For the people: Defining communities of readership through an Appraisal comparison of letters to two South African newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the affiliation of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) around bonds that are created in 40 letters from the opinions pages of the Daily Sun, a tabloid, and The Times, a mainstream national newspaper. Bonds consist of couplings of interpersonal and ideational meaning that are revealed by an Appraisal analysis of the letters, and show how the identity of the readership community is co-constructed by the letter writers. Ideational meaning is identified by generating frequency and keyword lists with a concordancer. The Appraisal information provides an empirical base from which to compare the natures of the two newspapers' readership communities in terms of how they view agency and group cohesion. This is done to explore whether the communities of readership are as different as they are perceived to be (by those who reject tabloids). Main findings show how both communities affiliate around the value of education, but The Times' readers are more individualistic than the Daily Sun's, who concentrate primarily on the behaviour of the group.

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1. Introduction

First published in 2002, the Daily Sun is a tabloid with more than five and a half million readers – by far the most-read newspaper in the country. Despite its skyrocketing readership statistics, it has not been welcomed by all South Africans. The mainstream media, journalism trainers, and audiences of mainstream media have all been less than respectful of the tabloid phenomenon. This disdain for the Daily Sun arose from its sensational approach to news, explicit displays of crime victims, and sexual content (Wasserman, 2008b[1]). Academics, however, have adopted a more accommodating approach to the Daily Sun, choosing to investigate why it is so popular. Steenveld and Strelitz (2010, p. 531), in particular, investigated the value of tabloid journalism in South Africa, and the way in which these publications "help constitute an imagined national community" which is "contrary to ideas of tabloid readers as engrossed in the individuated consumption of culture". What do all these tabloid readers have in common, we wanted to know. And, following that, what makes them so different from the readers of mainstream[2]

newspapers? A comparison of the Daily Sun and a mainstream newspaper would be necessary, but to "get into the head" of the reader, the letters page would be the place to focus. The first "prong" of our approach involved corpus linguistics: identifying the readers' priorities by investigating what each readership speaks about most frequently. Appraisal analysis was the second "prong" we came at the data with. The ability of a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) – specifically Appraisal – approach to provide empirical linguistic evidence for the communities that are construed by meaning potential in texts renders it the most suitable method for identifying, exploring and comparing the beliefs and values of the imagined communities. The interpersonal is becoming more visible in news media, and it is being made visible by systematic analyses. For example, Peters (2011) argues that emotion has been undertheorised in journalism studies, and that we should think of journalism as cultivating an emotional connexion between news text and audience. Following this, Pounds (2012) found that affectual expressions were prevalent in her Appraisal analysis of a BBC TV news programme. Evaluative language also plays a role in construing news values themselves, the criteria used to decide what is newsworthy (Bednarek and Caple, 2012). Even when certain value positions are attributed to others in a seemingly neutral way, journalists can reveal their own stance by the reporting verbs they choose, as White (2012) found

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[1] In this section of the paper, we rely on the work of Wasserman and Steenveld and Strelitz, media studies scholars who have published the most prominent research on tabloids in South Africa.

[2] Following Morna (2007), we refer to any non-tabloid press as 'mainstream', even though the Daily Sun is technically the most mainstream, given its high

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(footnote continued)

readership. Non-tabloid newspapers have been called the 'quality' press, and we reject this term, given the value judgements that it implies.

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in his APPRAISAL study of "hard news" reports, where objectivity is supposed to be the norm. APPRAISAL theory has also been used successfully by Swain (2012) to identify evaluative "keys" in editorial cartoons, which often appear on letters pages. While our data set is not like any of those described in the studies above, we have also understood the value of the resources that the APPRAISAL framework provides to map the interpersonal meaning expressed by readers about their experiences. These interpersonal and ideational meanings couple to form bonds around which the members of the readership communities affiliate, showing which bonds are specific to each audience, and providing a basis for comparison between the bonds of the *Daily Sun* and *The Times* readerships. We aimed to answer the following questions with our research:

1. How do APPRAISAL choices in letters to the editor construe the bonds that unify the communities of readership of the *Daily Sun* and *The Times*, and how do the authors attempt to align the reader with the proposed bonds?
2. What is the nature of each of the imagined communities and how do the APPRAISAL strategies help to construct them?

Although we identified three distinctive topics in each of the two newspapers with the frequency and keyword lists we generated, it was the priority of education that they had in common. Accordingly, this paper presents the results of an APPRAISAL analysis of the letters that dealt with education, and what we could infer about the communities of readership as a result of this. The other two bonds from each newspaper are discussed in separate forthcoming papers. When referring to letters from the newspapers, we use the initials of their newspaper's name (DS for *Daily Sun*, TT for *The Times*) and the number of the letter in the data set, from 1 to 20.

2. The *Daily Sun*: forward with the people!

Deon du Plessis, the *Daily Sun*'s former publisher, described the tabloid as "an alternative to the boring, serious, expensive, elitist, formal, difficult-to-read newspapers in South Africa, one that would reach its target readership – township dwellers, workers with low English proficiency – in a way that is entertaining, informative and relevant" (Jones et al., 2008, p. 167). Within a year of its launch in June 2002, the newspaper increased its circulation by 228% (Steenveld and Strelitz, 2010). Wasserman (2008a) suggests four reasons for the tabloids being welcomed by so many people in South Africa, at a time where print newspapers' deaths are predicted worldwide (Wasserman, 2010). The first reason for the popularity of tabloids is that they filled the void left by the demise of alternative media, i.e. publications with an anti-apartheid agenda. Second, Wasserman (2008a) explains that the mainstream post-apartheid media covered issues such as HIV/ AIDS, crime, and poverty in abstract terms, aimed at the white and black middle class and elite, ignoring the working class and unemployed majority in the country. Tabloids' coverage of these issues, by contrast, was more personalised, which appealed to readers that face these issues in their everyday lives. Third, the tabloids provided a much-needed platform for people to air their frustrations about socio-economic problems in their communities, such as unemployment, drug abuse, poverty, and lack of service delivery by the government. Finally, tabloids provided information for upwardly mobile young black working-class South Africans to "navigate their social progress", and their aspirations of a middle-class lifestyle included news consumption. Tabloid publishers recognised this and, by engaging with this audience through pages about home ownership, finance, and "lifestyle", created a new advertising market (Wasserman, 2010, p. 789).

Given their experience of exclusion from the mainstream newspapers, *Daily Sun* readers have a preference for stories where people that they can identify with have been lucky, where the underdog has triumphed against all odds (Wasserman, 2008b). Readers have a reciprocal relationship with the tabloid: they get to read coverage of the events and issues that affect their communities (unemployment and the lack of government service delivery, for example), and the newspaper receives tip-offs from readers, so the *Daily Sun* reporters can be the first on scene. In February 2013, the tabloid was the first to carry the story of a taxi driver who had been dragged behind a police vehicle, and later died in police custody. The report was accompanied by pictures taken from a video filmed with a cellphone, and was subsequently followed up by other South African news media. As Harber (2004, cited in Jones et al., 2008) says: "The politicians are not taking much notice now, but at some point in the next few years they will notice that the staff and the readers of the *Daily Sun* have become more important to the next election than [readers of mainstream broadsheets] *Business Day* or the *Sunday Times*. And things will never be the same again". Figures from the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF, 2012) show that the *Daily Sun* is read by more than 5,669,000 people every day. The newspaper also communicates with its readers via social media platform Twitter (username @dailysunsa), and launched its own twice-weekly TV news show in October 2012.

3. *The Times*: the paper for the people[3]

The Times was promoted as South Africa's first interactive newspaper, publishing its stories with added multimedia content on *Times LIVE*, the online home of *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*. *The Times* website or print edition does not provide much detail about its target market, so we had to rely on its Wikipedia (2012)[4] page to glean the following:

Times LIVE caters to a loyal South African audience hungry for breaking news, *quality journalism* and the opportunity to engage and to be more informed (Wikipedia entry for *The Times* (South Africa) 2012, our italics).

The words *quality journalism* struck us as important when researching *The Times*, as the concept appears in literature about tabloids, to imply that tabloids are the exact opposite of quality. Wasserman (2008b, p. 25) states that critics of tabloid journalism believe that the *Sunday Times*, an example of "elite media", is one of South Africa's most influential newspapers. *The Times*, the weekday version of this newspaper, must be the same. Although *The Times* does not specify the race of its target market, because the *Daily Sun* has declared its target market to be black, we present the demographics of *The Times* readers (Table 1) below, from the South African Advertising Research Foundation's (SAARF) All Media Products Survey (AMPS) data:

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[3] Other than readership statistics and our own knowledge of *The Times*, information about this newspaper is difficult to find. This could be because it has not deviated from the norms of the journalistic profession (as tabloids have), nor does it have readership figures that have climbed as astronomically as the *Daily Sun*'s. *The Times* is not an anomaly to South African media, and therefore has not caused the stir amongst journalists, media commentators, and academics, that tabloids did.

[4] We are usually sceptical about quoting Wikipedia; in this case, however, we believe that this entry was written by someone promoting the newspaper, so presumably the author would have got this quote from an editorial or managerial source. Since there is no equivalent information to be found on the newspaper's official website, we treat Wikipedia as the next most appropriate source.