

Review: Discourse Analysis; Sociolinguistics: Bednarek & Caple (2012)

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SUMMARY

“News Discourse,” by Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, is part of the longstanding Bloomsbury Discourse Series edited by Ken Hyland that provides students and researchers with introductions to core topics in discourse studies. This particular volume consists of nine chapters plus two appendices that discuss news discourse as it pertains to language and image in news construction. In addition to providing an introduction to the topic, with a non-exclusive focus on newspapers, the authors also provide frameworks for their own approaches to analysing language and image in soft and hard news stories, drawing from examples across news modalities and forms. The book’s final chapter is a case study of online video news reporting about the death of Osama Bin Laden that makes use of material discussed in the book’s discursive and methodological chapters. Roughly speaking, Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 could be seen as providing introductions to news discourse, while Chapters 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9 could be treated as methodological.

Each chapter in the text begins with an introductory paragraph, a list of objectives, and a section that operationalizes the main terms and concepts discussed in the chapter. Similarly uniform is the list of suggested readings at the end of each chapter. The directions for further reading provide viewpoints both complementary and alternative to the ones presented in the chapter. The authors also provide a concise summary of each reading to aid readers.

Chapter 1 operationalizes ‘news discourse’, stating that it is necessary to do so in ways that prioritise each of the two words in the term. The authors make clear that for their purposes discourse is multisemiotic and includes language and image in news construction. They differentiate themselves from those who focus exclusively on language as well as those who observe discourse as a reflection of news, rather than as an active construction of it. The chapter introduces readers to the various types of news discourse that are discussed over the course of the volume (e.g., print, online, television, radio, podcasts, etc.) and provides an overview for various approaches to its analysis. Bednarek and Caple provide descriptions of eight distinct linguistic approaches to news discourse and another four approaches that are within the domain of media/journalism and communications. The chapter closes with a summary and discussion of the book’s structure.

Chapter 2 begins with five objectives that are squarely placed in the ‘how’ camp: how news develops, and is produced, consumed, regulated, and financed. The authors argue that understanding these five topics is necessary in order for researchers to

contextualise their data analysis. They describe the communicative context of news as a complex triangle between news discourse, producers, and audience with energy transferring in all directions. Bednarek and Caple then provide a sociohistorical context for news discourse, discussing the development of the print news media in the UK, as well as its digitization, financing, and regulation.

The topic of news values, as defined by Bell (1991:155), is introduced as the focus of Chapter 3. Although Bednarek and Caple also provide four other definitions of news values, they make clear that “what these different definitions have in common, however, is that news values are said to determine what makes something newsworthy -- worthy of being news” (p. 40). They further draw on Bell (1991) in their categorisation of news values (Bell’s are in parentheses): news writing objectives (values in news text), news cycle/market factors (values in news process), and news values (values in news actors and events). From there the authors develop a news values summary, which includes elements similar to other such discussions (e.g., Cotter 2010; O’Neill and Harcup 2009; Richardson 2007). What follows from this is a short discussion of whether news values are cognitively or discursively conceptualised. Bednarek and Caple then consider news values and linguistic devices. This discussion includes but is not limited to evaluative language, intensification and quantification, word combinations, story structure, and first-person plural pronouns. From there the authors turn to news values and image, using some of the same subthemes as listed above but also incorporating aesthetic elements. The chapter concludes with a return to their original news value summary. At this point they provide and discuss examples of news stories as they pertain to each news value in order to discuss how news values are construed in discourse.

News discourse as a language variety is the focus of Chapter 4. Bednarek and Caple outline key lexical and syntactic features that distinguish news discourse from other linguistic varieties. They discuss the prevalence of nouns, subsequent nominalisations, and prepositional phrases in print news. The authors suggest that noun phrases work to evaluate and label news actors and sources. With respect to verbs, the authors provide data from a corpus of UK news discourse, arguing that ‘will/would’ are key verbs, and that finite verbs rarely occur in the passive voice. They argue that time specification is the most common type of adverbial and that linking adverbials are rare. This discussion leads into the topic of the structure of the news story, which they posit can be separated into three parts in most print genres: headline, intro/lead, and body/lead development. The topic of ‘headlines’ is discussed in some detail, including features, verbs, and examples of headlines. Online, radio, and television news headlines are discussed in the last section of the chapter.

Chapter 5 shifts attention to still and moving images in the news, including which images are used and their purpose/s in news coverage. The communicative function of news images is discussed and is divided into a number of categories: illustration, evidence, sensation, icon, evaluation, and aesthetic. The relationship between text and image is discussed, including image and caption relations, image and headline relations, and image and body text relations. The final section discusses text and image relations in sequenced images.

In Chapter 6, the authors provide the first of two frameworks for analysing language and image in news discourse: a linguistic framework for analysing the role of language in news stories. Bednarek and Caple discuss various parameters of their framework: un/importance, in/comprehensibility, im/possibility and in/ability, un/necessity, emotivity, in/authenticity, reliability, un/expectedness, evidentiality, and mental state. The chapter ends with a discussion of other issues for consideration,

focusing on evaluation of the sentiment behind the text: namely, whether or not the journalist is expressing an opinion, what (if anything) is being evaluated, the degree of evaluation, and the purpose of evaluation.

Chapter 7 complements the previous chapter, providing a framework for analysing image composition. Here the authors draw on Caple's training and career as a press photographer to claim that news image composition is based on balance and symmetry. They develop a framework for analysing balance and composition in news discourse, which includes: image frame, elements, and visual unit of information. The authors also discuss a number of different patterns in photographs, the importance of aesthetics, and problematic or 'ugly' images.

Chapter 8 applies the frameworks of the previous two chapters (evaluation in language and image composition) in analysing the topic of the stand-alone print news story. The authors explain the concept of the stand-alone story and provide a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis of stand-alones in the Sydney Morning Herald. The quantitative analysis focuses on composition and evaluation while the differences between soft and hard news stories are discussed primarily using qualitative research. Their argument is that images in this format are of good composition and a high technical standard, and that the headlines associated with the images tend towards playfulness (e.g., through the use of puns, allegories, etc.). They found this to be the case with both hard and soft stand-alone stories, and assert that this could be considered inappropriate for some hard news stories, which tend to focus on material events that affect people's lives.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, is a case study that focuses on Osama Bin Laden's death. As with Chapter 8, the emphasis here is on applying their frameworks and concepts to the study of news discourse. They discuss the reason for selecting this example over other global news events during the same period (2010/2011). They then apply earlier discussed frameworks and concepts from Chapters 3-5 to their analysis of two video clips approximately one minute in length from the websites of public news broadcasters in Australia and the United Kingdom.

The volume also contains two appendices and an index.

EVALUATION

"News Discourse" is a volume on an interesting subject that merges two important and interconnected topics within news discourse: text and image. Bednarek and Caple introduce readers to the field while also providing methodological frameworks to aid in data analysis. The book fills an important gap in the existing literature in that it considers news discourse in a variety of mediums, and gives equal weighting to image and text. The volume will be particularly useful to students or those moving into this research field as it provides both an overview to the topic and a toolkit for analysing news.

This is a book that takes on a great deal: it is an introductory text, a methodological guide, and it covers both image and language. The breadth of material ensures that the book will be useful to students and researchers of news texts and images across a range of disciplines. However, as a result of the ambitious range of approaches and key studies discussed alongside their own analyses, there are sections where the exposition seems too brief. This is especially true in some of the chapters emphasising methodological frameworks, where a topic is introduced and discussed for a single paragraph before the authors move onto the next theme.

The short sections and subsections that move between distinct ideas allow Bednarek and Caple to cover much terrain but further elaboration of some of their themes (and subthemes) and frameworks might have been helpful to readers. For example, their discussion of cognitive and discursive approaches to news values might have benefited from further elaboration and/or clarity. The authors state (p. 44) that the cognitive perspective holds the position that news values originate in mental assumptions and categorisation, but this is not taken any further (i.e., how do these assumptions and categories come into being?). Similarly, “from a discursive perspective [...] newsworthiness is construed through discourse (both language and image)” (p. 44). For readers not steeped in the discussion already, these definitions provide little clarification of cognitive and discursive approaches to news values.

Chapters 4 and 7 stand out as providing excellent mixtures of concepts/frameworks and supporting data. These two chapters will be of particular interest to linguists researching or teaching in the area as well as linguistics students. Chapter 4, which focuses on news discourse as a language variety, includes discussions of linguistic features specific to news discourse and their functions. Bednarek and Caple provide a broad set of examples to illustrate their argument as well as a framework to use in approaching news text. Chapter 7 focuses on composition, balance, and aesthetics in image composition, which is an important but under-examined area within the study of news discourse. The authors’ introduction to image composition and analysis is accessible and provides a wide range of examples of images to support their frameworks.

It is impressive that the authors balance their treatment of text with image, and concept with framework. However, the way that this is sequenced in the volume is somewhat unclear. Although there is a section of the introduction dedicated to the ‘[s]tructure and summary of the book’ (p. 14-17), it does not include how the chapters fit together, why the book is structured as it is, or any clear reason for their sequencing. It may have been helpful to readers had the authors explained how the chapters follow from each other, and why the authors favoured this sequence and division of material as opposed to other equally valid strategies.

One issue that it might have been interesting for Bednarek and Caple explore is whether text and image must be analysed using separate frameworks, and to be explicit about where independent analysis joins up again. The authors structure the discussion of text and image quite separately in earlier chapters but analyse the two together in the latter chapters. Chapter 8 uses examples to examine language and image in soft and hard news stories and their case study in Chapter 9 looks at an online video story (thus combining image and language). However, the frameworks that they provided earlier in the book treat image and text rather separately.

“News Discourse” is a valuable addition to the Bloomsbury Discourse series; it covers an interesting topic in a novel way that will be of interest to a wide readership. More importantly, the volume does so in a way that is timely both in the modalities under consideration and the data used. Bednarek and Caple’s book incorporates an extensive range of material and examines the crucial interplay of text and image in contemporary news discourse. The book will be useful to researchers and students interested in linguistic, media, or discursive approaches to analysing news texts and images.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Chrystie Mykietiak is a postdoctoral fellow at Queen Mary, University of London where she works on CHI+MED, a project at the intersection of human-computer interaction and medical safety. Her research combines media, health, and discourse in a variety of ways, including: medical errors in incident reports; the construction of blame in news about medical errors; and online sex talk. She holds a PhD in Computer Science (Interaction, Media, and Communication) and Linguistics from the University of London.