1 Analysing evaluation in the news

1.1 About this book

This book is about the expression of opinion in news discourse, in particular the expression of opinion through language. How do news writers express their opinions about the events, people, and situations they report on? Do tabloid news writers really express more opinion than broadsheet news writers? And do these two types of newspapers differ in terms of how they express opinion? These are all questions that I want to address in this book.

To analyse the phenomenon of speaker opinion – variously known as evaluation, appraisal and stance within linguistics – a new framework of evaluation is introduced as an alternative to and a synthesis of existing approaches. As a springboard for this framework I take Thompson and Hunston’s definition of evaluation as

the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker’s or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values.

(Thompson and Hunston 2000: 5)²

I identify these ‘sets of values’ as evaluative parameters (a term adopted from Francis 1995), assuming that speakers can evaluate aspects of the world as:

- good or bad (the parameter of emotivity)
- important or unimportant (the parameter of importance)
- expected or unexpected (the parameter of expectedness)
- comprehensible or incomprehensible (the parameter of comprehensibility)
- (not) possible or (not) necessary (the parameter of possibility/necessity)
- genuine or fake (the parameter of reliability).

Moreover, I presume that speakers can evaluate propositions as more or
1.2 Why study evaluation?

But why should it be of interest to study evaluation in the first place? And why study evaluation in the press? Several answers to these questions suggest themselves: Firstly, there is still much research to be undertaken regarding the phenomenon of evaluation. Although it is true that much recent research in linguistics concerns evaluation, this is true only for some areas of inquiry. Thus, evaluation/stance has been researched widely and systematically in the context of English for academic purposes (e.g. Bondi and Mauranen 2003), and, under the name of *appraisal*, within systemic-functional linguistics (e.g. Macken-Horarik and Martin 2003, Martin and White 2005). Additionally, there is some (mostly) large-scale corpus research which analyses markers of stance in different registers (e.g. Biber et al. 1999). However, there is hardly any research that tries to apply a parameter-based approach of evaluation to text (exceptions are Lenke 1992, 1998, Thetela 1997 and, to some extent, Hunston 1994), and the only grammar that devotes a section to stance is Biber et al. (1999). All in all, nothing is settled: the ground is still shifting beneath our feet, and evaluation remains a mostly unexplored territory within linguistics.

Secondly, evaluation itself is a significant element of our lives: as a device for interpreting the world and offering this evaluation to others, it pervades human behaviour: when we interact with the world around us, we perceive, categorize and evaluate what we encounter. Our short-term evaluations may then turn into long-term values, which are as important to our lives as our beliefs. Our values arguably determine to a large part who we are personally, which path of life we choose to take, and which friendships we form. Furthermore, evaluation is extremely important in actual discourse,
Table 1.1 lists the word count (based on an automatic count with Word 2000 for Windows) for the individual news stories in the corpus (see Appendix 1 for additional methodological decisions).

As becomes evident, the corpus is quite balanced in that there are only slightly more words in the broadsheets than in the tabloids.
1.4 How to study evaluation

This book aims at providing an account of evaluation in news discourse that combines corpus analysis with discourse analysis, trying to integrate corpus-based research with manual text analysis. It therefore includes quantitative calculations of the distribution of evaluations, and qualitative comments on their discourse functions, and involves both manual and automatic analyses. The manual analyses demand the use of a small-scale corpus and are required because of the special nature of evaluation:

- Evaluation shows 'context-dependent polysemous functionality' (White 2001a: 18), and in its analysis the wider context must consequently be included.¹
- Evaluation is a very complex textual phenomenon, as many researchers have pointed out:

  [W]hen we consider the meanings made by extended, cohesive texts that are not made in individual clauses, we often encounter phenomena of language that reveal new semantic resources at the text level. This is particularly true of the semantics of evaluation because of its tendency toward 'prosodic' realizations, i.e. realizations that tend to be distributed through the clause and across clause and sentence boundaries.

  (Lemke 1998: 47; for similar assumptions see Thompson and Ye 1991 and Bubbly 2002)

This suggests that the phenomenon of evaluation can only be correctly understood, interpreted and analysed when looking at its context. On the one hand, linguistic means of evaluation are highly context-dependent; on the other hand, analysing the discourse semantics of evaluation shows how evaluation extends like a wave over the text and lends a specific 'evaluative prosody' to it (for the wave metaphor in connection with evaluation see Hunston 1994: 200). Martin states the case strongly: 'we will never understand the function of evaluation in a culture if our studies are based, however quantitatively, on the analysis of "deco-textualized" examples' (Martin 2003: 177). Thus, the evaluative force of linguistic expressions may not be noticeable in an automatic corpus-based study (Stitesbury 2003: 331). Moreover, such an analysis would not only pick up instances of writer evaluation but also instances where evaluation is simply quoted.

- Many evaluative means belong to open classes. There is no clearly defined list of linguistic means of evaluation (called evaluators in the following) that could be looked for in a large-scale corpus with the help of a computer. The list of lexico-grammatical means that can be used for evaluation is endless, and it would be futile to take a list of possible evaluators as a starting point and check which of them occur in the corpus, since this would only provide a limited perspective on the evaluation present in this corpus.

Furthermore, there are no existing large-scale corpora that are suitable for

the analysis of the object of investigation. Corpora such as LOB/FLOB (www.aksis.uib.no/icame.html) contain only a mixed category (A) called press: reportage which does not distinguish between daily and Sunday newspapers, between regional and national newspapers or between the categories of political news, sports news, society news, spot news, financial news and cultural news (www.khnt.hit.uib.no/icame/manuals/flob/kata.htm). This is a problem because these categories differ so much from each other (Bell 1991: 14). Moreover, these corpora include samples rather than complete texts, and in total, category A consists of only 44 texts of roughly 2,000 words each, i.e. only marginally more than my own corpus. Other potentially suitable corpora like the BNC (Aston and Burnard 1998, Burnard 1995), the Bank of English (www.ccl.bham. ac.uk/phrasebox/swengui.html#Somereferences), the Reuters corpus (www.reuters.com/researchstandards/corpus/LREC_cameraready.pdf), the Rostock Historical English Newspaper Corpus (www.ph.uni-rostock.de/institut/iangam/sitemap.htm; on its design see Schneider 2000), the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE) corpus (Biber 2003), and the Zurich English Newspaper (ZEN) corpus (Fries and Schneider 2000) either consist of samples rather than complete texts, or do not include all of the ten national newspapers considered in this book, are diachronic rather than synchronic, or do not distinguish between the category of hard news and other categories. To my knowledge these are thus no existing corpora that would have been suitable for my purposes. The only other alternative, to design a large-scale corpus myself, would have been far too time-consuming (although broadsheets are available on CD-ROM, the tabloids are not).¹

In view of these issues I decided upon a smaller corpus as a basis for my analyses. Even though this may mean that the conclusions are not always statistically definite and wholly representative of British newspaper discourse as a whole, I believe that the analysis of the corpus strongly indicates certain trends in this variety of English. Furthermore, representativeness is a thorny issue in corpus linguistics in any case, and it might be more important to linguistic analysis to know the corpus that is used very well, and to interpret the results accordingly (Mahlberg 2004).

A different methodological issue involves the identification of evaluation. How can we determine that linguistic items are evaluative or not? In this book a combination of methods was used:

- previous (often corpus-based) research was surveyed to identify potential evaluative means
- native speakers were questioned: when they gave contradictory responses (as was frequently the case) or when expressions were only identified as 'a bit/slightly negative', or 'hard to say' the linguistic expressions were excluded (as not unequivocally evaluative)
- the Bank of English (BoE, a general corpus of spoken and written English from Britain, the US, Canada and Australia, which stood at
450 million words at the time of the analysis) was the basis for extensive corpus research concerning the evaluative potential of individual linguistic devices. If this did not yield satisfying results (because there were not enough occurrences), WebCorp (a search engine for the Internet which was designed for use by linguists; www.2002.org/CDROM/poster/67/) was employed for the same purpose.

- a corpus-based dictionary was used to check the evaluative force of linguistic expressions (COBUILD, COBUILD 1995).

Thus, the manual analysis of my news story corpus is based both on ‘first level’ corpus research (Bank of English, WebCorp) and on the ‘second level use of corpora’ (Neale 2006) (corpus-based research such as Thompson 1994, COBUILD); in other words the discourse analysis is supported by what Louw (2005) calls ‘data-assisted reading’. The study analyses 5,158 individual evaluators, and is to be regarded as a contribution to the ‘prolonged fieldwork’ on interpersonal meanings demanded by Stubbs (1996).

Notes

1. In this book the terms writer/speaker and reader/hearer are used alternatively – the one implies the other, though we are only concerned with writers and readers in news discourse.


3. I use the term context in this book to refer to the textual, the situational and the socio-cultural environment of linguistic expressions, although it will mostly be the textual environment that is particularly significant.

4. Concerning the advantages and disadvantages of designing a newspaper corpus from CD-ROM see Ljung (1996) and Minugh (2000). Charles (2004) mentions four overlapping problems concerning large-scale corpus-based research on stance (i.e. evaluation): (1) corpus-based methods cannot retrieve implicit stance; (2) they cannot retrieve combinations of stance; (3) they cannot reveal indeterminacy; (4) the multilayering of stance leads to uncertainty in quantification. What corpus linguistic research can do, however, she concludes, is to quantify certain linguistic realizations of stance as well as to identify key sites of stance construction. For examples of corpus-based research on stance/evaluation see, for example, Hunston and Sinclair (2000), Charles (2003), Biber and Finegan (1989), Conrad and Biber (2000) and Precht (2003).

2 The news story in its context

This chapter discusses previous research on media discourse, and examines the socio-economic and linguistic context of the news story. This provides the background to the empirical study in Chapters 5 and 6.

2.1 Approaches to media discourse

There is in fact a great diversity of scientific research devoted to describing the media, of which I shall only mention the major and most influential approaches. The non-linguistic approaches among this research are often concerned with issues such as ideology, mediation, mass communication (van Dijk 1988a: 5–16), the semiotics of the news (Hartley 1982), the concept of popular culture (Conboy 2002), and media standards (Sparks and Tulloch 2000). However, although these studies shed some light on the nature of mass media and newspaper bias, they offer little in terms of a systematic linguistic analysis of media language.

Within linguistics, we can distinguish between two vantage points of linguists: that of discourse structure and linguistic function, or according to its effect as ideology-laden discourse (Cotter 2001: 417) or, as Scannell calls them, ‘the ideological and the pragmatic’ (Scannell 1998: 251) approach to media and language. More specifically, there are at least eight major approaches to media language (elaborated from Cotter 2001, Jucker 1992, Bell 1991, Fairclough 1995a and Bell 1995):

- the narrative/pragmatic/stylistic approach: work which focuses on discourse-level elements and explanations, concerned with the structure and language of news discourse (often involving pragmatic analyses, discussions of presentation and perspective, genre status, style and register) (e.g. Crystal and Davy 1969, Verschueren 1985, Carter 1988,