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News discourse about crises: language study Conference HSS-2009

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Abstract – The research, based on French and British nation-wide press, is devoted to the analysis of the news about crises.

The paper discusses why study of discursive features of news texts about crisis is relevant.

Key words – news discourse, crisis, peace journalism, language

I. Introduction

Main sphere of my research, interdisciplinary per se, is the study of how crises are being treated by the mass-media.

In this paper I would touch upon the issue of journalist's responsibility in covering crises.

The research is based on 76 news texts of top nation-wide press of France, United Kingdom. Given material is about an incident in Belgian crèche (January 2009), shooting in german school (March 2009). The research is done within the framework of discursive analysis.

II. Language study of news discourse about crisis

Study of news discourse is of great interest because they supply the reader with information important for his/hers socialization; texts are to show potential patterns of behavior in similar critical situations, they specify what the consequences may be [1]

Linguistic interest to the study is connected with two facts – 1. news is “the first step of verbal and semiotic transformation of the reality” [4. p. 8], 2. journalist's preferences – how will the author deal with verbal and visual semiotic codes to cover what has happened before.

I believes, that a journalist presents in his text a critical situation. By the critical situation, presented in the news, I understand a set of elements about crisis of objective reality, that are in author's consciousness in the moment of “verbalizing” and that determine the selection of

language signs for the construction of message. This notion has been formulated taking into account the notion of situation by V.G.Gak [2]. Given notion is relevant for the research due to meditative nature of the news. I would like to stress that what has been studied is not an event of objective reality itself, but the image of the event that an author builds in his text. Consequently, the image of crisis is critical situation.

Information about crisis is considered to be newsworthy for mass communication. News about crisis is shaped in the news genre and is published in the front-page. Though the news genre doesn't imply any factful and linguistic standard, although it is regarded as “typically media genre [as] even beyond mass-media a person came from mainland would present the news as it would do a news caster” [3, p. 180].

Journalist's function in this case is to pass on the formed image about such an important social event as crisis.

At this point the journalist relies on his communicative potential, which is restricted by the discursive context of news-making, for example, editorial point of view, journalist's ethics, and newness of a happened event (whether anything similar had happened before or not).

At this stage I assume that how a journalist copes with his active creative position, on one hand, and discursive context of news-making, on the other hand, would determine the way how the journalist would use verbal and non-verbal semiotic codes.

III. Coverage of crisis and peace journalism

I believe that creative and responsible attitude of journalist towards discursive context of covering crisis would modify the initial structure of news media-text – author includes in the news other elements of compositional block “event” apart from a standard one – “happened fact” and “victims”.

For example, such elements as “reasons”, “consequences”, “participants” (“victims” as well as “representatives of the society”, who help to solve the critical situation – rescuers, psychologists, representatives of the authorities).

At this stage, inclusion of new elements into prototypical structure of the news may enable the reader to better understand a happened event. So, the information becomes clear to a reader as it helps to form an integral image of an event.

For example, at the micro level it is possible to see how differently the same event is being presented. Shooting in German school – “violence”, “act of great brutality”, “massacre”, “dramatique tuerie”, “rampage”; incident in Belgian crèche – “stabbing incident”, “triple meurtre”, “triple assassinat”, “crèche stabbings”, “knife attack”.

Regarding macro level of news media-texts about critical situation in Germany, I would like to mention several examples, where the journalists attract reader’s attention to some new elements of compositional block “event” such as “reasons”/searching for reasons, “role of mediator”/role of mass-media, the last example specifies the perception of a happened event through its metaphorical representation as “film”.

Examples - [Another pupil, 18-year-old Janina Schmidt, told] «I feel as though I'm in a film. You see this sort of thing all the time in films or on the TV, and now suddenly it's happening in my life. I just don't know how to react to it.» (Guardian, 11.03.2009). «De quoi laisser perplexe la presse qui ne sait plus comment éviter que se reproduise un tel massacre» (Monde, 11.03.2009). «La presse s'interroge par ailleurs sur la personnalité de cet adolescent de 17 ans» (Figaro, 11.03.2009). «De quoi relancer la traditionnelle polémique sur la violence à la télévision» (Monde, 11.03.2009).

I believe that inclusion of new elements and modification of initial ones enables the coverage of crises within the framework of peace journalism.

Peace Journalism is a form of [journalism](#) that frames stories in a way that encourages [conflict](#) analysis and a [non-violent](#) response. It aims to “frame conflicts as consisting of many parties, pursuing many goals, rather than a simple [dichotomy](#). An explicit aim of peace journalism is to promote peace initiatives from whatever

quarter, and to allow the reader to distinguish between stated positions and real goals” [5].

Peace journalism is a response to traditional war journalism and [reportage](#). Practitioners believe that the traditional approach emphasizes the current conflict while ignoring the causes or outcomes, while peace journalists use conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting.

So as it is possible to see “the Peace Journalism approach provides a new road map tracing the connections between journalists, their sources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their reporting - the ethics of journalistic intervention” [5]. Mass-media in this case turns out to be a conflict-resolving media, which implies an important social role of mass-media.

Conclusion

I think that individual creativity of the author, based on his responsible attitude to the presented information, seems to be real within this type of journalism even though the author remains restricted by discursive context.

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