

Contextual Properties of News Reports in the Press

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The article deals with the analysis of contextual properties of news reports in the press and the role of contextual factors in textual production and comprehension processes.

Key words: news reports, context, context model, outer/inner context, recontextualization.

Ковальчук Л. В. Контекстуальні особливості газетних новин. Стаття присвячена аналізу контекстуальних особливостей газетних новин та ролі контекстуальних факторів у процесах породження й інтерпретації текстової структури газетних новин.

Ключові слова: газетні новини, контекст, контекстуальна модель, зовнішній/внутрішній контекст, реконтекстуалізація.

Ковальчук Л. В. Контекстуальные особенности газетных новостей. В статье анализируются контекстуальные особенности газетных новостей и роль контекстуальных факторов в процессах порождения и интерпретации текстовой структуры газетных новостей.

Ключевые слова: газетные новости, контекст, контекстуальная модель, внешний/внутренний контекст, реконтекстуализация.

The study of news reports is one of the major tasks of media discourse research. Complex analysis of news reports presupposes not only textual analysis, but also relation between structure of the text and its cognitive, social, cultural contexts.

Contextual properties of media discourse were researched by such linguists as A. Duranti, C. Goodwin, T. A. van Dijk, C. F. Graumann, K. Werner and others.

The aim of the article is to study contextual properties of news reports in the press and to specify the role of contextual factors in textual production and comprehension processes.

The hierarchical schema of news reports consists of such conventional categories as: headline, lead, main events, context, comments. The headline expresses the topic of the article. The lead and the subsequent sentences provide further details of the topic in the main event category. Context forms the background category of news reports. The comment category is expressed discontinuously throughout the text containing conclusions, expectations and speculations about the event [4, 87].

As a rule, a news report starts with the activation of contextual information about participants, temporal and spatial references. The writer and the interpreter are presented as focal points because the contextual aspects of physical, social and mental worlds do not usually start to play a role until they have somehow been activated by the language users' cognitive processes [6, 77].

The peculiar feature of news reports production is the absence of a real interpreter except the one mentally constructed by the writer. The interpreter role is simply incorporated into the world of the writer, even if a real potential interpreter may take on that role later. A virtual interpreter is really only imagined at the moment of producing a news report.

When talking about temporal reference it is necessary to differentiate event time, time of utterance and reference time. Spatial reference is represented by absolute and relative spatial relations. Spatial reference is usually relative to a perspective which can be either utterer space or reference space [6, 96–99].

A news report is characterized by global and local coherence. Global coherence is represented by the topic of the news report. Topic summarizes the text and specifies the most important information. It can be described as semantic macro-proposition, as it is derived from sequences of propositions in the text. The hierarchical set of topics forms the topical structure of the news report. The most general topic of the news report is conventionally expressed in the headline. For example, the headline “*Clinton fights in secret to show Obama is unelectable*” in the newspaper “*The Times*” No 69289 (April 4, 2008, P. 45) expresses the gist of the news report that concerns the nomination fight between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and the former First Lady's pre-election campaign against her rival.

The major condition of local coherence is that its propositions refer to facts that are interrelated (time, condition, cause and consequence, participants). The propositions are also conceptually related, as they are part of the script of some situation or event. Much of the information is not explicitly expressed, but left implicit. Our shared, social knowledge of such scripts provides numerous missing links between the concepts and propositions of the text, which is a semantic iceberg of which only the tip is actually expressed, whereas other information is presupposed to be known by the reader and can be inferred on the basis of background knowledge. Besides this referential local coherence, propositions may also be functionally coherent. For example, the same news report states: *“With ten contests left, Mr. Obama has a narrow but almost unassailable lead among elected delegates. About 250 of the super delegates have yet to declare their support. One very high profile member of the party elite – Jimmy Carter – hinted that he would back Mr. Obama. Al Gore, another heavyweight super-delegate, has refused to intervene. Mr. Obama said on Wednesday that he would have the former vice-president in his cabinet”*. The irresistible Mrs. Clinton’s decision about her rival’s unelectability is proved by the following quotation: *“He cannot win. I don’t talk about private conversations. But I have consistently made the case that I can win”*. This quotation naturally restores the initial context of the reported event. The subsequent propositions have the function of specification of the headline. More general propositions are followed by more specific ones giving further details about the reported event.

Context with respect to news reports exists in two forms: external, on the one hand, and intra-interactive, on the other [2, 195]. External or outer context is formed by the social environment of the event talked about. It is not constructed by the writer, but objectively exists in reality. Such context is relevant not even being actualized. Its stability is expressed by the fact that social, geographical, economic and ethnic conditions of the society are developed by the whole community. Intra-interactive or inner context is context of the current situation of communication. It is exhibited by means of verbalization the mental states of individuals and not by the whole community. That’s why it is more dynamic than outer context. Both outer and inner contexts are not autonomous. They assist effective communication only in their natural coordination [1, 60].

Contextual properties of news reports are expressed not only through their textual structures, but also relevant cognitive, social and cultural context models. The cognitive approach presupposes that language users (journalists and readers) have a unique, personal representation of news events. This knowledge representation in memory is called a situation or event model. The model not only features the information which is expressed through the text representation, it also contains much other information about this event which is not expressed in the text, because it is assumed to be known by the reader or because it is found irrelevant by the reporter. Some of this presupposed information is derived from the scripts. Such scripts are culturally shared, conventional knowledge representations about well-known episodes of social life.

Besides people also have a specific mental model of the present communicative context, a so-called context model, that controls what information from the event model will be found communicatively relevant in the text of news reports. It is the context model that manages this communicative aspect of discourse and relates discourse with social situations.

The information in context models may easily be combined with that of other mental models. This allows them to bridge the well-known gap between social structure, on the one hand, and interaction–discourse, on the other. In other words, context models are the interface between society, situation and discourse [4, 86].

Since context models control discourse production and comprehension and since they can be combined with other mental models, they explain how news reports of the same event in different newspapers will always be different when written by different journalists, and that we cannot possibly tell “the same story” twice in different circumstances and for newspapers with different constraints on reporting.

Reporters and readers may have different models of the same communicative event. Such differences may lead either to negotiations about the shared aspects of their context models or to misunderstanding and conflicts.

Different accounts of the same event often differ in their display of different perspectives on the reported event. Perspective is a discourse-based notion. It points to possible differences in talking or thinking about the same event and treating a given subject-matter. Such properties of discourse are of utmost

importance simply because the retelling of accounts and stories in new context, defined as recontextualization, is a ubiquitous feature of human communication [5, 50].

Recontextualization becomes especially vivid in news reports. Recontextualization often involves new perspectives, thus leading to reperspectivization. Such changes involve sharpening of only one perspective on the topic at the cost of others which may be present in the original report. When the context changes new perspectives on the same topic appear. This reperspectivation process recontextualizes the treatment of particular events into debates that are of a long-lasting nature.

Perspective changes as part of recontextualization process can be observed in different newspapers dealing with the same event but from different perspectives. The way of presenting news may be fundamentally divergent. For example, let us compare two news reports about the same event with almost the same headline “Clinton urges voters to get behind Obama” (1) and “Clinton urges supporters to get behind Obama” (2) taken from two different newspapers “The Daily Mail” (October 21, 2008) and “The Denver Post” (August 25, 2008):

(1) *America will rise from the “ashes of the Bushes” if the nation elects Barack Obama two weeks from today, his former rival Hillary Clinton said. Mrs Clinton urged Americans to do “everything you can” to make sure the Illinois senator was elected on November 4.*

She told supporters that they should not let anyone vote for the Republican McCain-Palin ticket because it would “condemn our country to four years of stagnation and falling backwards”.

(2) *Across the city today, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton urged supporters and delegates to unite behind presidential hopeful Barack Obama, saying that they have more in common with him than John McCain. Clinton encouraged Latino voters who had overwhelmingly supported her to support Obama. Nearly 800 delegates and conventiongoers cheered her on when she arrived at the caucus meeting, held at the Colorado Convention Center, in which she greeted the crowd with a “buenos dias”.*

The comparison of two abstracts demonstrates the differences in presenting the same event. The first example shows a vividly expressed writer’s perspective on the reported event and his preferences concerning the pre-election campaign, while the second example demonstrates more objective and neutral assessment of the current event by the writer.

Context models explain in detail the process of recontextualization and how participants are able to actively manage such changes – for instance, how they retell what they have read in the newspaper in subsequent conversations. When initiating the discourse production involved in newswriting, a journalist already has a context model, comprising:

- setting (time, location);
- new knowledge about a newsworthy event;
- contextual knowledge about what has been reported before about the event;
- contextual knowledge about the sociocultural knowledge of the readers;
- sociocultural knowledge about general properties of news events;
- social attitudes and ideologies about this event;
- professional ideologies as a journalist;
- intention to write a news report;
- purpose to inform the readers of a newspaper;
- emotions about the reported event [3, 104].

Thus, when starting to write a journalist has a model of the event, as well as a partial context model (a newswriting “plan”) that will control the actual writing from the selection of topics and the formulation of headlines to the structures of foregrounding and backgrounding, style, rhetoric and semantics. Event model already exists before the context model. However, how the information stored in the event model is actually reported depends on the context model. In that respect a context model is a transformation device between what we know and what we tell [3, 104].

News report writing does not merely express what journalists know about some news event, but involves a complex process of contextualized selection from event models of propositions, which are then formulated in a way that is also controlled by the context model (professional knowledge of reporters about news reports, knowledge about the interests of the public, knowledge about what the editor wants, ideology of the newspaper, ideology of the reporter, identity of the writer as a reporter, newspaper style and so on).

Event models in memory not only feature knowledge, but also opinions and beliefs about events and their participants. Critical analysis of the meaning of discourse often involves reproduction of the beliefs in

the models of the writer. Models feature specified knowledge from scripts, they embody specific opinions that are derived from general, socially shared opinion structures such as attitudes. They are based on social representations or social cognitions. If social cognitions about different social groups and social events are similar, they are monitored by the same fundamental interpretation framework, that is, by the same ideology. Such an ideology features the basic norms, values, and other principles which are directed towards the realization of interests and goals of the group, as well as towards the reproduction and legitimation of power [4, 84].

Summing up the current research, it is necessary to specify that contextual factors and context models contribute greatly to clarity of news reports. The process of recontextualization is one of the most important ingredients in verbal generation of meaning. Contextual interpretation is actively signaled and used to avoid ambiguity in media discourse, especially in news reports in the press.

Further research of the current linguistic problem will refer to the study of communicative factors of contextualization, decontextualization and recontextualization processes and linguistic means of their expression in media discourse.

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