Stylistic Devices of Brief News Items' Evaluation Trends (On the Example of English-Language Newspapers)

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ABSTRACT

Modern journalism is characterized by a shift towards a more biased and emotional representation of the events. This trend is considered omnipresent and can affect even such inherently objective and fair-minded genres as brief news items (BNIs). This research is an effort to investigate to what extent evaluation has become a distinctive feature of BNIs and what linguistic devices are used to express evaluation in them. For this purpose, 1093 BNIs from leading English broadsheets the Economist, the Week, The New York Times, the Washington Post published from 2019 to 2021 were analyzed. The findings demonstrated that 16% of all BNIs included stylistic devices, out of which 8.9% were aimed at transmitting the author's evaluation (expressive language, adverbs of degree, informal language, metaphor, inversion, allusion, pun, quotes, modal verbs and parenthesis). The results prove that the premise that modern mass media texts are indiscriminately emotional and biased is an exaggeration as those genres (as BNI) which are inherently aimed at clear and free of prejudice reporting preserve their basic characteristics.

Keywords: news; brief news items; evaluation.

1. Introduction

Objectivity has long been considered as the golden standard of journalism (Benson et al., 2005; Schudson, 1978; Chong, 2017). This implies that journalists must hide their "voices", remaining invisible observers of the events. The classic tools of "objective journalism" are the bald statement of fact, shaven of subjective interpretation and spoken impersonally (Coward, 2013, p. 15). However, lately, quality papers have been accused of having shifted from this ideal; what was once considered to be the golden standard of journalism is not in high demand among modern journalists. The information has been widely replaced with entertainment, rationalist discourse with sensationalism (Clark, 2013, p. 270), facts with opinions, which has brought in the centre of modern journalism bias, emotions and subjectivity. There is no comprehensive explanation of the trend. Some researchers note that journalism has never been fully objective, as "objectivity" is an unattachable goal and cannot be clearly defined (Stenvall, 2017, p. 226; Schudson, 2001, p. 149). Others link the trend towards texts being subjective, opinion-based and biased rather than objective, fact-based and fair-minded to social changes such as the rise of confessional journalism (Coward, 2013), the dominance of political discourse (Sheigal, 2004), and the influence of social media.

A sweeping judgment that modern journalism is indiscriminately emotional and biased is an exaggeration.
As our early research shows, despite the rise of subjectivity, a number of mass media genres preserve the dominance of informative function (Nikonova, 2019). For instance, this is true for news genres, which are inherently aimed at informing rather than interpreting the events. However, nowadays, the news is often used as a tool of informational wars both on the local and international levels and as a result, the linguistic characteristics of news are experiencing a shift towards a decrease of informational constituent and the rise of evaluative one. Nevertheless, those genres which form the core of the news discourse most prominently reflect the key characteristics. One of such genres is brief news item (BNI).

BNI is aimed at providing updated information on the latest events in conscience and clear way. The core feature of the BNI is clarity, so it contains only facts so that the reader is free to make conclusions based on the information given. The dominant function of the BNI is to transmit information without providing any comments (apart from those needed to make the text more clear) and evaluations. The BNI is largely unemotional, stereotyped matter-of-fact language prevails. Any departure from this neutral narrative style is unacceptable. However, the BNI cannot fully stay aside from the overall changes in the news discourse as well as journalism, in general, being their part, so the rise of evaluation is seen. In this research, the following research questions were attempted to be answered:

1) To what extent has evaluation become distinctive for news block?
2) What linguistic devices are used to express evaluation in the news block?

2. Literature Review

The literature review is centred on works dedicated to two aspects underlying our research: news and evaluation.

2.1. News

Research in the news is based on a long-established definition of news as a piece of information about current events (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), emphasizing a set of values that make a story newsworthy. The list of values introduced by Norwegian scholars Galtung and Ruge is considered to be landmark research and includes frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, reference to something negative (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). The list of values has been subject to review (e.g. Gans, 1980; Hetherington, 1985, pp. 8–9; Herbert, 2000, p. 318; Bell, 1991); however, the values building the core of the list (unambiguity, meaningfulness, etc.) remain unchangeable. With an introduction of a new informational sphere – the Internet – the way news is perceived has undergone significant changes. Recent studies on the news emphasize the effect of digitalization on news content and presentation (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018; Diakopoulos, 2016; Karlsson and Clerwall, 2013; Podger, 2009; Zamith, 2018; Picone et al., 2015; Swart et al., 2017). One of the aspects discussed in light of the emergence of digital news is the rise of evaluation. In writing news texts, journalists are tending “to invite readers to align themselves with a preferred reading of events” (Aaron, 2005, p. 695).

As mentioned above, objectivity and judgment-free reporting have been the golden standard of journalism for a long time, so the balance between objective and subjective information has existed with the dominance of the latter. But the growth of information flows seen in the last decades has brought about a situation when it seems hardly possible to get a handle on the information represented in the mass media on your own. That has led to the increasing demand for the selection and interpretation of information. So the people are now interested not in bare facts but in respectable conclusions, which they can rely on in the decision-making process. As a result, the mass media does not serve solely as the means of transmitting information but rather “sells their own interpretation of the information and their ability to select the most interesting and relevant news” (Sluckiy, 2008, p.). One of the indicators of this trend is the popularity of “confessional journalism” (Coward, 2013, p. 91), which means the rise of first-person narrative texts with elements of personal experience and focus on real emotions. Although this characteristics have traditionally underlaid the tabloids, nowadays, they see spread in broadsheets. The trend is also enhanced by the rise of the market share occupied by social media blogs and telegram-channels. Of course, the initial function of the mass media – to inform – persists, but it undergoes significant changes as the modern mass media among other things aims at reflecting the opinion. As a result, those genres that are inherently focused on informing see the rise of the evaluative element.

2.2. Concepts of evaluation

In a broad way, evaluation is defined as the attribution of positive and negative characteristics to the object considered (Telia, 1991). Evaluation is based on the speaker's positive or negative references to the object in general or its parts which are based on the accepted worldview or the speaker's personal philosophy (Telia, 1991). Evaluation is a tool of the author's attitude expression and is always subjective (Klimenko, 2015). Evaluation enables subjective presence of the writer in the text (Martin and White, 2005).
Modern works dedicated to evaluation are mostly based on the APPRAISAL framework, representing “the most complex system of analyzing evaluation” (Aaron, 2005, p. 695) that is currently receiving wide use. The theory gives look into the way evaluations are expressed and perceived and subcategorizes appraisal into several categories which are meant “to reflect not only the conventional means of expressing appraisal in a given language but more fundamentally the feelings and values of a culture” (Thompson, 2014, p. 50).

For the aims of this work, the APPRAISAL framework is inadequate as we do not aim at making complex analysis of evaluations in the BNIs, but just demonstrate their presence so that evaluation will be interpreted in most basic categories of positive and negative values (Cruse, 1986; Volf, 2019).

3. Method

We have analyzed brief news items of the leading English broadsheets, the Economist, the Week, The New York Times, the Washington Post published from 2019 to 2021, which amounts to 88 pages. We analyzed the stylistic devices used to infringe the BNI core characteristics emphasizing the devices used to transmit the author's evaluations.

4. Results

The findings are: out of 1093 BNIs, only 177 (around 16%) included stylistic devices (including those which were used to express evaluation), 98 BNIs (8.9%) included stylistic devices aimed at evaluation (see Table 1). The stylistic device can be multifunctional, and indifferent news items serve as an expressive and evaluative device; also, one stylistic device can perform several functions simultaneously – in this case, we counted it only once. So all other BNIs (84%) are written in the accordance with inherent characteristics of the genre:

   Ancient food counter uncovered in Pompeii: Archaeologists in Pompeii, the city buried in a volcanic eruption in 79 AD, have made the extraordinary find of a frescoed hot food and drinks shop that served up the ancient equivalent of street food to Roman passersby. Known as a termopolium, Latin for hot drinks counter, the shop was discovered in the archaeological park's Regio V site, which is not yet open to the public (The Washington Post 2020).

This BNI can be characterized as concise, clear and free of all assumptions and values; the author is “left behind” the text. The language used is brief and emotions free—the main goal of the text—to inform the readers. For example, the author uses parenthesis to include the definition of a possibly unknown word to the readers (“termopolium, Latin for hot drinks counter”), which means the text aims at giving a clear picture of the event. As mentioned before, not all BNI texts are in line with this example: over the last decade, we can observe a tendency towards the rise of evaluation in the BNI, which we will further analyze in more details.

![Table 1. Evaluative stylistic devices.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stylistic device</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage, % (out of all BNIs analyzed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allusion</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthesis</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal language</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pun</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs of degree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inversion</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quotes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modal verbs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
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5. Discussion

The analysis results demonstrate no big difference in the frequency of stylistic device used to express evaluation. However, the most frequently used stylistic device is expressive language, which has been proved by previous research on newspaper language (Semina, 2017).

Hereunder we present a detailed analysis of the stylistic devices used to transmit evaluation.

5.1. Expressive language

Expressive language is not typical for the BNI, as it aims to transmit objective, fair-minded information rather than express the journalist’s attitude. That’s why the usage of expressive language in the neutral linguistic environment of the BNI becomes a powerful means of making the desired effect on readers.
Covid-19 featured large in the vice-presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence, a more orderly affair compared with the fireworks of the Biden-Trump encounter a week ago (The Economist 2020).

In this example, the author compares vice-presidential debates between Mike Pence and Kamala Harris and presidential debates between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, calling them an “orderly affair” and “fireworks”, respectively. In the context of this piece of news, the word “fireworks” isn’t used in its direct meaning. Still, it is subjectively evaluative, emphasizing the aggressive and disorganized nature of the presidential debates. During the debates, both candidates neglected the time limits and frequently interrupted each other. As a result, the debates failed. The author of the BNI doesn’t state his attitude towards the presidential debates directly but uses expressive language to disguise his opinion.

5.2. Adverbs of degree
The usage of adverbs of degree such as “too”, “much”, “hardly”, “even”, etc., may acquire strong emotional colouring in the BNI discourse and be interpreted as means of transmitting the author’s evaluation.

In the week that international data confirmed that England had experienced the worst excess mortality in Europe <....>). Some have sought to blame this rise on young people – or, in the case of one Tory backbencher, on a lack of social distancing among ethnic minorities – but it’s the Government’s fault for relaxing measures too quickly (The Week 2020).

In this BNI, the journalist tells about the rise of the coronavirus death toll and presents different views on the possible reasons. The author fails to avoid prejudice and bias as he states his position directly: the Government is to blame for the death toll increase as the lockdown measures were lifted too early. The position is intensified by the adverb of degree “too”, which makes the Government’s guilt even more evident in the reader’s eyes.

5.3. Informal language
An informal language is a potent tool for making the language vigorous, fresh and expressive. As mentioned before, these characteristics are not inherent to the BNI, so informal language plays the role of evaluation means.

If the British Government wondered what the next clanger in its handling of covid-19 would be, then outdated software provided the answer (the Economist).

In this news block, the journalist uses the word “clanger”, which is indicated by the dictionary as “informal” and is defined as “something that you say by accident that embarrasses or upsets someone” (Cambridge Dictionary). The word’s role in the piece of news is not merely to name the phenomenon but to implement the author’s attitude towards the British coronavirus policy, which he obviously finds unsuccessful.

5.4. Metaphor
Metaphor is believed to be one of the most potent devices of creating images (Galperin, 2010). Through association, it can lead to a deeper understanding of the event and for this reason, are often used to frame news (Boeynaems et al., 2017). Besides, metaphors are used to reflect the author’s expressive evaluations:

Politicians in many countries pulled out their fiscal bazookas to defend their economies. America’s Congress passed a $2.2tm stimulus bill (the cares act), which directed cash payments to households and topped up unemployment benefits (the Economist 2020).

In this BNI, the author uses the term “fiscal bazookas”, in which the word “bazookas” is used in its metaphoric meaning. On the one hand, the metaphor helps the author recreate a clearer image of the events (to outline the significance of fiscal measures undertaken by the governments to protect their economies). On the other hand, it seems to transmit the editor’s attitude towards such protective measures. As the Economist is known as a promoter of economic liberalization and integration¹ (see also the leading article “Slowbalisation”²), the editorial board obviously disapproves of such tough protectionism which countries have demonstrated during the pandemic, so the word “bazooka” helped to create a relevant image of “war” and “death”, which can be the result of such policy.

5.5. Inversion
As the English sentence is predominated by subject-predicate-object word order, any change in the structure can be considered as expressive means of the language. Inversion is especially conspicuous for the BNI, as news language has its own syntactical peculiarities, which among others, include preservation of common word order. So the occurrence of inversion always signals of the journalist’s desire to make the sentence more expressive, and by emphasizing certain words in the sentence, he transmits his own evaluations.

Rarely can a mountain stretch its advantage over its rivals, but this week Everest did just that. Nepal and China, the two countries that the “goddess mother of the world” straddles, agreed that the correct height is 8,848.86 metres

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¹ https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2013/09/04/why-are-the-economist-writers-anonymous

² https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/01/24/the-steam-has-gone-out-of-globalisation
above sea level, 86cm above the previous height, established in 1954 by a survey in India. China did its own estimate in 2005 and had insisted that Everest was four metres shorter (the Economist 2020).

The word “rarely” takes the first position in the sentence, which makes it more prominent. By emphasizing the idea of the exceptionality of the event, the journalist transmits his surprise.

5.6. Allusion

Allusions are common in newspaper texts but are rarely used in the BNI, as the latter is aimed at brief and clear informing. As allusions are not followed by the indication of the source but are based on the facts that must be familiar to the readers, they can often be left unapprehend or misinterpret by the readers (especially if it comes to international newspapers whose readers have different socio-cultural experience). We haven’t come across any allusions used in the body of the BNI (however, that doesn’t deny the fact that there are some, but proves the idea that allusions are not common for news blocks), but in the headings. News blocks are usually not accompanied by any headings, so the fact that a journalist violates the fixed structure reinforces its position.

De do do do, de da da da

America’s presidential election was a rowdy affair. The Democratic primaries produced a surprise when Pete Buttigieg was declared the winner in Iowa; a delay in the count because of a technical glitch raised more questions about America’s election machinery. Joe Biden cleaned up on Super Tuesday and went on to win the presidency. In February, Donald Trump, who was acquitted at his impeachment trial, resorted to more shenanigans, falsely claiming the result was fraudulent. He will be gone from the White House on January 20 2021 (The Economist 2020).

The piece of news is devoted to the American 2020 presidential elections.

Following the BNIs stylistic peculiarities, the journalist avoids evaluating the events, restraining the adjective “rowdy”, which can be considered neutral here as the following listing of the events proves the elections being like that. The journalist’s attitude is formulated in the heading “de do do do, de da da da”, which is an allusion to the words of a song with the same name, which was popular in the 80s. Linguistically the allusion means something meaningless and, in the given linguistic landscape, acquires ironical meaning.

5.7. Pun

Puns are based on the interplay of primary and secondary meanings of the words/phrases and are quite common for tabloids.

As Brexit trade talks went down to the wire, the British Government announced an “agreement in principle” with the European Union over border controls between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Britain also agreed to scotch legislation that would allow it to break international law. Boris Johnson, the prime minister, went to Brussels for a dinner with Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission. Still, their meeting left a bad taste in the mouth for those hoping for a breakthrough (the Economist 2020).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the meaning of the idiom “leave a bad taste in sb’s mouth” according to the Cambridge Dictionary is “to have a bad memory of smth”. Although the metaphorical meaning of the phrase is apparent, the context ("went for a dinner") brings about its direct meaning “to feel the badflavour of the dish”. The interplay of two meanings creates a humorous effect and enables the journalist to undermine Boris Johnson’s actions.

5.8. Parenthesis

Parenthesis is a detached construction, which interrupts the syntactic construction of the sentence and contains some additional information. Parenthesis can be used both in order to clarify the meaning of the sentence and to transmit the journalist’s evaluation.

Mexico has overtaken the UK as the country with the third-highest recorded death toll from Covid-19, behind only the US and Brazil. Mexico’s death toll has now passed 48,000 (compared to more than 96,000 in Brazil and more than 160,000 in the US). [...] Mexico’s president, the left-wing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has been widely criticized for his Government’s ineffectual response to the crisis – Mexico has an exceptionally low rate of testing, for example – and for politicizing such issues as mask-wearing. Last week, López Obrador said he would wear a mask only “when there is no corruption” in Mexico – a fairly distant prospect (The Week 2020).

In the example, we see three parentheses. The first and the second construction probably give additional information that makes the events described more understandable, while the last one reveals the journalist’s attitude towards the political situation in Mexico as he doesn't support the idea with any fact-based rationale.

5.9. Quotes

Quotes are widely used in BNIs as they enable journalists to represent various views and demonstrate different angles of the issue. So quotes mainly serve as a tool for transmitting a comprehensive image:
Conviction of Man Serving Life Overturned

After reviewing new evidence, a Tennessee judge has overturned the conviction of a man serving life in prison for a 1998 slaying.

The ruling Tuesday came nearly two weeks after the Davidson County District Attorney's Office filed a motion to vacate the charges against Joseph Webster, who was convicted of murder in the killing of Leroy Owens, news outlets reported. After a unit in the prosecutor's office, the move came after investigating the case and found new evidence not presented at trial.

"The Conviction Review Unit no longer has confidence in the conviction of Mr. Webster," the motion said. "We recommend Mr. Webster's conviction be vacated and the charges against him dismissed."

Evidence not presented at trial included several allegations against another suspect and DNA evidence found on the murder weapon that excluded Webster, 41.

"The Court is here to do justice according to our state and federal constitutions and per our state laws. Justice, in this case, based on the information presented to the court, requires relief to the petitioner," Judge Steve Dozier wrote in his ruling.

Webster's attorney, Daniel Horwitz, said his client is grateful to the people who helped him get the conviction overturned (The Washington Post 2020).

In this extract, the quotes fit in the narrative and complement the story. They are aligned with the style of the BNI, not cut and have a clear reference. However, in many cases, the usage of quotes has long exceeded the target of emphasizing credibility and transmitting facts. Nowadays, journalists often use quotes for the implementation of their own communicative aims; for example, a journalist can resort to quotes (especially incomplete quotes and quotes without clear references) to express evaluations. In this case, quotes are used not as an argument or illustration of the event but as a tool of nominating it:

Robert Jenrick, the Communities Secretary, has declined to challenge the building of a controversial new deep coal mine in Whitehaven—the first facility of its kind to gain planning approval in 30 years. <…> WCM says the mine will extract 2.5 million tonnes of coal a year and create 500 jobs, but Friends of the Earth's Tony Bosworth claims the "jaw-dropping" decision will totally undermine the UK's credibility at the UN climate summit to be held in Glasgow later this year. "Global leadership on the climate emergency means leaving coal in the ground," he said (The Week 2020).

In this extract, we see that the journalist quotes the representative of Friends of the Earth's Tony Bosworth calling the decision to build a new deep coal mine in Whitehaven "jaw-dropping". The adjective used has a strong emotional connotation and is alien to the BNI's stylistic landscape. Hence, the journalist's decision to use it is deliberate as it enables him to express his own position. Moreover, the piece of news is void of any alternative positions regarding the building of a new coal mine; such one-sided presentation of news can be explained by the journalist's desire to inflect his opinion.

5.10. Modal verbs

In BNIs, modal verbs are mostly used to preserve objective and judgment-free narrative:

The Senate Banking Committee approved Judy Shelton's nomination to the Fed (the full Senate must still vote). Donald Trump's choice of Ms. Shelton is controversial. <…> (the Economist 2020)

In this BNI, the modal verb "must" is free of expressive connotation as it transmits the idea that according to the rules, the Senate Banking Committee must conduct the voting. However, there are cases when the journalist's choice to resort to modal verbs can be explained by their intentions and communicative strategies.

A measure of business activity compiled by IHS Markit fell to record lows for America, Britain and the eurozone. Worse is yet to come. The survey was taken before many more stringent lockdowns on companies and personal movement was introduced (the Economist 2020).

In this extract, the journalist uses the modal verb "to be to," which expresses a high probability of events. Still, the statement is not supported by any fact-based arguments, references or objective explanation. It can be considered a subjective assessment and a tool that the author uses to inject his own voice into the BNI.

6. Conclusions

The core function of the BNI is to inform readers, creating a clear and unbiased image of events, which entails a neutral, matter-of-fact style of reporting. As nowadays, we observe a shift of journalism from its golden standard, which implies that texts get more subjective, emotional and biased; the BNI being a part of modern mass media, can't stay aside from this trend. As the research has shown, there is a tendency towards the usage of evaluative linguistic devices in the BNI. We identified the following devices used to express the journalist's evaluations in the BNI: expressive language, adverbs of degree, informal language, metaphor, inversion, allusion, pun, quotes, modal verbs and parenthesis. However, the findings have demonstrated that only 16% of all BNIs included any stylistic devices
(with 8.9% of evaluative tools), which proves that the BNI remains in accordance with its inherent characteristics and news values in general.

Material:


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