THE LANGUAGE OF ENTERTAINMENT NEWS IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

By

TATJANA MARJANOVIC

Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

ABSTRACT

An essentially qualitative structural and semantic analysis is performed on the text of an 'American Idol' coverage posted on yahoo.com January 24th, 2013, constituting a micro-corpus of 2,739 words. Since such stories feature entertainment laced with a shot of drama and scandal, most of us share similar expectations as to what packaging their contents will come in: in short, we anticipate relatively informal language and simple structures. However, a preliminary analysis of the story reveals at face value, a fair amount of both phrasal and clausal complexity, with modification embedded at different levels of structures under investigation. Moreover, not only do the structures appear morphologically and syntactically complex, but their semantic representations also add to this diversity. While providing too much detail at word, phrase and clause level can easily lead to information overload. It also makes a clever tactic helping to transform a basically frivolous event into a top story of the day. It seems to be an attempt to ascribe relevance and newsworthiness to an affair that is nothing more than entertainment, but the aforementioned strategies almost make it look like a serious business.

Keywords: Entertainment News, Complex Noun Phrase, Verbal Style.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of global communication and the Internet we have become accustomed to receiving our daily dose of news on-line: politics, sports, show business stare us in the face, tempting us with their vibrant colours and flashy headlines. We easily succumb to the temptation and have a quick look as soon as we check our e-mail. Like it or not, we join thousands and thousands of those who let the Internet take them for a short walk around the world. Scores of stories we read there are both serious and poignant, shocking and scandalous, personal and public, not discriminating against their global readership, young or old, working class or aristocracy, single or married. They are usually ordered chronologically and can be accessed in a conveyor-belt fashion. Although some of them constitute hard news, most feature human interest stories. Owing in particular to their form, they very much resemble blogs, even more so when the writer's presence in the text is strong and clear. Such stories use a format and style that separate them from conventional news prose, and are therefore not directly comparable (Lewis, 2004).

Nevertheless, one of those stories was utilized as an empirical basis for a small-scale qualitative analysis performed on a micro-corpus of a 2,739-word text. The text was an 'American Idol' coverage posted on *yahoo.com* January 24th, 2013, offering a rather personalized account of the show and focusing on a feud between the talent show judges: comment clauses, modal adjuncts and other interpersonal elements were used unsparingly, emulating a conversational tone and a sense of involvement. But it was what lay beyond this superficial immediacy and informality that caught my attention: a structural richness and a gamut of expressive tools made the text an interesting and revealing research sample.

One of the aims was to investigate whether the text shared some of the features traditionally associated with news prose, especially tightly packed noun phrases. Another aim was to determine whether the text could be characterized as structurally complex and semantically diverse in the first place, and what elements contributed to its perceived complexity and elaborateness or the lack thereof. The analysis proceeded mainly on structural grounds with the occasional lapse into the realms of meaning.

The complex noun phrase in media texts

There are sufficient examples in the text of noun phrases with both pre and post-head slots filled by a variety of structures. Newspaper prose generally show a strong propensity for tightly packed noun phrases (Biber, 2004), but this feature seems to be understated if the actual source does not fall within the scope of 'highbrow' or 'up-market' journalism targeting an elite readership. Research suggests, though, that other forms of reporting, on-line stories included, can easily emulate the compressed style of their more traditional counterparts in order to honour the economy principle (Lewis, 2004).

Pre-head structures in the text

Premodification, with decades of plentiful attention it has received in media texts for its nominal strings preceding head nouns (Ni, 2004), has a very prominent and diverse presence in the American Idol text, too. Most types of premodification identified in major reference books (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990; Downing and Locke, 2003; Leech and Svartvik, 1993; Carter and McCarthy, 2006) are found in this text as well: adjective phrases, noun phrases, participles, genitives, even verb phrases and clauses. Actually, the only types of premodification absent from the text are adverb phrases (e.g. a *home* match) and prepositional phrases (e.g. *just-above-the-shoulder* length), both of which are occasionally attested in stories found in the same venue as the one currently investigated. The following examples showcase modified and coordinated (as well as modified) premodification, respectively.

(1) the *clearly long-term-memory-challenged* Randy (the adverb *clearly* modifies the participle *challenged* along with its modifying noun phrase *long term memory*).

(2) Nicki's *potentially censor-provoking, five-second-delayed* behavior (the participle *provoking,* modified by both an adverb and a noun, is coordinated with another participle, *delayed*, which is modified by a temporal noun phrase).

These illustrations are believed to constitute complex noun phrases at their best. Many of the premodifiers in the text precede a proper noun as head of the phrase, and it is in these instances that an interesting and a relatively novel use of the indefinite article has come to our attention.

(3) an insulted Keith

(4) an impressed Keith

These uses seem to counterbalance the common practice of deleting the definite article before appellative nouns in news writing (Bell, 1999, p. 107), as in *host Ryan Seacrest*, but their meanings are best analyzed when compared with similar phrasings with the definite article present.

(5) the almighty Whitney Houston

(6) the always soundbite-ready Nicki

It would not be entirely improbable to conclude that the indefinite article here carries an episodic meaning in relation to the premodifier-head sequence, signalling temporariness (e.g. Keith, who was angry/impressed at the time), as opposed to the definite article, which in the same context strives to express relative permanence or even timelessness (e.g. the almightiness of Whitney Houston and Nicki's soundbite readiness are perceived and interpreted as universal truths).

It is understandable that proper nouns should have such a high-profile status in the text; after all, it is the participants of the talent show that readers are primarily interested in. But it is somewhat unusual that proper names should be used as *bona fide* premodifiers (not used in the genitive case as determiners, which is their common provenance), creating a range of dynamic syntactic and semantic relationships with the headword. For example, the premodifier *Nicki* in the noun phrase *a lot of conclusion-jumping Nicki haters* takes up object position, as well as the role of patient, in relation to the head. In another phrase, *Keith Urban standards*, the premodifier *Keith Urban* is analyzed as filling the subject slot and reflecting agency in a reconstructed clause such as *Keith Urban set standards*.

Post-head structures in the text

Postmodification was instantiated by a wide range of structures and was at times as complex as one would expect it to be when reporting events that are more formal in both style and content. The two appositive noun phrases in example (7) offer a compelling case for significant phrase-level complexity in the text: a postmodifying relative

clause and a premodifying adjective and noun sequence together form an appositive phrase revolving around the noun *city*; along with the preceding appositive *North Carolina* the phrase is juxtaposed to the head of the entire phrase, *Charlotte*. Also bear in mind that the relative clause itself features a highly complex noun phrase, *catfighting alpha-female judges Mariah Carey and Nicki Minaj*.

(7) Charlotte, North Carolina, the infamous audition city where catfighting alpha-female judges Mariah Carey and Nicki Minaj went from frenemies to full-on enemies.

Another example illustrative of a fair share of complexity within postmodifying structures in the text involves two coordinated noun phrases, the first of which features a prepositional phrase in post-head position and within it a noun phrase containing a postmodifying relative clause; the other coordinated noun phrase also includes both pre- and postmodification, with the postmodifying relative clause resting on the building blocks of no less than five verbs: *make*, *seem*, *find*, *mainline*, and *enter*.

(8) Her head of Barbie hair that looked like one of Nicki's beat-up wigs and an over-caffeinated personality that made her seem like she'd found the show's secret Coca-Cola stash and had mainlined it right before entering the audition room.

The above-mentioned syntactic relationships are those of recursion, coordination and subordination (Downing and Locke, 2003), all of which, although they may have been applied more scarcely in the text, were nevertheless reported at some point in the analysis. Also, we would like to highlight the fact that all major postmodifying categories were observed in this micro-corpus, including prepositional phrases, relative and non-finite clauses, along with some register-specific ones such as appositive phrases and clauses.

Clauses and verbal style in the text

A multilayered structure of noun phrases argues for nominal complexity so often inextricably linked with writing practices in the media, but we should be careful to claim that nominal density and tight packaging is the only source of complexity in texts. Verbal style may be more linear and straightforward in its freedom from deconstruction and reconstruction (Downing and Locke, 2003, p. 493-4), but if we look beyond nominalizations and complex noun phrases in general, we can begin to see that clauses are just as capable of building massive blocks of meaning as phrases are.

(9) The ensuing fallout over the past months did nothing to help this show, only generating icky vibes, turning off longtime viewers, and creating a lot of conclusion-jumping Nicki haters (seriously, folks, give Nicki a chance)--all before Season 12 even began.

(10) This prompted fellow judges Randy Jackson and Mariah to question Summer's true musical calling, and poor Summer quickly, somewhat desperately backpedaled, claiming she was actually a huge country music fan who practically grew up on a farm and came out of the womb sporting a cowgirl hat and spurs.

As the illustrations suggest, perceived structural complexity is rarely attributed to a single factor or source; more often it is a matter of several agents working in unison towards the same goal. In this particular case, the complementary principles are complex phrases in equally complex sentences: phrases generally make ample use of modification and complementation processes, individual clauses introduce more constituents and are themselves liberally engaged in the syntactic relationships of coordination, subordination and embedding, and the overall result is a sentence which is both structurally and semantically exacting.

Another major difference between entertainment news and 'serious' reporting appears to be predominantly a matter of quantity rather than quality: in other words, complexity is not absent from entertainment news, only its presence is less conspicuous. The 'American Idol' text is a mixture of simple and complex phrases and sentences, a dynamic interplay of what we readers perceive as short and long structures.

A miscellany of lexical and rhetorical categories in the text

Not only was the text prone to embrace both nominal and verbal style, but also its choice of vocabulary revealed a pattern in which boundaries between relatively formal and informal writing practices were frequently crossed (Cornbleet and Carter, 2002). Alongside explicitly formal vocabulary mainly of Latin origin, such as the adjective

intrepid or the nouns *versatility* and *adversity*, the text abounds in elements and uses characteristic of informal style, some of which are listed here as a miscellany of categories.

- Phrasal verbs: (11) Not since Flavor Flav has a reality star *come up with* so many bizarre contestant nicknames.
- Compounds: (12) Hey, Randy, tell that to "Idol" producer Nigel Lythgoe, who nowadays seems to think that this show is all about *tabloid-baiting, gossip-mongering, and lowest-common-denominating*.
- Derivatives: (13) Rodney needs to learn to rein it in a bit and be less *shouty*, and of course he needs to choose better material but the raw gift was there.
- Conversions: (14) Nicki strutted off the set in frustration, practically threatening to quit the show and apparently soon after, the *outtake* from this *outburst* was all over TMZ's YouTube channel.
- Vague language: (15) When Summer somewhat offhandedly told judge Keith Urban that she "did the country *thing*" already, an insulted Keith got a little mad (well, mad by Keith Urban standards, *not* by Nicki Minaj standards), quipping: "That's like saying, 'I did the brain surgeon *thing*.'"
- Slang: (16) Ja'Bria's *shtick*, if you can call it one, is she likes to hunt frogs and eat their legs.
- Interjections: (17) When it finally came time for Nicki, who supported Summer from the get-go, to speak, she grunted: "*Sheesh*, for a minute I thought this was a country music debate!".
- Onomatopoeia: (18) I was getting total flashbacks to that Beavis & Butt-Head "Frog Baseball" cartoon (*splat!*), and Nicki's special nickname for Ja'Bria was "Frog Killer".
- Pun: (19) And the rest was history, or *herstory*.
- Graphic emphasis: (20) *AND* she chose to audition with a cover of a country artist, Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues".
- Speech representation: (21) *Said Mariah*, "You took me by surprise, and I seriously enjoyed it".

Just as the structural foundations of the text rest on both nominal and verbal style, so the corresponding meanings tend to be conveyed through both formal and informal means, however unequal their distribution in the text may be. The length of the list not only prompts the remark that the text is markedly informal in style, but also that its predominantly informal tone is the result of a rich repertoire of features enhancing the overall expressiveness of the language used. Consequently, if the formal-informal distinction should in this case be superseded by a more subjective set of criteria, then the text certainly seems to lack little in view of articulacy and effervescence. The issue is merely a matter of perspective gained by an understanding that linguistic richness and complexity can come in many different forms.

For instance, the text is also found to be rich in long strings of verbal hyponyms, adding to superordinate forms, e.g. Say and Walk, meanings suggestive of manner.

- SAY (to express in words): (22) "You really made me feel what you were singing," *said* Nicki.

(23) "I'm head over heels in love with you," *gushed* Nicki. (to express oneself extravagantly or emotionally; talk effusively).

(24) "That sounded really, really pretty," *cooed* Nicki, who nicknamed Ashley "Blondie." (to murmur or talk fondly or amorously).

(25) Nicki was Jimmy's biggest fan, *raving*, "You poppin'! You mad fly!" (to talk or write with extravagant enthusiasm).

(26) "You lit up the room. That's what stars do," *declared* Randy (to state emphatically).

- WALK (proceed by steps): (27) Did Nicki need to *walk* off the set?

(28) But honestly, she's probably *not* the first tantrum-tossing reality judge to *storm* off the set in a huff (to rush angrily).

(29) What exactly *was* it that made Nicki *stomp* off the set, spewing expletives like Steven Tyler on a bad day? (to walk with forcible or heavy, resounding steps).

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that the text shares some of the features characteristic of traditional news prose: especially striking is its potential for introducing tightly packed noun phrases, although not necessarily nominalizations and not

necessarily in large amounts. Secondly, the analysis leads to a realization that it is usually a combination of phrasal and clausal make-up that results in what is perceived as structural complexity.

As a vivid concoction of elements that are both simple and complex, nominal and verbal, formal and informal, the text engages the reader in a dynamic interplay of styles. It seeks to find expression in a diverse variety of sources and materialize it through assorted forms and meanings. Individual words, tight phrases and elaborate clauses all make equally suitable creative tools for telling stories that exude attention to detail, a quality the text clearly does not lack.

Finally, let us briefly comment on some of the choices whose occurrence in the context of entertainment news may have come as a surprise. Having slang and Latinate words standing side by side or heavily modified phrases and clauses interacting with the simplest of forms in the same text may seem unlikely, and when such pairings occur we may ask what business these formal and/or complex tidbits have appearing in entertainment stories, which are by default thought of as being light in all respects, vocabulary and grammar included.

All stories are the products of their writers, who naturally want their stories to be read and their writing abilities and way with words appreciated. Whatever the topic, most writers will supposedly do their very best to turn it into as good a story as they possibly can. The task may be even more challenging if the contents of a story fall outside the scope of serious-minded writing, as is the case with entertainment.

By selecting from a lexical and structural repertoire 'weightier' elements, such as hyponyms replacing superordinate verbs, writers pack more information into their stories and lend more substance to their texts. What these meaningful choices eventually amount to is a clever tactic of turning just another piece of entertainment news into a larger-than-life story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tatjana Marjanović is Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She read for her MPhil at the Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics, University of Cambridge, UK. Her doctoral thesis was an attempt to shed light on a correlation between thematic structure and coherence in English news texts. She takes a close interest in functional approaches to grammar and discourse analysis.