

Representational Strategies

Naming and reference:

Fairclough (2003) has shown that the way that people named can have significant impact on the way in which they are viewed. We have a range of naming choices that we can make when we wish to refer to a person. These allow us to place people in the social world. These choices can allow us to highlight certain aspects we wish to draw attention to and silence others.

For example take the following sentence:

Muslim man arrested for fraudulently claiming benefits

In fact there were many other possibilities that could have been used to characterise the man: an Asian man, a British man, a Midlands man, a local office worker, a Manchester United supporter, a father of two young daughters, a man named Mazar Hussein. Each of these can serve psychological, social and political purposes for the writer and reader (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001:47).

This is shown in the following:

Father of two daughters arrested for fraudulently claiming benefits

In this second case the meaning is different. In the first case the headline locates the story in a news frame emphasising his 'otherness' and the man as part of something that is problematic. From 2005 Muslims became represented through news-frames that emphasised their threat to the wider society and resistance to wider cultural values (Richardson, 2007). Since the man was born in Britain the headline could equally have said that he was a British man. But this would have appeared odd and would have suggested 'one of us'. Crime reporting usually involves creating morality others, so that the perpetrator is not like us. In the second headline referring to the man in the first place as a father humanises him having the opposite effect. The effect is that possibly the fraud was justified.

Van Dijk (1993) has shown how the news aligns us alongside or against people can be thought of as what he calls 'ideological squaring'. He shows how texts often use referential choices to create opposites, to make events and issues appear simplified and often in order to control their meaning. For example phenomena can be associated with old or new, future and past, etc. Van Dijk specifically gives the examples of sexual assaults in the press. Where the man is considered guilty he will be referred to as a 'sex fiend', 'monster' or 'pervert'. In this case he will *attack* innocent women who will be referred to as 'mother', 'daughter', 'worker'. However, where the man is considered innocent the referential strategy will be different. In this case the woman will be referred to as 'divorcee' or through physical features such as 'busty'. In this case she will *provoke* an innocent man referred to as 'hubby', 'father of four', 'worker'. In this way the referential strategy becomes part of the way we perceive people and their actions. As in the case of the Muslim man the actions of the man or woman becomes part of the broader social problems caused by this category of person.

Classification of Social actors

To help us to be more systematic when describing referential choices Van Leeuwen (1996) offers a comprehensive inventory of the ways that we can classify people and the ideological effect that these have.

Personalised/impersonalised

We can ask to what extent the participant is personalised or impersonalised. This can be seen in the following two sentences:

Prof John Smith requires academic staff to give notification of strike action
The University requires academic staff to give notification of strike action

In the second case impersonalisation is used to give extra weight to a particular statement. It is not just a particular person but a whole institution that requires something. It is simply not personal. Of course this conceals certain issues. We could argue that the staff, along with the students, *are* the University. But

here this has been phrased to give a sense that giving notification may be in the interests of the university as a whole. We often come across the same process where politicians say ‘Our nation believes...’ or ‘Britain will not be held responsible...’. This serves to conceal who actually believes it and who is actually responsible in each case. In the EMDA example above we read of ‘the goals of the Regional Economic Strategy’. But these goals have their origins in a particular political organisation.

Individuals or collectivised

It is also useful to consider how participants are described as individuals or as part of a collectivity as is shown in the following sentences:

Two soldiers, privates John Smith, and Jim Jones were killed today by a car bomb
Militants were killed today by a car bomb

In the first case these soldiers are actual people. The details individualise them and therefore allow us to associate with them as real people. In the second case the militants are simply a generic group. In the following case we can see how additional referential information individualises the participants further:

Two soldiers, privates John Smith, and Jim Jones, both fathers of two daughters, were killed today by a car bomb

We can see the effect of this in the following which is confusing as we are not normally given personal details of participants classified in this way as it tends to humanise them:

Terror suspects, both fathers of two daughters, were killed today by a car bomb

It is useful in analysis of a text to ask which kinds of participants are individualised and which are collectivised. In other words we reveal which group is humanised.

Specific or generic

We can also look at whether participants are represented as specific individuals or as a generic type. In our earlier example, we saw that the person accused of benefits fraud could be either named or identified as a type. For example in the following:

A man, Mazar Hussein, challenged police today
A Muslim man challenged police today

In the second case the man who challenged the police is represented as a type. This is used here to place the story in a particular news frame. In this case the generic category of Muslim can place this story into a news-frame where Muslims are a contemporary problem in Britain, either through extremism or whinging about their situation. In fact the man may not have been a practicing Muslim. It could be like saying “Christian John Smith challenged police today”. It is the use of such generic terms that can be used to give a racist angle on a story even while the newspaper takes a stance that it is not racist.

Nominalised or functionalised

Participants can be nominalised in terms of who they are or functionalised by being depicted in terms of what they do. For example:

George Bush said that democracy would win
The American president said that democracy would win

This can have different effects. Use of functionalisation can sound more official, and nominalising can sound more personal. Functionalisation can also reduce people to their role which may in fact be assigned by the writer or be generic, for example.

The demonstrator was injured outside the embassy.
The defendant was warned by Judge Peter Smithely-Smigely

In these cases the demonstrator and defendant are partially dehumanised by referring to them with functionalisations that highlight only their roles.

Also functionalisation can also connote legitimacy. Machin and Mayr (2007) in an analysis of a regional newspaper showed that functionalisation, in the form of 'shop owner' and 'office workers' served to positively evaluate speakers represented as legitimate, decent members of a local community. Those who were not legitimate were represented only in terms of what they said.

Of course functionalisation can itself be an attempt to define what someone actually does. In the Daily Mail anti-immigration story above we find the following line:

A teenage scribbler in a liberal Sunday newspaper, who normally seems to write reasonable sense, virtually accused me of being a neo-Nazi.

The author of the text does not name the journalist who has criticised him but uses a pejorative functionalisation of 'teenage scribbler'. The author also uses a technique pointed to by Van Dijk (1992) for the denial of racism where he first states that he normally has no problem with this person, but in this case he does, distancing himself from being more broadly critical pointing to this being an isolated case – the point being that he is not biased and is reasonable. In the example of racist discourse we might find:

I normally I have no problems with ethnic minorities but in this case...

Objectivated

Here participants are represented through a feature

'The ball of fun' for a baby
'The beauty' for a woman

Anonymised

Participants can often be anonymised.

A source said today that the government would be focusing on environmental issues
Some people believe that globalisation is a bad thing

In the first case it is usual to see this in newspapers. On the one hand we rely on journalists to have legitimate sources, but in fact this conceals the way that certain social groups and organisations have access to feed information to journalists. In the second case we can see how politicians, in this case Tony Blair, can use such representations to avoid specification and developing detailed arguments. It allows us to conveniently summon up kinds of arguments that are easy to then dismiss.

Aggregated

Here participants are quantified and treated as 'statistics' :

Many thousands of immigrants are arriving in...
Scores of Muslim inmates at a high security prison are set to launch a multi-million pound claim for compensation after they were offered ham sandwiches during the holy month of Ramadan. (Daily Mail 26th October 2007)

Van Dijk (1992) shows that this kind of use of statistics can be used to give the impression of research, of scientific credibility, when in fact we are not told specific figures. Is 'many thousands' three thousand or one hundred thousand, for example. And what are 'scores'? In the news agency feed received by the IRN above we find the following line:

One of the few suspects to express remorse over his alleged involvement in last year's bombings on Indonesia's Bali island arrived at court on Thursday

In this case how many is a few? Exactly how many have shown remorse and how many have not? And if we are not told then why not? What is clear from this particular text is the depoliticisation. We are not told about the political aims of those who planted the bombs. They become generic terrorists and part of the news-frame of the war on terror. What kind of remorse is not clear either. Does this mean they now no longer believe in their political aims?

Pronoun/noun: The 'us' and 'them' division

Concepts like 'us', 'we' and 'them' are used to align us alongside or against particular ideas. Text producers can evoke their own ideas as being our ideas and create a collective other that is the opposition to these shared ideas:

*We live in a democracy of which we are proud
They shall not be allowed to threaten our democracies and freedom
We have to decide to be strong and fight this global terrorism to the end*

Fairclough (2000:152) has pointed out that the concept of 'we' is slippery. This fact can be used by text producers. 'We' can mean 'the political party', then in the next sentence can be used to mean 'the people of Britain', and in the next an unspecified group of nations. In the last example above does it mean 'we' the people who are proud of democracy or a collection of superpowers? This means that who the 'we' is, who actually has the power or responsibility, can be hidden.

We can see this vague use of 'we' in the *Daily Mail* anti-immigration story above. In this case it is used to evoke a British 'we' who share the indigenous culture although how this is so and the exact composition of this 'we' is not overtly explained in the text. This can be illustrated as follows.

*Britain has an indigenous culture
We must fight the deluge of immigrants*

These two sentences imply what is said in the following without actually saying it:

We of the indigenous British culture must fight the deluge of immigrants

Put in this way the racist discourse becomes much more direct. Splitting the information into two sentences helps the writer to conceal this.

Suppression

We can also look at what is missing from a text (Fairclough, 2003) as in the following examples:

*Globalisation is now affecting all national economies
Market based economics are establishing themselves in all areas of life*

In all these cases the agent is missing. Globalisation is not a thing that has power to change things but is a process or phenomena that is caused by particular agents. It is driven by capitalism and world economic organisations such as the World Trade Organisation and World Bank. In the second case market based economics are not agents themselves but are a result of a particular political ideology. The fact that they have become established is through specific political decisions and the waves of privatisation that have followed. The result of these two sentences is that both globalisation and market based economies appear natural and inevitable, something that must be responded to rather than something that is being created through specific decisions and politics

References

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