

Unidentified speakers in news discourse: A pragmatic approach to anonymity

Christoph Schubert^{*}

University of Vechta, English Department, Driverstrasse 22, D-49377 Vechta, Germany

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Abstract

Anonymous speakers pose a great pragmatic challenge to other communicative interactants, since their appearance implies a lack of contextual information. Nevertheless, news discourse makes frequent use of unidentified speakers, so that its cooperativeness might potentially be restricted by this practice. Hence, this paper investigates the occurrence of unnamed speakers in news discourse based on a corpus of 218 online transcripts of the TV program *CNN Newsroom* from the year 2014. The study shows that recipients may employ several strategies of constructing the identity of anonymous participants, relying on hints by news anchors, reporters, or the nameless interlocutors themselves. Moreover, with the help of the frameworks of the Cooperative Principle, Relevance Theory, and evidentiality, the paper points out that the non-identification of speakers fulfills a number of pragmatic functions, such as creating suspense or suggesting that knowledge about the speaker's identity is unnecessary for comprehension.

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1. Introduction

When Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crashed in Ukraine in July 2014, a tape from the Ukrainian secret service with unidentified Russian speakers played a central role in US media reporting. After the Ukrainian newspaper *Kyiv Post* had published an English transcript of this telephone conversation, newspapers and television channels such as the *Washington Post* or *CNN* extensively discussed the authenticity and possible consequences of the utterances by presumed pro-Russian separatists. This is just one notable example of the significance of anonymous sources in news discourse, where unnamed people from the street are often quoted as well. However, unidentified speakers pose a great challenge both for addressees and for any pragmatic analysis, since they are news sources whose contextual parameters are partially deficient. As regards the basic deictic coordinates, it is often not only the dimension of person that is undefined but also space and time may remain open. By contrast, classic approaches to sociopragmatics and discourse analysis have stressed the importance of knowing about the background of interactants, such as Hymes (1972), Goffman (1967, 1981), Gumperz (1982), Brown and Yule (1983), Levinson (1983), and more recently Johnstone (2008). Furthermore, unidentified speakers seem to be problematic not only for the audience but also for news journalists, since at first sight they may appear less reliable than identified experts and could be regarded as detrimental to the construction of news values (cf. Garrettson and Ädel, 2008:186). Accordingly, “named (rather than anonymous or unnamed) sources are

^{*} Tel.: +49 04441 15301; fax: +49 04441 15459.

E-mail address: christoph.schubert@uni-vechta.de.

valued more highly by editorial policy and reasons for anonymity are sometimes provided when the latter are used” (Bednarek and Caple, 2012:91). Hence, this paper investigates the ways in which unidentified speakers are introduced and which functions are commonly fulfilled by them in news discourse, in view of the fact that their appearance seems to make it more difficult for reporters to provide well-founded and reliable information.

In order to discuss this issue, the study uses Grice’s (1975, 1989) framework of the Cooperative Principle as the superordinate theory, with additional references to other approaches, such as Relevance Theory (cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1995) and evidentiality (cf. Aikhenvald, 2004). By bringing these models together, it is possible to provide a comprehensive discussion of anonymity from different pragmatic angles. Moreover, the paper takes into account relevant research on news discourse, such as the classic study by Bell (1991) as well as more recent monographs by Montgomery (2007) and Bednarek and Caple (2012). These studies strongly contribute to a pragmatic analysis, since they combine the use of linguistic features with the contextual production process and the multimodal character of printed and broadcast news.

While the meaning of personal names is a semantic topic rooted in the linguistic branch of onomastics, the contextual effect of namelessness falls within the scope of pragmatics. By applying pragmatic models to news reporting, the present paper is located at the interface of pragmatics and media discourse studies. As for the data, the study relies on a representative sample of online transcripts from the TV program *CNN Newsroom*, which is broadcast several times every day. With regard to the specific communicative situation inherent in the genre of TV news, the paper will investigate contextual strategies of identity construction and will elaborate on the cooperative functions of unidentified speakers in news discourse.

2. The communicative situation in the genre of TV news

In “televisual news discourse” (Bednarek and Caple, 2012:4), the communicative situation is highly complex. The mere production process of the program requires a chain of editorial steps and several producer roles. Basically, a news broadcast is a multimodal and “mixed genre” (Spina, 2012:215), as it includes an intertextual patchwork of images, audio and video discourse (cf. Goodman and Manners, 1997:53). In the editing procedure, the producers need to choose which news items to include and which discursive modes to use (cf. Spina, 2012:216). Input material is usually condensed and dramatized in the final news broadcast (cf. Nylund, 2003:521), and in collaborative text-picture newswriting, journalists commonly need to combine verbal and visual data into a single coherent narrative (cf. Perrin, 2011:1869). As a consequence, the appearance of unidentified speakers is the result of a deliberate news construction process with specific objectives.

According to Goffman’s “participation framework” (1981:146), journalists and reporters act as productive and original “authors”, while newsreaders using teleprompters are mere “animators” in their role of verbalizing the message (cf. Bell, 1991:36–44). In addition, journalists draw on a large amount of external input material, which ranges from political press releases, live talk and interviews over agency copy to miscellaneous utterances by further identified or unidentified speakers (cf. Bednarek and Caple, 2012:21). As regards the relationship between journalists and their sources, Nylund (2003) discusses the way in which reporters use interviews for the production of TV news stories. In particular, he comes to the conclusion that the selective recontextualization of quotes often results in an “amplification of a reporter’s gut-feeling combined with cultural beliefs, stereotypes and myths” (Nylund, 2003:531). In the same way, unnamed sources may be exploited for mere soundbites, whose main function is to confirm a journalist’s preconceived ideas. Moreover, by leaving opinionated utterances to external witnesses, news anchors manage to maintain the appearance of a neutral stance (cf. Conboy, 2007:93). In this way, journalists tend to make use of “strategic impersonalisation” (White, 2012:67), attributing contentious and provocative statements to third-party sources. As a result, news discourse is a construct based on a symbiotic and “constantly negotiated” relationship between reporters and their sources (Berkowitz, 2009:111). As opposed to the producers of news broadcasts, there is a mass audience of TV viewers, whose reception process is usually non-interactive.

3. Anonymity in news discourse

In order to determine the pragmatic significance of anonymity in news discourse, it is necessary to provide a definition and to assess its meaning in social interaction. As far as the adjective *anonymous* is concerned, its definition shows various aspects in the *OED*:

- 1.a Nameless, having no name; of unknown name.
- 1.b Hence *subst.* A person whose name is not given, or is unknown.
- 2 *transf.* Bearing no author’s name; of unknown or unavowed authorship.
- 3 Unacknowledged, illegitimate. *rare* (Simpson and Weiner, 1989:493)

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