

VU Research Portal

Subjectivity in news discourse

Vis, K.

2011

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Vis, K. (2011). *Subjectivity in news discourse: A corpus linguistic analysis of informalization*.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl



Conclusion and discussion

This dissertation addressed the assumed process of informalization in Dutch journalistic prose. It presented a series of analyses that focused on informalization at different levels: informalization in the amount of directly quoted language, at the lexicogrammatical level, and at the level of discourse structure. This concluding chapter will first summarize the main aims of the study and draw attention to the most important conclusions of the dissertation. It will then continue to discuss the limitations of the study. Some directions for further research will be outlined by way of final comment.

It has been suggested that “a major change in discursive practices affecting many public institutions in contemporary society is the ‘conversationalization’ of public discourse [...]” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997: 265). This change, also indicated as ‘informalization’, involves “the modelling of public discourse upon the discursive practices of ordinary life, ‘conversational’ practices in a broad sense” (Fairclough, 1994: 253). It entails a change in the style and register of many genres, journalistic prose being one of them, since World War II. The dissertation is part of a larger research project (VU-Ster project *Conversationalization in discourse*, cf. Chapter 1), in which the main aim was to determine whether informalization in journalism can be found in linguistic realizations in Dutch journalistic news texts. One study in this research project is focused on metaphor as a realization (Pasma, in preparation), the present study is focused on characteristics of subjectivity.

Chapter 1 introduced informalization as a development in society that is manifested in its reflections on journalism. Due to the changes in society, the role of the printed press changed from a unique authority on what counted as news to one presenting many diverse news sources, each calling for attention. With this

new role of the newspaper came the new role of the journalist as an interpreter of what is happening in the world, rather than just as a reporter of news events. This changed role is notable in an increase of interactivity between the newspaper and the public, an increase in the expression of opinions, and an increasing importance of interpretation by the journalist (RMO, 2003).

From a linguistic viewpoint, what these effects have in common is a shift in attention from the object, i.e. the news, to the subject, i.e. the journalist and his/her news sources. In other words, the informalization hypothesis presumes that the journalist and the news sources have become more central as speakers. This centrality of speakers is linguistically reflected in the expression of self and writer's perspective or point of view. These are all aspects of what in linguistic theorizing has become known as subjectivity (Lyons, 1982; Langacker, 1990; Traugott, 1989). Hence, in this dissertation informalization was understood as an increase of subjectivity on two dimensions, reporter subjectivity and source subjectivity: the subjectivity expressed by the journalist and the subjectivity expressed by news sources in fragments that were directly quoted. These two dimensions consequently represent the two voices in journalistic news texts: the journalist's voice and the voice of his/her news sources. Since informalization would imply an increase over time of "conversation" between these two voices, the question is whether the voice of sources has become more prominent, resulting in a larger proportion of direct quotations. Thus, the first research question this dissertation aimed to answer was:

RQ1: has the amount of directly quoted language changed over the course of the second half of the twentieth century?

Based on the literature on subjectivity, in Chapter 2 a model was developed for the systematic analysis of subjectivity at two linguistic levels: the lexicogrammatical and the textual level. With respect to the two levels, the subsequent questions this dissertation set out to answer were:

RQ2: does informalization occur at the lexicogrammatical level?

RQ2a: are the indicators of subjectivity indeed informal, i.e. are lexicogrammatical features more common in conversations than in news texts?

RQ2b: have the lexicogrammatical indicators of subjectivity become more frequent in news texts over the course of the second half of the twentieth century?

RQ2c: is there a difference in the development between the indicators in the reporter's words and in direct quotations?

RQ2d: are there differences in the development over time between newspapers and registers?

RQ3: does informalization occur at the textual level?

RQ3a: are the textual indicators of subjectivity more common in conversations than in news texts?

RQ3b: have the textual indicators of subjectivity become more frequent in news texts over the course of the second half of the twentieth century?

For these analyses, two corpora were compiled of Dutch diachronic written news data, and Dutch spontaneous conversation data, which were discussed in Chapter 3. In light of the main objective of this dissertation, the material contains diachronic Dutch newspaper data. Additionally, it includes present-day data from Dutch spontaneous – face-to-face – conversations. News texts were selected from five Dutch national newspapers from the periods 1950/1951 and 2002. This interval reflects two pivotal instances in societal development: the first point directly after World War II and before the presumed informalization development, as opposed to the second point after the presumed informalization. The year 2002 was chosen because it is a year between two relevant developments within journalism: after a period of professionalization, but before the broad spread of digitization of journalism. The old and new news texts were compared to spontaneous conversation data from the Corpus Gesproken Nederlands (CGN), which was the third type of data in the corpora.

Corpus A consisted of approximately 135,000 words taken from news text and conversations, and was used in the manual analyses conducted in this study, i.e. an analysis of directly quoted language (Chapter 4), an analysis of subjectivity at the textual level (Chapter 6) and also in the analyses of an adjacent study on metaphor in news discourse (cf. Pasma, in preparation) within the same larger research project on conversationalization (VU-Ster project *Conversationalization in discourse*, cf. Chapter 1). It also served as a test case for the compilation of the larger corpus B, which was compiled later. Corpus B consisted of approximately 3,660,000 words in 7,500 news texts and conversations. It was used in two semi-automatic analyses; the analysis of directly quoted language (Chapter 4), and the analysis of subjectivity at the lexicogrammatical level (Chapter 5). The news data in the corpora allowed for several diachronic comparisons, to test whether Dutch newspapers show a shift in stylistic preferences toward a more informal style, whereas the spontaneous conversations were used in several synchronic comparisons with newspaper data from the same period, to identify to what extent newspaper texts resemble present-day conversations with respect to subjectivity.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 report on the analyses that were conducted to answer the research questions. The first analysis, presented in Chapter 4, concentrated on the language that the journalist quotes from news sources. In line with earlier findings for written English, the results showed that the amount of direct quotations increased over time. In the data used for this quantitative analysis directly quoted

language was operationally defined by means of annotating all stretches marked by inverted commas. This measure was determined to be reliable based on the fact that in a quantitative analysis of data that was manually annotated for quotation, directly quoted language accounted for the vast majority of the stretches marked by inverted commas. In both sets of data an incline was found both in number of occurrences and in number of words. These findings can be considered as a manifestation of informalization, which means that RQ1 can be answered affirmatively.

Chapter 5 addressed the analysis of indicators of subjectivity at the lexicogrammatical level. Drawing on previous research on subjectivity and stance, a list of lexicogrammatical indicators of subjectivity was compiled. Examples are linguistic features such as first and second person pronouns, modal elements (verbs, adverbs, and particles) and intensifiers. First, RQ2a was answered. It was established that, indeed, the lexicogrammatical features of subjectivity are more common in conversations than in news texts. Thus, the subjectivity features in the model can be used as indicators of informality. The analysis then went on to exploit the annotation of direct quotations discussed in Chapter 4, in that it used the annotation to make a distinction between lexicogrammatical indicators that reflected reporter subjectivity (found in the reporter's words) and lexicogrammatical indicators that reflected source subjectivity (found in direct quotations).

The data showed that this distinction is essential to arrive at correct conclusions. In the text overall there seemed to be evidence of informalization, thus providing a seemingly positive answer to RQ2b; however, this is misleading, because closer inspection revealed that the increases found for some indicators in the texts overall should be attributed primarily to an increase in the direct quotations. Within the subset of direct quotations, almost all indicators showed a significant rise over time (except for exclamation marks, and not in all newspapers and registers for question marks and modal adverbs). Hence, the direct quotations met the expectations raised by earlier findings in diachronic research, providing clear evidence of informalization.

By contrast, the development in the words of the reporter seemed to be somewhat different: some indicators provided evidence in favour of the informalization hypothesis, whereas others displayed the opposite tendency. More specifically, there was an increase of question marks and in second person singular pronouns, contrasted by a decrease in deictic elements, a decrease for first person plural pronouns, and no change in first person singular pronouns. This could mean that newspapers tend to express more indications of interactivity over time whereas they became more reluctant over time to explicitly refer to the here-and-now and to themselves as an institution or to the community or nation they write about. The decrease in modal adverbs remained unexplained.

The results provided a positive answer to RQ2c: there was a difference in the development between the indicators in reporter's text and in direct quotations, in that

the latter have clearly become more subjective, whereas the former show a more ambivalent development. In addition to the more convincing increase of the frequency of subjectivity indicators in direct quotations and the increase of the proportion of direct quotations demonstrated in Chapter 4, the extent to which news sources expressed their subjectivity proved to be higher than what could be observed for the journalist: for all indicators, all frequencies were higher in direct quotations than in the reporter's words, in all newspapers and all registers (with just a few exceptions). It may be concluded that RQ2 can in part be answered affirmatively: informalization does occur at the lexicogrammatical level, but more unequivocally so within the news sources' directly quoted words, than in the reporter's text.

With respect to the comparison between the five newspapers and between the three registers included in the corpus, the data showed that remarkably often the newspapers and registers (or most of them at least) concurred in the direction of change. In most cases, however, the newspapers and the registers showed significant differences, in that either one newspaper or register was divergent, or because they developed at a different rate. Thus, no conclusive answer can be formulated to RQ2d on the basis of these results: general statements about the differences between newspapers and between registers cannot be made, since not one newspaper or register showed a consistent pattern.

The distinction between reporter and source subjectivity was taken up in Chapter 6, which presented the analysis of indicators of subjectivity at the textual level. In this analysis, coherence relations holding between clauses, sentences, or larger discourse units in news texts were analyzed using Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann & Thompson, 1988). By distinguishing between subject-matter and presentational relations, the latter, which express aspects of interactivity between speaker and addressee, could be singled out as subjective. Examples are relations such as Concession, Evidence and Evaluation. The goal was to answer the question whether such expressions of subjectivity in discourse coherence increased over time (RQ3). However, it appeared not possible to treat the direct quotations annotated in the corpus as a separate subset; because they were often short and fragmented, the direct quotes could not be treated in the same way as the reporter's text in the RST analysis. Thus, RQ3a could not be answered. This is why only reporter subjectivity could be analyzed.

The results revealed that an increase could be observed for just one of the subjective relations, i.e., Evidence, but this was found only under a weaker definition than that of the prototypical subjective relation. Therefore, RQ3b must be answered with great reservations: in only one aspect did textual indicators of subjectivity become more frequent in news texts over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. It seems that, similar to the conclusions of Chapter 5 for reporter subjectivity, at the textual level there are only marginal indications that a trend of informalization has occurred.

This dissertation has adopted a distinction that is essential in the analysis of subjectivity in journalistic prose: reporter subjectivity versus source subjectivity. Informalization was not found across the board; instead, a finer grained analysis revealed that informalization is woven in the news texts' texture. It is in the proportion and the form of news sources' texts *within* the news text that informalization was found. The evidence for informalization in reporter's text is marginal, but at the lexicogrammatical level, an increase in some lexicogrammatical indicators and a decrease in others seem to indicate that over time the journalist has started to pay more attention to interactivity, and less to explicit reference to himself or the situation. At the textual level there also was only marginal evidence of increased subjectivity: only in the Evidence relation. By contrast, the evidence for informalization in source subjectivity/direct quotations is clear. The number of direct quotations has increased, both in number of occurrences and in proportional amount of words. At the lexicogrammatical level, the results show an increase for (almost) all indicators, and frequencies that were higher than in reporter's text anyway. Due to restrictions in the RST analysis model, the level of subjectivity within direct quotations could not be analyzed at the textual level.

The conclusion is that informalization of news discourse lies in direct quotations: journalistic prose is not becoming like conversation, but presents more conversation as part of its regular discourse. Paradoxically, in several respects journalists themselves have become even more formal, which is witnessed by e.g. the decreasing use of modal adverbs and exclamation marks. A possible explanation is the increase in formal professional training that started in the Netherlands since 1950 in the form of Vocational Training Programs for journalists. It is likely that journalists tend to ascribe observations and interpretations to traceable, clearly indicated news sources, in order to distance themselves from overtly subjective elements, and by doing so, reinforce their credibility and objectivity.

In short, the newspaper is still a family friend, but no longer of undisputed authority. It has to attract attention, and does not do this by raising its own voice, but rather by inviting more friends and acquaintances on the stage to tell their own story. Over the last half century, more and more informal direct quotations are used in news texts, giving them a lively, informal, conversational aspect.

This dissertation has extended previous studies by its relatively large corpus of Dutch. In itself this corpus is a valuable yield of the present study. In a separate project (CLARIN-NL-10-016), it will be standardized for further scientific research as the VU-DNC corpus (VU University Diachronic Newstext Corpus). It is expected to be available by December 2011. For the lexicogrammatical analysis, the larger corpus allowed for a distinction between newspapers and registers, and the inclusion of other sections than just editorials and front page news.

The main contribution of the analytical approach in this study was the distinction between reporter subjectivity and source subjectivity in corpus linguistic anal-

ysis of news discourse. Although other researchers did acknowledge that some of the observed increases in informal features would be indirect, due to the increase of direct quotations, which is an environment traditionally appropriate for such forms (Leech et al., 2009), this had not yet been put to the test in a large scale study like the present one.

Furthermore, this study can now refine the conclusions drawn by Hundt and Mair (1999), who described journalistic prose as an ‘agile’ genre compared to academic prose, in that journalistic prose was more open to innovations such as ‘colloquialization’ as observed in increases of first and second person pronouns, contractions, etc. (cf. section 2.3). The current study explains that journalistic prose is more agile for these changes, precisely because quotes from news sources’ spoken discourse are being inserted in the text.

A related question is how the results can be explained in light of Biber and Finegan’s (2001) conclusions, who found differences in the development between specialist and more popular genres: in popular genres they observed a change towards a more oral style, whereas the specialist genres moved in the other direction in the second part of twentieth century. Readerships for these genres have become consistently more specialized, requiring extensive background training to be able to comprehend these texts effectively (Biber & Finegan, 2001, p. 82). It might be that for journalistic prose the reporter’s text reflects such specialist genre developments, in that it presupposes a more specialist readership, while, paradoxically, the news sources’ texts reflect the developments in the popular genres, in that they reflect lively, day-to-day discourse styles.

This study also has its limitations. A first issue concerns the two corpora compiled for this study. Although an attempt was made to make the data sets for 1950/1 and 2002 as similar as possible, due to availability and other pragmatic considerations the results are not perfectly comparable, for example with respect to the selection of the news texts from the various genres.

Another limitation is concerned with the categorization of the lexical items included in the study of lexicogrammatical indicators of subjectivity. Due to the way the closed sets of lexicogrammatical indicators were compiled, it is not possible to make certain distinctions in the results, for example between features expressing emotions versus indicators expressing more rational attitudes such as certainty and uncertainty. For instance, the list of lexical items for modal adverbs contains both adverbs expressing feeling and uncertainty such as ‘gelukkig’ (‘fortunately’) and ‘misschien’ (‘maybe’); similarly, the lexical items included for cognitive verbs contain communication verbs, attitudinal verbs, factive verbs and likelihood verbs. It would be interesting to submit these different types to a more differentiated test, but this was beyond the range of the current study.

Furthermore, the analysis of subjectivity at the textual level was restricted to part of the corpus: the reporter’s text in the news texts. Although it is a renowned and an

extensively elaborated and tested model, the Rhetorical Structure Analysis, which was used for the analysis at the textual level, appeared to be not optimally suited to analyze conversational data, or directly quoted conversational material in written texts. It was beyond the scope of this study to construct an analytical instrument that could replace the RST instrument. This left part of the data uninterpreted for subjectivity at discourse level. It would be very interesting to undertake this task in a further study.

The results of this dissertation give rise to more questions that must be left for further research. Following up on the corpus construction, it would be interesting to include more data points (e.g. 1975; or a data point in every decade between 1950 and 2002) to see whether more detailed changes could be traced between the first and second data points in the present study.

With respect to the function of journalistic news texts, it would be worthwhile to investigate who is quoted as news source and in which context. The current study shows that over time, journalists have devoted an increasing amount of their text to direct citations of news sources, both in number of citations and in number of words in citations. It would be interesting to further investigate who these sources are, and whether there are differences in the amount of subjectivity expressed in direct quotations from different types of sources: professionals or laymen; people involved (witnesses or other parties in the event reported on) or people from the general public; etc. Additionally, the idea of informalization could also imply that more news sources from the public are being quoted, thus, indeed, constituting a conversation between reporter and news source, and an interaction between sender and addressee. Current developments in technology and IT may further facilitate readers to contribute or even co-create the news.

The data in this study did not reflect the pervasive changes in journalism of the last decade. The internet has altered journalistic processes and products profoundly and will continue to do so, also changing the professional identity and ideology of the journalist (Deuze, 2008). Online newspapers, news sites, blogs and other social media, as well as the influence of civil journalism, have elicited quicker and broader production of news in altered, multimodal formats (Fortunati et al., 2009; Jucker, 2003). It is to be expected that news texts will change accordingly. The conversation on the news has become much more polyphonic and interactive than it was around the Millennium. Future research, such as the study by Küppers on subjectivity in French printed and online news (Küppers & Ho-Dac, 2010) will have to analyze which consequences these changes have for the degree and type of informalization. Presumably, the ever broadening range of news styles and procedures will cause a much wider range of registers, using both more informal characteristics in some, but less in other online and printed news genres.