

English Linguistics PhD Programme  
Eötvös Loránd University

Ferenczy Judit

**Grammatical and textual features of radio news**

Abstract

Supervisor: Dr Kontra Miklós

Budapest

2002

## 1 Rationale

The printed and electronic media has become the subject of intellectual scrutiny within many academic fields, such as cultural studies, media studies, semiotics, and film studies. By now, linguistic media research has come to constitute a distinct subfield of discourse analysis. However, it is printed news that has received most professional attention. Then comes television as the next most covered topic in the media literature. Radio has received less consideration, with some, albeit significant, studies on talk radio (e.g. Hutchby 1996, 1999) or radio interviews (Heritage 1985, Heritage and Greatbatch 1991). In sum, much research has been done on the news, but little on *radio* news; and there are a number of studies on radio language, but little on radio *news*.

The present study is intended to be gap-filling in three ways:

First, it focuses on grammatical features of radio news language, that is, on the neglected area of levels below the sentence. Language structure below the level of the sentence has received considerably less attention than the textual level of media language. Some exceptions are studies which deal with the use of reported speech in the news (e.g. Nir and Roeh 1987), or with phonological variables in newsreaders' language use (e.g. Bell 1984).

Second, the study addresses a much debated issue in the linguistic literature: that of orality and literacy. Media language represents a challenge for extant conceptions of orality vs literacy, but even the studies that have attempted to place media language along this variation (e.g. Vagle 1991) argue that broadcast news represents a written type of language in the oral media of radio. The present study seriously challenges this view, and provides evidence that radio news displays certain grammatical features that approximate it more to spoken genres than written modes of discourse.

Third, the discourse-level studies on the textual configuration of the news (van Dijk 1985, 1988; Bell 1991, 1998) have again focused on printed news, with the insightful but slightly casual remark (Bell 1991) that a model which accounts for the discourse structure of press news should be valid for broadcast news as well. This intuition is basically true, but only on the surface: certain press text categories may prove superfluous, and new textual units may be necessary, to describe accurately the make-up of radio news. The study explores the discourse structure of radio news.

Thus, the aim of the present study is also threefold: First, it is intended to reveal the main grammatical features of radio news. Second, it seeks to offer numerical data as evidence against the assumption that radio news has an absolutely literate character. Third, it is meant to shed light on the topics and the discourse structure of radio news vis-à-vis its press counterpart, also paying attention to how news items on the same topic are constructed in terms of textual units. The study will offer a new model for the topic structure of radio news, a modified model for its discourse structure, and will present a supplementary framework for analysing news on the same topic. The above objectives are projected on the subgenres of radio news as well.

The relative novelty of the study stands in its corpus-based character: the findings are grounded on a not too big but solid database of approximately 49,000 words. A corpus-based approach allows the researchers to support their observations with indisputable facts, which may or may not verify initial intuitions, but are surely apt to reveal unique characteristics of a register.

## **2 Research questions**

The dissertation aims at providing the answers to four quantitative and six qualitative questions:

- What are the main grammatical features of radio news? Do any of these grammatical features approximate it more to spoken than written language?
  - Is there any grammatical feature in which radio news differs from all other media genres?
  - Do the subtypes of radio news identified in the present study differ in their spoken vs written character?
  - Do the subtypes of radio news identified in the present study differ in quantitative features such as length of items, number of sentences, length of sentences and position?
- 
- What are the topics of the BBC corpus?
  - Is there any relationship between the position and the topic of a news item?
  - How does the position of (partially or entirely) repeated news items change?

- What are the textual units of the BBC corpus news? Is the discourse structure suggested by van Dijk (1985, 1988) and Bell (1991, 1998) for printed news valid for radio news as well?
- What is the relationship of headlines to news items?
- What are the transformation techniques of textual units when
  - (i) a correspondent's report is later incorporated into a news item?
  - (ii) a news item is partially repeated?
  - (iii) a long news item becomes a short one?

### **3 Theoretical background and previous works**

This part of the study is structured in the following way: First, the media literature is reviewed in general (Chapter 1). Second, the literature on orality and literacy is briefly discussed (Chapter 2). The remaining part is aimed at providing a ground for the comparison of radio news to written and spoken registers on levels both below and above the sentence. The main grammatical features of press news (a literate text type) and conversations (an oral register) are summarised (Chapters 3 and 4), on the basis of a fairly recent, comprehensive, corpus-based grammar (Biber et al. 1999). The textual structure of press news is presented by comparing two extant models (van Dijk 1988, Bell 1991) on the discourse structure of press stories (Chapter 5).

#### *3.1 Approaches to media language*

The study suggests a classification of the media literature in three groups: non-linguistic media studies, linguistic non-media studies, and linguistic media works. The first group includes, among others, the ground-breaking work of the Glasgow University Media Group and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the second half of the 1970's, which set the stage for all kinds of media studies: from cultural, social and linguistic perspectives. The second group refers to linguistic work not mainly aimed at the analysis of the media, but later substantially utilised in media-focused studies, such as Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics, or conversation analysis. The third group comprises frameworks within the domain of linguistics, particularly conceived for the analysis of media texts, such as

critical linguistics (Kress and Hodge 1979, Fowler et al. 1979), critical discourse analysis (van Dijk 1993, 2001; Fairclough 1995a,b), and non-critical linguistic media works (Ferguson 1983, Bell 1984, Al-Shabab 1986, and partly Bell and Garrett (eds.) 1998).

### 3.2 *Approaches to spoken and written language*

There now seems to be an agreement between scholars that speech and writing are not two distinct, independent and contrasted categories, but the two endpoints of a continuum. It has also been acknowledged that the categories 'oral' vs 'literate' are too simplistic, and that there is more to it than the medium used. Several complementary distinctions have been suggested, such as typical speech vs typical writing (Tannen 1982), unplanned vs planned discourse (Ochs 1979), fragmentation vs integration and involvement vs detachment (Chafe 1982) etc. Some studies go as far as stating that speech and writing are not even valid distinctions, and that a whole system of features and dimensions has to be introduced to capture variation in English (Biber 1988). As regards the electronic media, it brings about an age of new non-literacy, of secondary orality, in which the traditional speech vs writing distinction is even less suitable (Ong 1982, Lakoff 1982). Radio news, however, is said to represent a kind of language which – despite being intended for the ear – very closely resembles written text types in its lexical and syntactic texture (Vagle 1991).

### 3.3 *The grammatical features of printed news and conversations*

Biber et al. (1999) find that, both in press news and in conversations, the grammatical features correspond to *what kind* of information has to be communicated on the one hand, and *how* this information is conveyed on the other.

News is mainly concerned with current events, newly emerged states, and the acts and words of elite personalities; hence the use of activity and existence verbs, heavily modified nouns and circumstance adverbials. It also packs as much information as possible in a limited space; hence its lexical density, long sentences and phrases, a high frequency of nouns, determiners, prepositions, attributive-affiliative adjectives, agentless passives, and nonfinite clauses.

Conversations are preoccupied with on-going activities, and the acts, thoughts and features of conversants or third parties; hence their high frequency of (mostly activity and mental) verbs, adverbs, circumstance adverbials, simple and progressive verb phrases, size and age adjectives. Colloquies involve personal viewpoints; thus they display a high rate of evaluative adjectives and stance adverbials. Conversations present information in more linear, simple structures; therefore, they display a low lexical density, a low rate of passives, of nonfinite clauses and simple sentences, a high frequency of linking adverbials; while adjectives are used both attributively and predicatively. Face-to-face conversations are interpersonal and situational; hence their low noun modification, high rate of pronouns and present tense verbs. Finally, conversations take place in real time; thus they might contain much non-clausal material and non-standard linguistic forms.

### 3.4 *The textual features of printed news*

Two extant models of the discourse structure of printed news are discussed. It is found that van Dijk's (1985, 1988) 'sociocognitive' and Bell's (1991, 1998) 'structural discourse analytical' models are in great consonance. Both models feature Abstract/Summary (Headline plus Lead), Main Events, Consequences, Context, History, Verbal Reactions, Expectations and Evaluations as textual elements of typical press stories. The main difference between the two frameworks is that Bell has complemented van Dijk's model with the category Attribution, for both the news story as a whole and the individual pieces of information contained. Bell also places great emphasis on the discontinuous time-planes that make up a news story.

## **4 Radio news – the study**

The second part of the dissertation focuses on the new research done on radio news. Methods of data collection and processing are discussed (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 presents the results and discussion of the quantitative analyses, while Chapter 8 does the same for the qualitative investigation. Chapter 9 offers a supplementary analytical framework for radio news items of a radio station dealing with the same topic.

#### 4.1 *Data and methods*

The BBC corpus collected for the purposes of the present study consists of a 4-hour 30-minute sample of BBC World Service news from five-minute morning and two-minute afternoon programmes for three weeks running. The consecutive-days sampling was important for allowing some of the qualitative questions to be addressed: e.g. textual transformations along news items dealing with the same topic. The news was transcribed in terms of words, which resulted in a body of text made up of approximately 49,000 words (452 news items). The data are fairly representative of the BBC WS news output and, given the prestige and acknowledged exemplary character of the BBC, the findings are prone to be generalised to all Western-type public service radio news production.

The database was quantitatively tagged with the help of QTAG 3.01 part-of-speech tagger (Mason 2001/1994), and manually checked for errors and cases in need of clarification. Some shortcomings of the programme were also eliminated. The news was qualitatively analysed for topics and textual units, and the subgenres were compared in terms of discourse structure.

#### 4.2 *Quantitative results – answers to the research questions*

- What are the main grammatical features of radio news? Do any of these grammatical features approximate it more to spoken than written language?

Just like the press in general, radio news is also concerned with the doings of prominent personalities who have to be easily identified by the listeners. This is reflected by a high ratio of determiners and nouns modified by adjectives, prepositional phrases, participles and relative clauses. The most frequent words in the corpus also reveal the interest of the news to give the circumstances of, and amounts involved in, current events (time and place expressions, quantifiers). The most frequent modals (expressing prediction) are related to the fact that news often deals with expectable events. Radio news also strives to present as much information as possible in the shortest possible time. Its grammatical features, therefore, display means of integration, such as long sentences, long noun and

prepositional phrases, multi-purpose genitives, many gerunds and a high number of nonfinite clauses.

Thus, radio news was found to present some features characteristic of written genres, namely, the length of noun and prepositional phrases, and aspectual marking (a preference for the perfective aspect over the progressive, when not simple). In these features, radio news is much similar to the printed media. In other features, however, radio news differs considerably from literate language forms:

- in lexical density, radio news stands between written news texts and conversations;
- the average noun/verb ratio of radio news (2.3 nouns per verb) places it between news reportage (3 to 4 nouns per verb) and conversations (a 1 to 1 relationship);
- certain aspects of clause grammar, such as the rate of finite vs non-finite subclauses, coordination vs subordination and the retention vs omission of *that*, shows a more marked similarity to spoken than written language;
- the extremely common usage of semi-modal auxiliaries makes radio news especially ‘conversation-like’.

This is an impressive list of grammatical features in radio news which approximate it more to spoken than written language. The findings considerably alter the picture drawn by previous works, which placed this radio genre totally at the writing end of the oral vs literate continuum.

- Is there any grammatical feature in which radio news differs from all other media genres?

The study identified a distinctive feature of radio news, namely, a remarkably high rate of the perfective aspect in verb phrases. This must be in a direct relationship with the aim of radio news to be of an accentuated present relevance. The strong preference for the perfective proves to be a unique characteristic of radio news.

- Do the subtypes of radio news identified in the present study differ in their spoken vs written character?

The subgenres of radio news were found to differ from each other in some ways: reports stand closer to conversations than to the press in their more frequent usage of pronouns, conjunctions and adverbs.

- Do the subtypes of radio news identified in the present study differ in quantitative features such as length of items, number of sentences, length of sentences and position?

Short news (originating from two-minute programmes) displays fewer, but not shorter, sentences than long news (reported or unreported, from five-minute bulletins). There is no difference between the number of news items per edition: the average number is seven both in the two-minute and the five-minute programmes.

In sum, radio news, indeed, shows appreciable similarities to spoken language both overall and, to a different extent, in its various subgenres.

#### 4.3 *Qualitative results – answers to the research questions*

- What are the topics of the BBC corpus?

Twelve topic areas were identified in the BBC World Service news: Legal issues, Conflicts, Economic issues, Human interest stories, Nature-related, Military, and Immigration issues, Protests, Media-related issues, Elections, Anniversaries and Scientific issues, in decreasing order of coverage amount. In a model offered for the topic structure of the BBC corpus, each topic area branches into topic groups (which may divide into topic subgroups), these are made up of topics, which, for their part, consist of subtopics. However, not all topics arch over several subtopics, not all topics have topic groups governing them, and topic subgroups are rare. This complex system is a true reflection of the disparate threads of media topics.

- Is there any relationship between the position and the topic of a news item?

Starting off from the axiom that the amount of coverage of a topic area suggests its perceived importance, it was found that this sense of significance is reflected in positioning as well: more important/covered topics tend to occur in higher positions, and vice versa. However, Position 1 deviates from this general tendency in that the inner division of topic areas here does not follow the above-mentioned importance order, but a recency principle.

- How does the position of (partially or entirely) repeated news items change?

If a topic is treated along several items on the same day in the BBC news, half of the repeated items occupy the same position as earlier, probably because the perceived importance of a topic is not likely to change in the course of a single day. One-third of them slip one slot down: the editor might feel that an item that has lost its 'freshness' by having been heard before is relatively less important. Finally, one-fifth of repeated news items move upwards. This may be due to a previous item having been left out in the next edition, or to a possible negotiation on the part of the editor not being able to decide which topic is more important, so they are presented in order *a-b* in an earlier edition, and *b-a* in a later bulletin.

- What are the textual units of the BBC corpus news? Is the discourse structure suggested by van Dijk (1985, 1988) and Bell (1991, 1998) for printed news valid for radio news as well?

It was found that both models are, to a certain degree, apt for being used in radio news analyses. However, Bell's category of Attributions – absent from Van Dijk's model – was found indispensable, Attributions being the most pervasive textual element of radio news. Some new subcategories, such as Verbal Main Events, Future (Main) Events and Reasons, have been introduced to make up a modified schema of radio news. It was also found that, unlike in press news, Leads and Main Events merge in radio news, and Leads/Main Events as well as Attributions are compulsory elements. These are most typically complemented by near-past previous events and a description of the present situation, possibly accompanied by an

evaluation. Elements which deal with either the remote past or an uncertain future are the least common.

- What is the relationship of headlines to news items?

Headlines were found to be peripheral and optional elements of radio news. Headlining takes place according to certain rules, being attached (i) to the first three elements of an unreported news programme; (ii) to the reported elements of a mixed news programme; and (iii) in the same order as that of the news items they belong to. Deviations from these rules are conditioned by internal factors such as the topic of the item; or external factors, e.g. time of edition, or proximity of other programmes. In a structural sense, headlines are summaries of news items, and the information they transmit more or less overlaps with that contained by the lead. The degree of this overlap can be placed along a continuum from loss of information through retaining knowledge to extra and different information.

- What are the transformation techniques of textual units when
  - (i) a correspondent's report is later incorporated into a news item?
  - (ii) a news item is partially repeated?
  - (iii) a long news item becomes a short one?

The textual transformations indicate two opposite but often simultaneous tendencies at work. One such direction points towards partial loss of information, the other to packing extra knowledge in the repeated item, with neutral cases in which the information is exactly retained. The core of a radio news item seems to be the lead, and all other elements are subject to discretionary alterations due to several constraints (time, availability of information etc.).

#### *4.4 A supplementary analytical framework for radio news*

In a complementary framework for the analysis of radio news, the concept of PANTEXT and a corresponding idea of PANTOPIC were introduced. Thus, a PANTEXT is the unity of all the news items broadcast on a radio station which deal with, and add new information to, the same PANTOPIC, that is, a topic that is pursued across several

items, and has distinct subtopics. Within this framework, the news items on the transportation of Mid-East fundamentalist prisoners to a US military base in Cuba (a 'pantopic'), for example, are considered to constitute one text (a 'pantext'). This is a basically narrative text type telling all the details from the first twenty prisoners being flown through the first night in the camp to the concerns of human rights organisations over the conditions in which the prisoners are held (subtopics of the 'pantopic'). A pantext, therefore, is a text which has been written since the topic was first taken up, and is being written until it is dealt with for the last time. Depending on the 'hotness' of the issue, the length of a pantext could range from just two pieces of news to a potentially endless number of items. It was demonstrated through an application of textuality principles that pantexts show many features which may classify them as texts in their own right, especially if we accept Halliday and Hasan's (1976:1) view that textuality is a matter of degree.

It is proposed that the concept of 'pantexts' can be generalised to a number of linguistic phenomena other than radio news. Letter, e-mail and SMS-message exchanges on the same topic; medical examinations which take place between the same doctor and patient, and lead up to the curing of the same ailment; business meetings between the same business partners until they reach an agreement on one transaction; tutorials which take place between the same teacher and student, and lead up to, for example, one BA thesis; university lectures which are given by one teacher to one group of students in one semester, etc. are some of the candidates for pantexts. However, further research is necessary to sustain this argument.

#### *4.5 Evaluation of the methods*

The combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods proved to be useful: the results obtained in one way were confirmed or complemented by the other. For example, the quantitative method of tagging and frequency counts revealed the distinctive grammatical feature of radio news: the usage of the present perfect. The qualitative method of news item analysis, for its part, showed how exactly the present perfect is used in radio news: in the textual unit of Lead, while in later parts of radio news it turns into the simple past. Or another example: the most important topic areas in the BBC corpus were established through the qualitative method of topic-assignment plus the quantitative method of rate-of-coverage counts.

The most frequent nouns, verbs, adjectives etc. identified via the tagging process confirmed the results of the textual analysis: e.g. the fact that the most often used verb was *say* is in concordance with *Attributions* being the most pervasive textual unit of radio news.

## 5 Future directions of research

Some extensions of current research are proposed:

- What other distinctive grammatical features of radio news besides the use of the present perfect are there? The multi-purpose way genitives are used is one candidate.
- Are the results of the present study based on the output of a prestigious public service radio station valid for news programmes of commercial radio stations?
- Is the concept of 'pantext' a tenable conception which may get experimental support? Do audiences regard these pantexts as single pieces of texts? If not, the concept has to be discarded, however elegant it may seem.
- What is the role of intonation, a very important aspect of radio news, in the expression of textual givenness (see Csölle 1999)? Does an intonation-based givenness analysis prove the suggested existence of 'pantexts'?
- Is there a routinised way of expressing similar stories in similar phrases in radio news? Do these prefabricated stretches of discourse define radio news as a register?
- Are the textual structure models suggested for English news texts – printed or broadcast – valid for the Hungarian news media?
- Does Hungarian radio news also display spoken characteristics?
- Is the concept of 'pantext' generalisable to other languages as well, such as Hungarian?

## References

Al-Shabab, O.S., 1986. *Organizational and Textual Structuring of Radio News Discourse in English and Arabic*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Birmingham: The University of Aston in Birmingham. [Microfilm format]

Bell, A., 1984. 'Language style as audience design.' *Language in Society* 13/2: 145-204.

1991. *The Language of News Media*. Oxford UK and Cambridge MA: Blackwell

1998. 'The discourse structure of news stories.' In A. Bell and P. Garrett (eds.), *Approaches to Media Discourse*, London: Blackwell Publishers, 64-105.

Bell, A. and P. Garrett (eds.), 1998. *Approaches to Media Discourse*, London: Blackwell Publishers

Biber, D., 1988. *Variation across speech and writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Biber, D, Johansson, S, Leech, G, Conrad, S, and Finegan, E., 1999. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman

Chafe, W. L., 1982. 'Integration and involvement in speaking, writing, and oral literature.' In D. Tannen (ed.), *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, Norwood NJ: Ablex, 35-53.

Csölle, A., 1999. *Discourse cohesion in spoken English narratives*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University

van Dijk, T.A., 1985. 'Structures of news in the press.' In T. A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse and Communication. New Approaches to the Analysis of Mass Media Discourse and Communication*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 69-93.

1988. *News as Discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

1993. 'Principles of critical discourse analysis.' *Discourse and Society* 4/2: 249-283.

2001. 'Critical discourse analysis.' In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen and H. E. Hamilton (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 352-371.

Fairclough, N., 1995a. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London and New York: Longman

1995b. *Media Discourse*. London: Arnold

- Ferguson, C. A. 1983. 'Sports announcer talk: Syntactic aspects of register variation.' *Language in Society* 12: 153-172.
- Fowler, R., Hodge, R., Kress, G. and T. Trew, 1979. *Language and Control*. London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Halliday, M.A.K. and R. Hasan, 1976. *Cohesion in English*, London and New York: Longman
- Heritage, J. 1985. 'Analysing news interviews: Aspects of the production of talk for an overhearing audience.' In T. A. van Dijk (ed.), *Handbook of Discourse Analysis. Vol. 3. Discourse and Dialogue*. London: Academic Press, 95-117.
- Heritage, J. and D. Greatbatch, 1991. 'On the institutional character of institutional talk: The case of news interviews.' In D. Boden and D. H. Zimmerman (eds.), *Talk and Social Structure*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 93-137.
- Hutchby, I., 1996. *Confrontation Talk: Arguments, Asymmetries, and Power on Talk Radio*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
1999. 'Frame attunement and footing in the organisation of talk radio openings.' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3/1: 41-63.
- Kress, G. and R. Hodge, 1979. *Language as Ideology*. London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Lakoff, R. T., 1982. 'Some of my favorite writers are literate: the mingling of oral and literate strategies in written communication.' In D. Tannen (ed.), *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, Norwood NJ: Ablex, 239-260.
- Mason, O., 2001/1994. QTAG 3.01. [A part-of-speech tagger].  
URL <http://www.english.bham.ac.uk/staff/oliver/software/tagger/>
- Nir, R. and I. Roeh, 1987. 'Declarative verbs on the radio news.' *Hebrew Computational Linguistics* 25: 19-30.
- Ochs, E., 1979. 'Planned and unplanned discourse.' In T. Givón (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics. Vol. 12. Discourse and Syntax*, New York: Academic Press, 51-80.
- Ong, W. J., 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen
- Tannen, D., 1982. 'The oral/literate continuum in discourse.' In D. Tannen (ed.), *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex. 1-16.
- Vagle, W., 1991. 'Radio language – spoken or written?' *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 1/1: 118-131.