

# Viewpoint representation in journalistic crime narratives: An analysis of grammatical roles and referential expressions



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## Abstract

This study examines how grammar and reference in journalistic narratives help to represent the viewpoints of eyewitnesses to shocking criminal acts. Grammatical roles of eyewitnesses and non-eyewitnesses and the expressions referring to them were analyzed in four journalistic narratives about different shocking events and compared to four non-narrative news reports about the same events. Results show that in the narratives, but not in the news reports, eyewitnesses appear more often in subject position of a clause than non-eyewitnesses. This indicates that in narratives, journalists choose eyewitnesses as the lens through which they narrate the events. Furthermore, eyewitnesses are more often referred to with pronouns than nouns, whereas non-eyewitnesses are more often referred to with nouns than pronouns. This indicates that eyewitnesses are cognitively highly accessible in news narratives and that their viewpoints are conceptually most proximate to the viewpoints of journalist and reader. It is argued that the strategic use of grammatical roles and referential expressions in journalistic crime narratives puts the reader in the position of a "mediated witness".

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## 1. Introduction

Present-day journalism is characterized by a move from objective reporting toward subjective storytelling (Hartsock, 2007; Ytreberg, 2001). In the case of disturbing news events, such as homicides, terrorist attacks, and spree killings, journalistic narratives are written about the experiences of people involved in the events (Kitch, 2009; Wardle, 2006). These narratives differ in function from traditional news reports. Consider, for example, the first two paragraphs of a news report about a shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut:

### Excerpt 1

A man killed his mother at their home and then opened fire Friday inside an elementary school, massacring 26 people, including 20 children, as youngsters covered in fear to the sound of gunshots reverberating through the building and screams echoing over the intercom.

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The 20-year-old killer, carrying at least two handguns, committed suicide at the school, bringing the death toll to 28, authorities said.

(The Associated Press, 2012)

Evidently, the function of this news report is to provide the reader with newsworthy information about a recent event (Bell, 1991): The who, what, where, and when questions are answered in the very first sentence of the report. In journalistic narratives, on the other hand, the *how* question plays a central role. Compare excerpt 2 below, which is part of a journalistic narrative that covers the same shooting:

Excerpt 2

Library specialist Bev Bjorklund heard the noises and hustled about 15 students toward a storage closet in the library, which was filled with computer servers. “Hold hands. Be quiet,” she told the kids. They looked back at her, confused. One child wondered if pots and pans were clanging. Another thought he heard firecrackers. Another worried an animal was coming to the door.

They were children in a place built for children, and Bjorklund didn’t know how to answer them. She told them to close their eyes and to keep quiet. She helped move an old bookshelf in front of the door to act as a makeshift barricade. She wondered: How do you explain unimaginable horror to the most innocent?

(The Washington Post, 2012)

This excerpt displays several characteristics that deviate from the standard way of reporting in news reports, but that are typical for news narratives: The events are chronologically ordered, situated in a detailed setting, and described from the perspective of an eyewitness.

Journalistic narratives about shocking crimes are thought to “invite” readers to become *mediated witnesses*, a phenomenological experience in which readers empathize with eyewitnesses and victims of a criminal act and vicariously experience the crime themselves (Peelo, 2006). This function is important as it provides the audience with the opportunity to experience what it must have been like to be present at the events. For this effect to occur, it requires readers to take the viewpoint of actual witnesses to the event. Linguistic choices help creating these viewpoints: Selecting either a pronoun or a full noun to refer to a person as well as choice of word order guides the interplay between the viewpoints of journalist, reader, and eyewitness (Hendriks et al., 2012; Langacker, 1987, 1991; Van Hoek, 2007). The present study examines how grammatical roles and referential expressions are used in journalistic narratives to describe shocking news events from the viewpoints of eyewitnesses, thereby aiming to turn readers into mediated witnesses who experience these events up close and personal.

### 1.1. Linguistic approaches to viewpoint representation in journalism

Compared to authors of fictional novels on criminal acts, journalists are highly limited in their options to represent different viewpoints. In fiction, the interplay between multiple viewpoints (i.e., viewpoints of narrator and character(s)) is often complex, with processes of viewpoint shifting and blending affecting the reader’s position relative to the narrative events and characters (Dancygier, 2012a). For instance, a mystery novel can describe a murder case from the viewpoint of the detective investigating the case, inviting readers to take the viewpoint of the detective and challenging them to solve the case. Alternatively, that same murder case can be described from the viewpoint of the murderer, inviting readers to take the viewpoint of the murderer and pulling them into the mind of a sociopath. Another possibility could be that the murder case is described partly from the detective’s viewpoint and partly from the murderer’s viewpoint. These different types of viewpoint configurations are guided by linguistic choices, with different linguistic categories related to different aspects of viewpoint. For example, verbs of seeing signal spatial viewpoint, modal verbs signal epistemic viewpoint, and thought representations signal psychological viewpoint. These and other grammatical and lexical choices provide the narrator of fiction with countless possibilities to represent narrative events and situations from a specific or multiple points of view.

In journalistic narratives, by contrast, some of these viewpoint representation strategies are not applicable because of the genre conventions. The objectivity norm dictates that journalistic articles should provide an accurate and neutral account of what happened in reality (e.g., Schudson, 2001). In line with this norm, news events are to be described from an “objective” viewpoint. Journalistic articles that represent news events from the viewpoints of people involved are thus at odds with the objectivity norm. In addition, accessing and representing the inner side of persons’ minds is not allowed for journalists – as opposed to writers of fiction. Such “strong” perspectivization techniques are incompatible with the requirements of the news genre, which imposes restrictions on the possibilities to represent news events from the viewpoints of subjective others. However, more subtle strategies can be used to represent viewpoints in an implicit

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