly written in linear format (Steensen 2009); see for example the New York Times’s “Snow Fall” (Branch 2012).

This is not to say that online news has not taken advantage of digital textuality (Trimarco 2015; Tyrkkö 2007). This concept refers to the new textual shapes made possible by digital affordances such as hyperlinks, multimodality, real-time updating, synchronous talk, databases, user profiles, social networking, direct communication with the audience, embedding, and mobility. Online stories are increasingly packaged with multimodal features such as slideshows, raw or processed audio or video, interactive maps and other graphics, comment boards and live feeds from journalists and social media. Such features are also presented as standalone “stories” on some news sites, opening the way for a deeper level of remediation and the emergence of new genres. When fully exploited, not just used as add-ons, digital textuality capabilities enable news sites to use the procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic properties that emerge in digital environments (Murray 1997); for example, enabling readers to aggregate news information on a map and perform actions with it, comment on news and submit their own contributions, explore the entire archive rather than just the latest day’s news.

Further, it could be argued that a major impact of online news has been greater transparency in newsgathering. Through searches and hyperlinks, readers can find out more about who is writing the news, what else they have written, how they can be contacted, what sources they consult, what errors they make, and how these are corrected. Some other parts of the process, such as negotiations with sources and editors, remain for the most part invisible.

3.6 Future directions: digital textuality

In addition to tracing the evolution of traditional media online, there is a second thread starting with “born digital” textual forms and their role in the evolution of news circulation. Here we examine blogs (Section 3.6.1), microblogs (3.6.2), and live-text commentary (3.6.3). These genres or media – their status is ambiguous – may themselves be replaced in short order with other forms of digital textuality (3.6.4), and the section concludes with a consideration of this.

3.6.1 Blogs

The first significantly new online media genre was the weblog, “a frequently updated webpage with [timestamped and] dated entries, new ones placed at the top” (Blood 2000). Blogs were first used as “online journals” for individuals just before the turn of the twenty-first century, and soon recognized as a general purpose medium or “socio-technical format” (Herring et al. 2005). They became entwined with journalism in several important ways. First, many bloggers collect and comment on news links, creating trails reminiscent of Vannevar Bush’s Memex (Bush 1945); this is known as “filter-style” blogging (Blood 2000). Second, bloggers write substantial reports and essays on news topics; blogging has thus become an accepted way for aspiring journalists to build a portfolio, as well as a way to update outside of print news cycles. In particular, hyperlocal news, eyewitness news, and alternative perspectives are regularly found on blogs (cf. Bruns 2006).

Third, professional journalists, loath to cede ground to new entrants, soon began to use “j-blogs” as a way to write in a less institutional voice. In their blogs, reporters gave rein to otherwise forbidden features such as “superlatives, first person, contractions, questions with
no answers, answers with no questions”; they published reflections on stories with hyperlinks to other versions and points of view, making them more open-ended than even the traditional inverted pyramid, as well as “reporter’s notebook” pieces and minute-by-minute “tick-tocks” (Robinson 2006: 78). An early study found some evidence that j-blogs were being tailored to institutional news standards (Singer 2005; Lasorsa et al. 2012; Hermida 2013 on Twitter and journalistic re-norming). It should be noted that newsroom content management systems are commonly built on the same database-backed website systems as blogs, and timestamps and hyperlinks (in the story or at least in the surrounding “frame”) have become naturalized elements of online news. As Myers notes (2010: 50), blogs “see (or claim to see) everywhere at once” and hyperlinks extend their reach, contributing to a de-spatialization of news compared to locally based and delivered production.

3.6.2 Microblogs

The apotheosis (so far) of increasing speed and interactivity is found in microblogs, the largest of which is Twitter. Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has been used to point out news stories in other media via hyperlinks; to comment on and respond to stories; and to broadcast news directly in the form of headlines or episodically as “live tweets.” In a study of Twitter use by two professional journalists covering the London riots of 2011, Vis (2013) found that they also used the channel to report obstacles to reporting, request information or confirmation, announce plans, express opinions, and thank people. Reporter tweets could express uncertainty (e.g., “not sure how they will break through,” 40), which is taboo in conventional reporter voice. The 140-character limit for posts in the first years of Twitter had the effect of making news talk resemble wire service headlines or blow-by-blow eyewitness commentary.

Microblogs embody traditional conversational behavior such as turn-taking, vernacular lexis, fragmentation, involvement (Chafe 1994), and rapid frame shifts (for example, to joking), and they are also conversational on their own terms, through means that are not available in speech such as delayed replies and multimodal elements. Prominent affordances of microblogs include use of pictures and video, retweeting (which might involve editing or framing with a comment) and marking posts as favorites, which provides an index of response to previous tweets. Tweets frequently include hashtags which can be used for signaling alignment or creating “folksonomies” for later searching (Zappavigna 2012; Barton 2015). The intertextual chain runs the other way as well: blogs and microblogs by news actors and vox pops are now routinely embedded in everyday reporting, as sources on a par with documents and interviews; quoted tweets in particular are framed by distinctive wordings, and vernacular language in them is variably preserved depending on the genre (Squires and Iorio 2014; Clayman 1990 provides a baseline study of quotation in newspapers). Sometimes Twitter is the first or only source for important news; for example, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper used the service to announce cabinet appointments in 2013.

3.6.3 Live-text commentary

Another genre through which news is becoming conversationalized is “live-text commentary” (LTC), in which coverage is posted a chunk at a time online as the news event evolves (Chovanec 2009). LTC may be posted as a secondary news channel on the main website, on a separate “live blog” platform (Thurman and Walters 2013) or through social media...
such as Twitter. The liveness of LTC both echoes and contrasts with the “tick-tock” feature story where the chronology is reconstructed, as well as with broadcast commentary transcripts which are posted later. LTC is often used in sports, where live comment by voice has long been the norm. LTC often incorporates reader feedback and can even be interactive, spawning threads of delayed reaction; these extra-chronological additions, together with any subjective elements in the main voice, create threads of commentary weaving through the text (Chovanec 2009: 111). As with other synchronous genres such as online chat, colloquial wordings, direct address, questions, inserts, and other typically conversational features are common (Chovanec 2009: 124; Jucker 2006).

LTC is clearly a genre where speech and writing converge in new media. Written talk genres such as live text and microblogs are posted faster and with less editorial intervention than traditional news products. At the same time, there is increased pressure for clarity, since less contextual knowledge can be presupposed, and this lack of context can be seen as a general trend in online genres. LTC also supports the ideal of transparency in newsgathering.

Atomization facilitates remediation. Because newspapers are designed and edited as “text colonies” (Hoey 2001) in which the stories are detachable from each other, individual stories should be easily transferable to new contexts – and long have been, as in anthologies of press clippings. Detachability has become even more important online, as readers are unlikely to enter a news provider’s site through the homepage or other predictable path (LaFrance 2012; New York Times 2014: 24). Instead they might enter through social media, automated aggregation sites such as Google News, or personalized alerts and newsfeeds (Thurman 2011). News can also be repackaged and remixed in mobile device applications, such as Flipboard, which in its first incarnation integrated news and social media flows into a “magazine” for Apple Inc.’s iPad. Its use of full-screen photographs supported the proposition of digital textuality theorists that online remediation entails a larger role for visual modes (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Bolter 2001). Circa, a short-lived news service that displayed a collage of paragraphs from different providers’ news stories to give a composite picture, was a more granular extension of the remixing concept (New York Times 2014: 19).

3.6.4 Future textuality

A number of provocative forecasts have been made about digital texts. One is that blogs would erase the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous modes (Herring et al. 2004: 11), which echoes the claim by Zelizer (1995) that quotations make news a hybrid of text and talk to begin with. It has also long been proposed that mass markets for news would disappear in favor of fragmented, diversified versions – from experiments by Bender et al. (1996) to today’s commercialized “Daily Me” (Thurman 2011). A corollary of increasing personalization is the idea that blogs would erode the neutralistic “reporter voice,” along with the professional role of the reporter. These predictions have come to pass in the sense that breaking and important news can now be experienced as a conversation among professional and amateur newsgatherers and their audiences on social media. However, for the archival “version of record” and for non-breaking stories, slower asynchronous news is still the norm. The reporter voice is still distinctive. Reports in that voice, by the largest news organizations, are still widely held to be credible and form the basis of much other commentary. So far, the center is holding.

It also remains to be seen whether future journalists will be less willing than predecessors to write in ways that will be read as critical. During much of the twentieth century there was a clearly independent “Fourth Estate” in Western countries, capable of critical comment,
if not of its biggest advertisers, at least of governments and others. To take one example, business is now replacing government in many functions as governments sell assets and service contracts. But it is not accountable to the public or open to reporting in the same direct way. More generally, finance and consumption coverage has grown while labor coverage has almost disappeared. Yet business news genres have been analyzed mainly as elements of routine intertextual chains rather than ideological news elements. Entry points to these chains have included news releases (Jacobs 1999; Pander Maat and de Jong 2013), press conferences (Jacobs 2011), and financial disclosures (Camiciottoli 2013). The decision to examine business news as the output of official sources is realistically motivated by the dependence of financial reporters on these sources and their difficulty in doing independent reporting, as supported by van Hout’s ethnography of business reporting (2009; van Hout and Magilchrist 2010). The erosion of boundaries between government and business, including media business, is another threat to the production of critical news.

Future directions and new vistas are also visible for research paradigms, SFL being one example. Given the spread of media language, evaluation in the systemic-functional sense remains a rich area for research, both in terms of whether the revised news economy has dampened negative criticism in some areas (as Brayfield (2008) suggests for arts reviews), and in terms of the qualities evaluated. Hommerberg (2011) found that wine reviews used a restricted, mainly positive range of evaluations that covered different discourse roles. In a study of stories about celebrations of nationalism such as U.S. Independence Day, newspapers were found to consistently evaluate the events in idiosyncratic terms of impressiveness, appropriateness, and popular enthusiasm, which overlapped the Appraisal categories (ben-Aaron 2005a, 2005b). These kinds of promotional and consumer news deserve more study across the many research paradigms we have mentioned here.

No matter the change in the media, the challenge is still to find underlying patterns of language use, including its variation and change, which are related to media production conditions and social functions (Tannen and Trester’s (2013) volume provides some direction). From van Dijk onward, the existence of high-level discourse schemata in mass media has been recognized, which makes sense given the way journalists were traditionally taught to shape stories based on checklists and prior story templates (Cotter 2010). Östman (2005) suggested the existence of a discourse pattern, an intuitively recognized schema that bridges genre and text type, and carries certain expectations of constituent elements. This is some of the first work on news within Construction Grammar (CxG), which considers utterances as complexes of features without being limited by traditional categories such as syntax and semantics, or phrase and clause. While CxG is in many ways a retooling of existing work in the areas described throughout this chapter, the emphasis on family resemblance in linguistic structures is distinctive and deserves to be integrated into existing ways of studying news. It remains to be discovered precisely how news in its linguistic mode is recognized as news, tested for credibility, and integrated into our mental models. News is always a product of its time and place, including the available technology, and varies accordingly.

3.7 Conclusion: the multidisciplinary advantage

Media language analysis will continue to be dominated by multidisciplinary blends of discourse analytic and sociolinguistic approaches, informed by the insights of work in complementary fields such as cultural studies, critical theory, political science, sociology, anthropology, and media studies. Discourse structure, representation, ideology, pragmatic and social semiotic
meaning, sociolinguistic variation, ethnographic understanding, mediatization processes, community of practice awareness, and involvement with audience and society will continue to be queried and studied through a wide range of media data across expanding modalities incorporating various methods. (See Puschmann and Compagnone, this volume, Chapter 32; Ensslin, this volume, Chapter 19; and Häusermann, this volume, Chapter 13.) As well as the sociolinguistic and discourse analysis paradigms on which most media language research has been developed today, newsroom and video ethnography and other practices from the social sciences are taking root within language- and communication-focused sociolinguistic paradigms. There is also room for a renewed focus on reception; this further aligns with the way evolving digital technologies enable more close and networked relationships between news producers and consumers. Our talk and interaction on all channels, but particularly those that are in flux or just emerging, will also require game-changing scrutiny from the sociolinguistic end of the analytical workforce.

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Discourse approaches


