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Joanna Thornborrow

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Style, Key and the New Poetics of TV News

Joanna THORNBORROW
Université de Bretagne Occidentale - HCTI

1. Introduction: Style in/Styling the News

In this paper I address the theme of ‘Crossing’ through a discursive analysis of intertextual ‘borrowing’ and recontextualisation (van Leeuwen 2008) in relation to the genre of television news. Television news reports are often seen as ordinary, taken for granted, mundane kinds of texts which are reproduced and consumed on a daily basis in the business of providing national and international news (Montgomery 2007). On closer examination however, the way that television news is presented to its viewing audience is continually under review by broadcasting networks, and thus is constantly changing with the introduction of new technologies and experiments with new formats, both in its physical presentation in the studio, and the editing choices made in constructing a news report. One example of the presentational changes that daily news broadcasts have undergone is the number of news anchors used. In 1984, the BBC1’s early evening six o’clock news bulletin was launched with two presenters, but at the end of 2007 it changed back again to a single news reader. The news presenters in later evening news broadcasts now move out from behind the news desk to stand in front of it, while the morning news programmes often feature presenters in more relaxed settings, sitting on a sofa with a low coffee table in front of them (Fitzgerald and Mackay 2012).

Over the years, the presentation of the content of news reports has similarly undergone changes in design and formatting. This includes drawing increasingly on textual resources from other contexts, genres and domains of discourse, in order to represent the events, the participants and the information in news stories on TV. Van Leeuwen (2008) has noted that in the process of transporting the discursive practices of

representation (of social actors and activities) from one context of meaning to another, these practices are not simply resituated, but are often also evaluated, legitimised, justified or critiqued. The crossing of textual boundaries – the inter-textual (Bahktin 1981) and the inter-discursive (Fairclough 1995) relationships between texts is a practice more traditionally associated with literary textual genres than with the factual production of news discourse. However, as I will argue in the following analysis of a data set of news reports taken from BBC networks in the UK, news reporting – despite its supposedly factual nature – seems to be increasingly drawing on other genres in order to tell its stories (Thornborrow and Haarman 2012).

Context

This intertextual ‘turn’ in TV news discourse is visible across both public service and independent news channels in the UK. The initial impetus for this investigation stemmed from an observation that BBC2’s flagship news and current affairs programme *Newsnight*, among others, was increasingly drawing on a wide range of texts in its headline presentations of a news story. At the same time, concurrent research on a comparative project investigating the discourse of television news across four European member states (IntUne 2005-2009) revealed that this practice was particularly noticeable in the UK, while absent from the presentation of news in the other three countries (France, Italy and Poland). Despite the globalisation of media formats, and the growth in international 24 hour rolling news channels, TV national news is not a generically stable form across cultures, and its style of presentation and production varies from one place to another. This analysis therefore offers a contribution to broader research themes relating to the changing discourses of broadcast news and the increasing hybridity of discourse genres within current practices of news reporting (Ekström and Tolson 2013)

Style and the news

As Jakobson (1960) reminds us, style is never a neutral matter, and stylistic choices inevitably affect the delivery and interpretation of a ‘message’. Coupland (2007) also argues that style affects both genre and key (Hymes 1972, Goffman 1974), and that shifts in style can result in the reshaping of conventional speech genres (Bakhtin 1986). My analysis focuses on these questions of cross generic borrowings, on the range of stylistic devices used in TV news reports. I examine first how intertextual

resources are activated in the discourse of broadcast news to bring about shifts of style and key in relation to the story being told, what I term the increasing ‘artfulness’ in the presentation of news, and second, how this artfulness may function to frame, in the sense of legitimise or critique, the news item and its subsequent potential interpretations. In conclusion I discuss the effect of this artfulness on the styling of news as a discourse genre.

2. Data: method and analysis

In order to illustrate the ‘artful’ styling of a news item and the kind of intertextual practices this involves, I turn now to a brief example, a short extract from *Newsnight* (BBC2, 05-04-2007). The topic of the news report was the release and subsequent return of fourteen British navy personnel who had been arrested/captured/taken hostage (depending on one’s point of view) when their boat had entered Iranian waters two weeks earlier. The structural presentation of the headline clip for this story is as follows: against a soundtrack of an ‘eastern’ sounding string instrumental, we first see individual, square-framed photographs of the fourteen crew members appearing, one by one, on the screen, then fading out. The camera then cuts to a quite dark and fuzzy-focused image of the crew standing still in a line, against an indistinct brownish background, waiting to board a plane. The caption below this image reads ‘The Return’. Next we hear the news reader Kirsty Wark say:

‘First in captivity, now in freedom, the drama of the detainees has been played out on our TV screens’

Accompanying this verbal text, the shot changes and we see the detainees slowly positioning themselves into a line, as the screen gradually brightens to gradually show them standing still again as in the first shot. We now see the background in full colour and clear focus: they are on the tarmac at an airport. This introductory, headline clip lasts a total of 20 seconds.

Figure 1

The ‘drama’ that has been ‘played out on our screens’ is being indexed here on several levels: first of all by the use of a non-diegetic soundtrack which connotes a rather mysterious, eastern rather than western, setting (van Leeuwen 1999: 170-181); secondly by the use of stylised images and camera shots from fictional film ‘drama’ rather than a factual news story, and by the on-screen text *The Return*, which appears like the title of a film (see figure 1). Put together, these elements work to produce a multimodal styling of the story of the sailors’ return. This particular news headline is produced using generic recontextualisation which frames the story through musical, visual and textual forms more frequently associated with the opening shots of fictional film genres, not news.

Framing in news

The concept of framing is a complex one, and the way I use it here draws partly on Hartley’s (1982) model of the structure of television news, where the ‘frame’ is the opening segment of a news report, our initial encounter with the story as news, and partly on Entman’s argument that ‘through repetition, placement, and reinforcing associations with each other, the words and images that comprise the [news] frame render one basic interpretation more readily discernible, comprehensible and memorable than others’ (1991: 7). From a discursive perspective, then, the framing devices which produce a particular ‘styling’ of a news item may consist of a combination of textual choices: the use of intertextual reference, the use of metaphor and metonymy, and the selection of voices and forms of address. But framing a news story also relates to how the visual/verbal synchrony between text and image is constructed in a report, as well as to the choice of visual images and soundtrack, all of which function to produce particular meanings and interpretations that are

foregrounded through the relationships between what we hear and what we see while watching TV news.

A question of key?

Given that the predominant news values in our culture (Galtung and Ruge 1965) are those of negativity, recency and superlativeness, it is hardly suprising that most of the headline stories on TV news deal with ‘big’ topics, serious issues that are generally ‘bad’ news. Turning to an earlier example from the mid-nineties, before many of the current intertextual practices I discuss here had become the norm, we find the serious keying of an introduction to a report on *Newsnight* on the Northern Ireland peace negotiations. The story is headlined as ‘Crisis in Northern Ireland Peace Process’ and as it is introduced, we see the news reader Jon Snow standing in the studio in front of a big screen, static close-up image of John Major. His headline to the report is as follows:

Good evening. The Prime Minister struggles to salvage his northern Ireland peace initiative after its biggest battering yet.

The introduction to this extended report is quite long and is accompanied by a sequence of images, all of which are in direct indexical relationship to the words spoken by the newsreader. For instance, when we hear Snow mentioning the Northern Ireland Assembly, the on screen image is of the Stormont building in Belfast. The following table shows this direct relationship between the visual and the verbal tracks in the opening segment of the report:

Verbal track	Visual track
we examine how the leaked plan provides for a new Stormont assembly to delegate some of its power to a north south policy making body	long shot of Stormont Assembly buildings in Belfast
Unionist John Taylor and Ian Paisley will be explaining why they reject it	mid shot of two men sitting at a table with papers
John Hume leader of the nationalist SDLP and Sinn Fein’s Gerry Adams will tell us whether it’s enough of a concession to Irish Unity and do the	close up head/shoulder image of JH
deputy leader of Ireland Fianna Foil and the Northern Ireland minister Sir Michael Mates recognise that John Major may now have to backtrack on the deal he’s negotiating with the Irish government	close up head/shoulder image of GA
	close up head/shoulder image DLFF
	close up head/shoulder image of MM against Westminster background

How then does this introduction frame the report? Apart from the two instances of alliteration in the opening headlines (struggles/salvage and biggest/battering) there is no evidence of any verbal play in this segment. We see shots of people sitting at tables, facing direct to camera in studio locations in Belfast, Dublin and London. The result of these choices is thus to produce a serious key for the framing of the story, with no use of intertextuality or visual recontextualisations. The participants are where we expect them to be: in a television studio, round a table, or on a visual link, ready to discuss the ‘crisis.’

However, when we move on to a later example from 1999, the following headline presentation demonstrates a very different approach to the use of language play and the combination of verbal and visual information. The newsreader is Jeremy Paxman who introduces a news item about John Prescott, deputy prime minister of the Labour government at the time:

“John Prescott **steamed** into the Commons today and **blew his top** (.) but is this veteran reaching the **end of the line**?”

On screen we see a short, 8 second clip featuring a well known image from a children’s story ‘Thomas the Tank Engine’, against the background of the Houses of Parliament at Westminster. The relationship between what we hear and what we see is no longer directly indexical as in the example above, but rather metonymic.

Figure 2

The introduction to this news story draws on several textual resources. The intertextual reference to the cartoon character ‘Thomas the

'Tank Engine' as a visual frame represents Prescott as a steam engine pulling the labour government train behind him, while a waving, smiling Tony Blair hangs out of the door as the train collapses behind him and Prescott's smile turns to a scowl. The selection of this semantic field, the figurative, idiomatic use of 'steamed into the commons', 'blew his top' and 'reached the end of the line' in the verbal track, combined with the recontextualisation of 'Thomas the Tank', styles this headline through visual and verbal play and produces a much more ironic, mocking key in framing the upcoming report than that used to frame the story of John Major's northern Ireland crisis discussed above.

In this initial analysis of three short texts, I have shown how the stylistic choices in the way a news story is framed in the headline – through the use of intertextuality, recontextualisation, metaphor and visual/verbal synchrony – produce a particular keying of the upcoming report which can be more or less serious, more or less playful and ironic. In the item about John Prescott just discussed, the less serious, more ironic key is produced by the representational choices made in relation to the message content, which foreground a particular set of meanings in relation to the news story's main character: not just an angry John Prescott 'steaming' into the commons and losing his temper (blowing his top) but also suggesting that like the steam train, John Prescott is old fashioned, 'old' labour, out-dated and maybe out of the government.

While it is perhaps no surprise that *Newsnight*, as the BBC's flagship current affairs programme targeting a late evening audience which is generally assumed to be well-informed and up-to-date with national and international political events, should take an ironic, sceptical and knowing stance to the stories it covers, the styling of news is not limited to this news programme. I now turn to an example of visual framing in news headlines taken from the early evening BBC1 6 o'clock news which targets a much wider audience. It relates to the 50th anniversary of the signing of the European 'Treaty of Rome' in 2007, and the news item features a similar use of stylised visuals which serve to frame the report.

Happy Birthday Europe

The introduction to this item contains an image of a birthday cake with blue icing, one candle and decorated with revolving yellow stars on the screen behind the news reader:

Figure 3

The accompanying headline is as follows:

It's 50 years since the treaty which marked the birth of the European Union was signed in Rome. But it is **a happy birthday?** Our European editor Mark Mardell has been **to sample opinion** in some of Europe's capitals.

The use of this graphic of the blue cake as a backdrop to the question 'Is it a happy birthday?' is followed by the pun 'to sample opinion', clearly linking the verbal and visual texts through evoking the semantic field of food. After describing the EU as 'a controversial club', Mardell's report continues to use this play on the meanings of the word 'sample' in his voiceover for clips from various places around Europe which feature people eating. Beer and sausages for a party in Berlin, spaghetti for lunch in Italy, and a canteen in Denmark where students are shown eating sandwiches. The sampling of 'opinion' is realised by vox pops from two young people in each capital city. The combination of the stylised birthday cake graphic in EU colours, the question 'is it a happy birthday?' and the wordplay around the use of 'sample' produces a frame to this story that is particularly sceptical in its key (for a further analysis of this story, see Thornborrow, Haarman and Duguid 2012).

Sarkozy at the summit

A further use of stylised graphics can be seen in this news item relating to the G20 summit meeting held in London in early 2009 during the height of the financial crisis. The rumours circulating just prior to the

meeting was that France's then president Nicolas Sarkozy was threatening to walk out in protest against what was generally seen as an alliance between Barack Obama and UK prime minister Gordon Brown which put them at odds with other European leaders. Jeremy Paxman is the newsreader:

Tonight Barack Obama brought the biggest entourage and made the most noise as leaders from across the world pour into the capital but Nicolas Sarkozy says (.) he's off if he doesn't get what he wants. Is there room for compromise between Anglo-saxon and European views of what needs to be done?

From the onscreen image of Paxman speaking, at the short pause after 'Sarkozy says' the screen cuts to a visual still graphic showing the leaders sitting behind a long table, and, accompanying the words 'if he doesn't get what he wants', in the manner of a Monty Python-esque animation, the cut-out figure of Sarkozy gets up, glides behind the others to the door (to a soundtrack of footsteps) opens the door and goes out (to a soundtrack of the door slamming shut).

This clip is interesting on various levels in terms of its use here in a news headline. Firstly, it portrays something that has not yet happened, the 'news' is talk and rumour about a future event that may, or may not, occur. Secondly, the borrowing of a style of

Figure 4

graphic animation and diegetic soundtrack usually associated with comedy sketch shows carries its own set of connotations for those familiar with the genre. And thirdly, the visual recontextualisation of world leaders as

cardboard cut-out figures, with a petulant Sarkozy slamming the door to accompany the verbal track 'Nicolas Sarkozy says (.) he's off if he doesn't get what he wants' creates a mismatch between the gravity of the crisis and of this summit meeting, and the flippant language used in the headline. Obama's entourage 'made the most noise'; here the expressions 'he's off' and 'if he doesn't get what he wants' are colloquial reductions of what may well be highly complex discussions.

In examining these examples my aim has been to show how the factual genre of TV news draws on other non-factual genres as a resource for framing news stories in headline texts. As a result of the intertextual and recontextualising resources used in these sequences, we encounter the news story within a frame that, through a range of different stylistic devices in both the visual and verbal texts, produces a particular keying of that story. In the last three examples, this key was essentially ironic, mocking and non-serious. Are we therefore being asked to interpret the upcoming story within the same frame? Viewers are clearly being invited to do something - in each of the last three headlines analysed here, the verbal track ends with an interrogative:

has this veteran reached the end of the line?
but is it a happy birthday?
is there room for compromise between Anglo-saxon and European views of
what needs to be done?

The use of an interrogative closing in headline texts is becoming generically routine; the framing segment of many news stories now frequently ends with a question. Combined with the use of many of the devices illustrated above, I would argue that the effect of this formal device is very often an invitation to the viewer to take up a questioning stance in relation to the topic at hand, to be sceptical and to assume that, in the course of the news report, the answer that will emerge to the question posed is likely to be, as appropriate, 'probably/probably not'.

In the final section of this paper, rather than just focusing on headline texts, I turn to the stylistic devices used in a more extended report about the financial crisis in 2009, and consider the possible effect of this stylisation on the interpretive stances made available for the viewer.

The financial crisis

My last example concerns a *Newsnight* report on the global financial crisis in 2009. The news story here was the publication of an economic forecast predicting that things were possibly beginning to improve. The report features interviews with some key figures and players: Ben Bernanke, an economist, a fund manager, an academic. It is, as we will see, structured around an extended metaphor that is made to do a considerable amount of representative work in the report, in both the verbal and the visual texts. The anchor is Jeremy Paxman and his opening link to the report is as follows (note again the question which closes this section ‘what is up?’ before the transition to the report itself):

it wasn't a particularly spectacular day on the stockmarkets today but there does seem a new mood abroad (.) bank shares have improved and even oil went up a dollar a barrel today too (.) no one in their right mind is saying the end is nigh (.) but what is up? first tonight Alex Ritson reports

The metaphor, the economy is a plane, appears visually and verbally during the first few seconds of the report as follows:

AR: Riding this downturn is pretty scary given the current trajectory
but now the man piloting the US financial system has broken ranks (.)
Ben Bernanke says we're going to pull out of our crash dive
later this year

The semantic field being mobilised here draws on a set of commonplace idiomatic representations often found in texts topicalising changes in the economy – an abstract and complex concept which is routinely personified in media reports in terms of its ‘growth’, ‘health’, or ‘recovery’. Here, however, the dominant representational trope is from a semantic field of movement of various kinds and in various directions:

Downturn, trajectory, riding, piloting, to break ranks, to pull out of, a crash dive

Accompanying the voiceover text is a CGI, showing first of all the nose of a plane descending into what turns out to be a graph, with a set of descriptive terms on one axis and dates on the other, as shown in Figure 5 below:

Figure 5

The verbal metaphor is thus also realised on the visual level where we see the large nose of a plane appearing from the left of the screen then swooping down to the crash just before 2010 and gradually pulling back up again. The plane here becomes literally the 'vehicle' indexing the 'tenor', the economy, through the shared representational field of movement, the 'mode'. The metaphoric extensions then fall into place, planes have pilots who can ride the downturn, break rank and pull out of a crash dive.

The visual and verbal play around movement and spatial position is continued in other parts of the report where the verbal text making reference to movement is accompanied by camera movement in the same direction, up or down. Below are some further illustrations of this verbal/visual synchrony between text and image, where the camera moves up and down to follow the topical representation in the report. First here we see the move is from street level to the top of a building:

given all that bad news you'd think that Ben Bernanke would have every reason to be pretty dour he is not he's optimistic and there are a few a small number of people in significant positions in the financial world who agree with him	Ritson walking in street Gestures to financial building behind him Close up head shot
But hang on (.) aren't we in the worst recession depression whatever you want to call it for <u>seventy</u> years (.) so what can Ben Bernanke and other optimists see on the horizon from their lofty economic vantage points that the rest of us are missing	Ritson walks out onto rooftop of building Long shot of London skyline, windows, door, other city buildings

In the verbal track, the reference to 'significant positions in the world', 'on the horizon' and 'lofty economic vantage points' is indexed in the visual track as we move from a close-up shot of Ritson talking to camera in front of the Lloyds building in the City of London, to a long shot of him walking out to with another man on what we are led to assume is the roof of that same building overlooking London, followed by long shots of the London skyline, some windows, and finally other city buildings. The people in 'significant positions' are thus metonymically indexed by the Lloyds building (one assumes, then, bankers), while the shots from the top of the building literally index the 'the horizon' and 'their lofty economic vantage points'.

The following extract uses the same device of verbal and visual synchrony to provide a visual representation of the language used in the verbal track. We move now literally back down to street level with the words 'street level barometer' as Ritson walks out of the building to interview a fund manager standing in front of it:

Okay so that's that macro economic theory but what about that street level barometer of confidence (.) who would invest in jittery stock markets in the current climate (.) <u>this</u> man would	Cut to mid shot of street Ritson walks out of building onto street
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So with the figurative expression 'street level barometer' the camera brings us back on street level, with the fund managers and traders.

Three final extracts complete this visual/verbal extended metaphoric device representing the economy as a plane in the reporter voice-over and the final sign-off:

the problem with economic forecasts is that there are as many of them (.) as there are economists and if you speak to people away from the financial world they think it could take an awful lot longer (.)	Ritson in street Ritson looks up, camera pans up building Graph appears above roof, slowly enlarges in foreground
But a year on from Bear Stearns stock markets are soaring again aren't they? and that's after soaring last week (.) the problem is (.) it could be the wrong kind of recovery	mid shot of Bear Stearns doorway camera pans up building to sky, back down to doorway
So downturn upturn loop the loop everyone has their own theory on when we're going to pull out of this (.) but the same people who are confidently predicting the future completely failed to see this crash coming (.) so should we believe them now?	Two-tone faded colour long shot of street camera pulls up from street up through clouds to skyline, full colour restored

The range of expressions used to denote aeronautical movement: 'defying gravity', 'soaring again' and the final trope 'downturn upturn loop the loop' and 'pull out of' are visually represented on screen by the camera movement, as well as with another graphic 'the economic forecast' that appears up in the sky above the city (see figure 6), and by the final contrast of the sepia coloured shot of the street gradually moving up to blue skies and back to full colour. We therefore do not just hear the words, we are moved through the visual representations of the ups and downs of the global economy in the multimodal combinations of word, image and camera work. Once again we might notice that the sign off to this report is another question: so should we believe them now?

Figure 6

3. Concluding discussion: The new poetics of news?

Returning to Jakobson's definition of the poetic function of language as a focus on the selection and combination of formal features of language, and the use of this function to produce a particular styling of a message, I have argued in this paper that contemporary news discourse is also being styled in order to create a set of 'available meanings in relation to news stories. Styling, as Coupland (2007) points out, always involves the motivated production of meaning' and in the news headlines and reports examined here, I have analysed the way that the selection of sounds and visual techniques used in news presentation, as well as selections in graphical representations borrowed from other, non-factual genres, can function to frame a news story and set up a range of potential meanings and interpretations of the message being delivered.

Similarly, the choice of metaphoric representations in relation to a given news story can serve as a kind of structuring mechanism for an extended report, as we saw in the final example of the report of the financial crisis above. The production of this report was based on combinations of visual and verbal synchronies in the graphics, the camera shots, and the language used in order to represent the messages it contained in a highly stylised manner. The new poetics of TV news is,

then, this tendency to draw upon a range of representational resources from other genres and discourses in order to frame news stories in particular ways. Style however also affects genre, and shifts in style can in some cases reshape and transform conventional genres of speech and discourse. It seems that this intentional, deliberate, and artful styling of the news as a discourse genre can now be found across different channels and news broadcasters, although I have only focussed here on data taken from the BBC.

One important question remains; what is the effect of this artfulness on the way we interpret news? Styling frequently produces a shift of key, which in turn broadens the scope of potential meanings in relation to the story, and I noted above that one of the outcomes of this ‘new poetics’ of news is often the creation of a particular stance vis-à-vis the story which sets up a position of scepticism on the part of the broadcaster as well as the viewers. As was argued in relation to the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome coverage, the keying of that story was both reductive and distancing: they are having a party but we know there is nothing much to celebrate, was the dominant message of this news item.

The new poetics of television news thus moves beyond the ‘principles of intelligibility’ proposed by Martin Montgomery which are based on ‘the presumption of shared reference between the verbal track and the visual track’ and which, he argues, ‘achieve a kind of closure between what we can see and hear represented in televisual news discourse’ (2005: 245). What we are being offered through the styling of many news reports today seems rather to be opening up a range of potential references and meanings through intertextual and visual/verbal play, rather than pinning down a single meaning and thus achieving closure between the verbal and visual tracks.

There is an argument that has been circulating for some time about the way information is now presented, perceived as the pervasive, generalised ‘dumbing down’ of public discourse – the reduction to a simplest, shortest common denominator of message and meaning that challenges no one and demands little effort on the part of the viewing audience. It may well be that part of the industry’s motivation to use easily recognisable references from popular culture and simplified computer generated graphics may well be to render the content of ‘the news’ more intelligible, less boring, more watchable, and thus to increase viewing

figures. However, I would argue that since this artfulness is clearly visible across channels and in late evening broadcasts with a more specialist target audience, as well as in early evening news programmes drawing in the mainstream wider audience, it is doing more than that. The principle of neutralism that has long been central to UK broadcast news and that is realised through various strategies of balance, footing and stance on the part of news producers and reporters (see Clayman and Heritage 2002), now seems to be giving way to a principle of scepticism, putting viewers in a different kind of relationship to news, whereby they are constantly being invited to take up a much more sceptical stance towards the information they are being given about people, events and the current state of national and international affairs: ‘can we believe them now?’

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