ON THE INTERPRETATION OF IDEOLOGY THROUGH COMMENT ARTICLES:
TWO VIEWS IN OPINION DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the dimension of functional variation across different situation types within Halliday's Systemic Functional framework. Data obtained from a study on the linguistic features used in comment articles from two British national newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Sun*, are correlated with their *field*, *tenor* and *mode* of discourse, with the aim of exploring to what extent variations of language use are related to variations of social context. From there, I consider the context of situation as a constitutive element of a broader context of culture. This will allow me to define register as well as see why register analysis is a valuable tool in understanding a culture.

1. Introduction

In this paper I attempt to tackle the differing ways in which ideology is contained within discourse in opinion writing, considering in the discussion of the material the discourse properties of comment articles. Comment articles are characterized by belonging to the large class of opinion discourses and thus they are the expression of persuasive communication. In this context, newspapers often publish comment pieces that are in line with their editorial slants, though dissenting opinions may often be given to promote balance and discussion.

The method adopted will involve a critical perspective that conceives language as a social practice construed by, and at the same time construing, the social. This conceptualization of the relationship between language and the social will allow me to dissect, compare and discuss the relationship of the texts analysed to their represented audience and look at how certain viewpoints are either foregrounded or backgrounded, giving voices to their respective audiences.

I will offer a critical description of the influence of the social and cultural context on the linguistic patterns of comment articles. The theoretical model that will be taken up in my analysis corresponds to the sociosemiotic model of language developed by Halliday (1978, 1985/1994, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). In this line, I consider the notion of context of situation interpreting it by means of a conceptual framework using the terms *field*, *tenor* and *mode* of discourse, as the immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning. From the analysis of a set of comment articles from *The Guardian* and *The Sun*, I will examine the association between the three register variables and predictable linguistic patterns, in order to explore the social context applicable to opinion discourse.

The perspective from which I have analysed the corpus is included in the line of studies advocated by Mardh 1980; Simon-Vanderbergen 1981; Haan 1987; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Bloor and Bloor 1995/2004; Thompson 1996/2004; López Maestre 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999; Ghadessy 1999; Gómez Guinovart and Pérez Guerra 2000; González Rodríguez 2003, 2004, 2006; Chafe 2003; Martin and Rose 2003; Allan 2004 (*inter alia*). This perspective is multidisciplinary and combines an analysis of the linguistic, cognitive, social and/or cultural aspects of the texts in context. In this approach, I adopt a dynamic perspective in which language is a tool for social interaction to argue for systematic correlations between the organization of language itself and specific contextual features, and to explore to what extent situational factors determine and influence the linguistic pattern used in them. A study

such as this, I hope, will provide an understanding of language use in two different socio-cultural settings and make useful contributions to intercultural rhetoric and discourse studies.

2. Corpus

National newspapers in Britain are often thought of as either *quality* or *popular* papers on the basis of differences in style and content. Quality newspapers, which are broadsheet in format, are directed at readers who want full information on a wide range of public matters and current affairs and are prepared to spend a considerable amount of time reading it. Popular or tabloid newspapers appeal to people who want news of a more entertaining character, presented in a more concise form and with ample illustrations. The more popular tabloid papers tend to appeal to those readers who want issues with more human interest, and they generally contain a larger number of photographs.

In general, opinion writing has received less theoretical and empirical attention by scholars than hard news stories (see, for instance, van Dijk (1985, 1986, 1988); Bell 1991; Fowler 1991; Scollon and Scollon 1997; White 1998; González Rodríguez 1999, 2001; Ungerer 2000). However, since opinion articles are important parts of the dailies they have, obviously, been at the centre of interest in mass communications, text and discourse linguistics (see van Dijk 1998; Vestergaard 1999; White 2003; Martin and White 2005), in so-called Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 2001), and more recently corpus linguistics or historical analysis (Westin 2002), *inter alia*.

The description is illustrated throughout with the study of a sample of opinion articles from the British national newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Sun* in relation to a common topic, the events which took place in America on 11 September 2001 and their aftermath. Justification for the choice of these two newspapers is formulated in terms of the basic communicative purpose of each publication. To this respect, the quality daily *The Guardian* and the popular *The Sun* belong to different cultural idiosyncrasies, they are directed at different readers and, on the basis of differences in style and content, both newspapers provide different interests and levels of education. The study is mainly of a qualitative type, since my main interest is to discuss the nature of the categories to be analysed and to illustrate them with instances of real discourse from the press. For this purpose, I collected 12 opinion articles in each newspaper from 11 September to 31 October 2001. Due to the limited scope of this article, most references will be made here to two comment articles: *Beyond belief* (*The Guardian*, 12 September 2001) and *Tragic proof* (*The Sun*, 21 September 2001).

The comment pieces were taken from the respective websites of the two newspapers (www.guardian.co.uk and www.thesun.co.uk). All references in the analysis section below will be to these web-based archives. A sample of the study was checked against the hard-copy versions of the two newspapers in order to show that, although the format was different, the textual content was the same in the two versions.

3. News Discourse: The "Fact" vs. "Opinion" Dichotomy

Media discourse is concerned with the expression of statements that, at least traditionally, are supposed to fall into a twofold division: either information or opinion, the one providing the necessary information for us to interpret the world ourselves, the other offering the newspaper's point of view of the issue.

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All the press news are basically divided into two categories: *stories* (*hard news* and *soft news*) and *comments* (Itule and Anderson 1987; Bell 1991; Vilarnovo and Sánchez 1994). As far as my own examples are concerned, news organizations express comment on a variety of subjects and in a number of formats. There are editorials, columns, reviews, and commentaries. For newspapers, opinions are found throughout the newspaper — on the editorial page and the *op-ed*, or opposite editorial, letters to the editor, complaint letters, commentaries by experts, and so on.

Whereas the publication of news becomes the publication of "truth", the purpose of opinion discourse, by contrast, is to emphatically *reaffirm* this "truth" for the intended reader. Thus, in comments, the mixing of fact and evaluation is to be expected, due to the rhetorical and argumentative nature of giving opinions and attitudes. Many comments are published by newspapers without credit to the author. In this way, the entire news organization is represented, presenting opinion *as an institution*. It is in this sense that van Dijk (1995: 2) argues in relation to editorials: "When expressed in editorials, opinions and ideologies are being produced by journalists and other writers, who […] exhibit their shared social representations, and participate in the complex processes of newspaper production and reception as well as in inter-group interaction and institutional reproduction."

Newspaper opinion discourse has considerable influence upon the formation of political opinion, not only of the reader but also of institutional and elite members of society, for example, politicians and executives. This is due to the fact that this type of articles contributes to the formulation of certain viewpoints about the world, offering readers a distinctive and sometimes authoritative voice that speaks to the public directly about matters of public importance.

Despite the fact that most discourse types are organized by a conventional news schema or superstructure which orders and categorizes the topics of a text, no such conventional structure of comment articles has far been proposed in any theoretical and empirical detail. However, we may at least expect comments carry a headline and address an issue which may or may not require some background information occurring either before or after it. It then starts off an argumentation for or against the addressed issue by an initiation statement that is optional. It makes the arguments, and finally takes a position about the issue discussed. This latter process may reoccur. This to say, an argumentation process begins with a series of arguments and ends with the articulation of a position. This process can then be repeated until the planned conclusion is drawn.

4. Theoretical Base

Registers have enjoyed attention from almost all aspects of language studies. These include linguistics, stylistics (Crystal and Davy 1969; Gregory and Carrol 1978; Halliday 1991); applied linguistics (van Dijk 1977; Cole 1978; Carston 2002); sociolinguistics (Hallliday 1978; Stockwell 2002); discourse analysis (Ghadessy 1988; Mathiessen 1993; Eggins and Martin 1997); and pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Herbert 1996), *inter alia*. These studies have generally applied the Hallidayian field, tenor and mode, to different aspects of written and oral texts. In this line, the theoretical model considered here, namely a model about language use, corresponds to the sociosemiotic model of language developed by Halliday (1978, 1985/1994, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c), and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). This model will be outlined in this section, through a brief examination of Register and Genre

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theory, in order to present later the analysis of the results together with some concluding remarks.

4.1. Context of Culture and Context of Situation

Whereas interaction between text and context is seen in the form of the nexus between language and society (Leckie-Tarry 1993: 33-34), social contexts comprise two different levels of abstraction, genre and register, which are respectively described in terms of context of culture and context of situation (Eggins 1994: 32) and which "are the technical concepts employed to explain the meaning and function of variation between texts" (Eggins and Martin 1997: 234).

Genre, as the realization of the context of culture, refers to the overall purpose of a social interaction. Martin (1984: 25) describes genre as "a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture". Genres have specific schematic and linguistic realizations, which are mediated through different text types or registers. Genre theory is concerned with recognizing and understanding various types of texts and what they accomplish in different human activities based on the production and use of texts. Therefore, "texts belonging to the same genre can vary in their structure," while "the one aspect in which they cannot vary without consequence to their genre-allocation is the obligatory elements and dispositions of the GSP [genre specific potential]" (Halliday and Hasan 1985:108).

The context of situation or register refers to the immediate interactive situation and is consequently less abstract than the notion of genre. Following the functional-semantic tradition pursued by Firth, Halliday (1978:64) considers register "a useful abstraction linking variations of language to variations of social context" and suggests "that there are three aspects in any situation that have linguistic consequences: field, mode, and tenor" (Eggins 1994:52). Halliday notes that while people are communicating they make predictions by using the values of field, tenor and mode to understand register and that their assessment facilitates their own participation. Thus the three register variables delineate the relationships between language function and language form since a register is constituted by "the linguistic features which are typically associated with a configuration of situational features—with particular values of the field, mode and tenor" (Halliday 1976:22).

According to him, field refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place, what the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component (Halliday 1989c: 30-31). Similarly, Gregory and Carroll (1978: 7) state that the field of discourse is the consequence of the user's purposive role, what his language is about, what experience he is verbalizing, what is going on through language. Sometimes field can be glossed as the topic of the situation but Martin's (1984: 23, 1992: 536) broader definition in terms of institutional focus, or social activity type is more useful to capture the field in situations where language is accompanying action. The tenor of discourse is defined in terms of the players, the actors or rather the interacting roles that are involved in the creation of the text. It refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their status and role: what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved. This relationship that the speaker establishes with the audience in relation to the tenor of discourse has been emphasized by Gregory and Carroll

(1978: 8) as well. Finally, mode refers simply to the role language is playing in the interaction. What it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel (if it is spoken, written or some combination of the two) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like.

4.2. Metafunctions of Language and Register Variables

The model outlined above is functional and Halliday suggests that the terms field, tenor and mode of discourse can be associated with three functional components or metafunctions: the *ideational*, the *interpersonal* and the *textual*, which are "the modes of meaning that are present in every use of language in every social context" (Halliday 1978: 112; Bloor and Bloor 2004: 10-11). In identifying these three strands of meaning Halliday is suggesting that of all the uses we make of language, language is intended to fulfil three main functions: a function for organising, understanding and expressing our perceptions of the world and of our own consciousness (ideational); a function for creating interpersonal relationships (interpersonal); and a function for organizing information (textual) (Eggins 1994, 2004).

Each of the three metafunctions deals with a different aspect of the world, and is concerned with a different mode of meaning of clauses. The ideational metafunction is about the natural world in the broadest sense, and is concerned with clauses as *representations*. The ideational function can be classified into two subfunctions: the experiential and the logical. The experiential function is largely concerned with content or ideas. The logical function is concerned with the relationship between ideas. The interpersonal metafunction has to do with the relationships between communicators and addressees, i.e. with those linguistic resources that actualise social roles more generally speaking, and especially those roles developed through conversational interactions and other kinds of linguistic exchanges. And the textual metafunction has to do with the production of actual texts, i.e. with those linguistic resources that facilitate the presentation of ideational and interpersonal meanings as information that may be shared by a speaker and a listener in a text which unfolds in a context. The textual metafunction serves to make possible a presentation of ideational and interpersonal meanings in the form of information which may be exchanged, and it also offers the speaker strategies for how to direct the listener (or reader) in his or her interpretation of the text.

Halliday points out that the field of the text can be associated with the realization of ideational meaning; these ideational meanings are expressed as patterns of transitivity through configurations of process (verbal group), participants (nominal group) and circumstance (adverbial group or prepositional phrase). The tenor of a text can be associated with the realization of interpersonal meanings; these interpersonal meanings are realized through the mood patterns of the grammar. And the mode of a text can be associated with the realization of textual meanings; the textual meanings are realized through the theme patterns of the grammar. Each metafunction analysis of a clause gives a different kind of structure composed from a different set of elements. In the ideational metafunction, a clause is analysed into *Process, Participants* and *Circumstances*, with different participant types for different process types. In the interpersonal metafunction, a clause is analysed into *Mood* and *Residue*, with the mood element further analysed into *Subject* and *Finite*. In the textual metafunction, a clause is analysed through the theme patterns of the grammar, *theme* and *rheme*.

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The relationship between the context of situation and the text is represented in Table 1 below.

Feature of the context	Functional component of semantic system	Discourse-semantic patterns	Lexico-grammatical patterns
Field	Ideational	Lexical cohesion Conjunctive relations	Transitivity (case) Logical-semantic relations (taxis)
Tenor	Interpersonal	Speech function Exchange structure	Mood, modality, vocation, attitude
Mode	Textual	Reference participant tracking	Theme, Information structure Nominalisation

Table 1: Relationship between context, strata, and systems in the systemic functional model

5. Register Analysis: Discussion of Findings

On September 11, 2001, four planes were hijacked in the United States and turned into missiles destined for major American landmarks. Two hit the World Trade Center towers, defining symbols of the New York City skyline, and brought them crashing down. A second one hit the Pentagon, causing a portion of the historic landmark to collapse. Another one was probably destined for either the White House or the Capitol Building but evidence points to the passengers finding out about the terrorists' plans and attempting a take-over of the plane. They failed to assume control of their aircraft, but they succeeded in preventing the plane from reaching its destination and thus saved an unknown number of lives. These attacks on America made headlines all over the world. Since they were the first attacks on US soil in 60 years newspaper reports throughout the world told of their effect on every facet of American society.

In the ensuing discussion I shall focus upon the data provided by comment articles on these terrorist attacks. The section deals with the results of the analysis and is divided into field, tenor and mode of discourse. Field describes the subject matter, genre and purpose of the texts in their cultural context. Tenor describes the writer, the stance he/she takes, and the intended reader to which the texts are targeted. Finally, mode makes reference to the medium through which the texts are communicated. In the present study, the medium encompasses not only print but broadcast and internet media as well. As I previously mentioned, I will illustrate my explanation making reference to two examples of comment pieces from the data collected; a comment article published in *The Guardian* under the headline *Beyond believe*, and an editorial published in *The Sun*, *Tragic proof*, both of them transcribed in the appendix of this article.

5.1. Field of discourse of comments

It has been stated above that field can be described as the situational variable that has to do with the focus of the activity in which we are engaged (Halliday 1989a: 12; Martin 1992: 536). Although field can be regarded as the topic of the situation, authors such as Martin

(1984: 23; 1992: 536) broadens the definition in terms of institutional focus or social activity type which is more useful to capture in situations where language is accompanying action.

All the articles that comprise the corpus of the study are examples of opinion pieces, a reflection of management's attitude or the reporter's or the editor's personal view who comment on a common issue, here the attacks on America on September 11, 2001. The intention in all the examples is to arouse public indignation condemning the attacks. However, the situations which have given rise to the opinion discourse in the quality and popular publications are notably different. In this line, the situations in the two sets of newspapers (the quality *The Guardian* and the popular *The Sun*) vary from technical to everyday in the construction of the activity focus as Figure 1 shows:

technical ◄---►commonsense
The Guardian   *The Sun*

Figure 1: The field continuum in the study

Following Halliday and Matthiessen's approach (2004), field varies along a dimension of technicality. As the comment pieces analyzed state, *The Guardian*'s coverage is much more detailed and extensive, with a considerable amount of serious, and enlightening commentary in support of the story. This newspaper credits its readers with considerable powers of assimilation and sets out to comment fully not only about what has occurred but also about a great deal of background and parallel material relevant to the event. This, of course, clearly proves that the quality newspapers are concerned with a much wider range of material and they assume a greater stock of knowledge and intelligence on the part of the readership. By contrast, the information in the comment pieces from the popular *The Sun* compared to those of *The Guardian* is more segmented and the style is much more anecdotal, nevertheless its reporting, attitude and supporting material are not unworthy by any standards. The intention of the popular *The Sun* is clearly to entertain an audience which is assumed to be not interested in any but the most sensational world affairs. As it will be seen, even intrinsically serious and potentially tragic themes are treated in this way.

There are a number of linguistic implications to the variation of field. Technicality in *The Guardian* opinion discourse is characterized by a heavy use of technical terms. However, technicality is not only encoded in the lexis. There are also verbs that tend to be of technical processes or of attributive (descriptive) processes. These grammatical choices reflect the focus of a technical situation which is to relate, comment on and evaluate an already shared knowledge base. Note as an illustration the following examples from my data: nouns as *resemblance*, *heroism*, *symbolism*, *wonderment*, *professionalism*, *conflagration*; and verbs as *collapse*, *pronounce*, *instruct*, *reflect*, *contemplate*, *accompany*.

Language in an everyday field is more familiar and the lexis tends to consist of everyday words, as it is shown in *The Sun* editorial *Tragic proof*: *home*, *hearts*, *bigotry*, *quarrel*, *shock*. In consonance with this, if a term is used technically in a popular newspaper like *The Sun* it is usually signalled as such by being printed in bold or having quotation marks around it. In the same line, verbs tend to be of the identifying (defining) kind, as the following verbs illustrate: *work*, *love*, *forget*, *cut off*, *kill*. The grammatical structures are standard and acronyms are only used if they are first introduced and explained.

I have mentioned before that field is realized through some parts of the grammatical system; in fact, through the patterns of processes (verbs), participants (nouns) and circumstances (prepositional phrases of time, manner, place, etc.). These types of grammatical patterns can be collectively described as the transitivity pattern in language. I

have considered relevant to establish the functional role of the process types in the comment pieces under study. Authors as Martin and Rothery (1981), Halliday (1985/1994) and Caldas-Coulthard and Holland (2001) define process types as verbs and verbal groups which describe actions or states of being. They identify four main process types: *relational processes* state existence or states of being or possessing; *material processes* describe physical action; *mental processes* describe mental activity; and *verbal processes* describe verbal activity.

Generally speaking, comment articles and editorials are supposed to contain a high degree of relational (being and having) and mental (sensing) processes since they are concerned with personal attitudes and interpretations of events. However, it is interesting to note that, despite the fact that the corpus deals with opinion pieces that normally lead one to expect to hear one's thoughts and ideas, over 50% of the processes are relational and approximately less than 10% are mental in the data collected from *The Guardian*. This can be explained by the fact that relational processes are used to represent a reality which is needed to be true in order for the writer's argument to be true. In the articles from *The Sun* there is a high instance of relational processes as well. A difference in relation to *The Guardian* is the higher use of mental processes which encode meanings about thoughts, feelings and perceptions. This is judged within the context of the tabloid newspapers considering news consumers' preferences, where a key ingredient is the encoding of feelings. Thus, it is not surprising that in the tabloid opinion discourse one finds verbs as *feel*, *forget*, *hate*, *know*, *love*, *understand*, etc. Apart from this, data also show the extensive use of material processes in both publications, occupying the second place after relational processes (verbs as *act*, *carry out*, *die*, *do*, *go*, *murder*, *persecute*, *rule*, etc.). Finally, it should be mentioned a small percentage in the data collected of verbal processes that account for the quotes or report speech in the pieces. This is because verbal processes as processes of verbal action are more typical of hard news stories. Take as an illustration the (only) two examples of verbal processes that appear in the texts under discussion: "Eyewitnesses told us of office workers jumping from awesome heights…" from *The Times* comment article; and "When he [referring to PM Tony Blair] says…" from *The Sun* editorial.

The last point I would like to mention as relevant to the examination of field in the opinion articles published in *The Guardian* and *The Sun* is the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality focuses on how different discourses are referred to within a text, as internal rather than external influences. This enables the reader to see the commonalities among texts, and to follow these interpolations and shared forms across usages. As Bolter (2001: 179) states: "Intertextuality is more than the references within a text and allusions between texts that are common in literature; it is the interrelation of all texts on the same topic, language, or culture". Thus, intertextuality is not only the result of conscious or unconscious connection-making on the part of the writer, but also of the reader.

Intertextuality operates differently in the British quality and popular press. This difference is highly influenced by the socio-cultural background and experience of the reader in each publication. In view of this, intertextuality works essentially in the quality opinion writing where different discourses are referred to within the opinion discourse, which the writer presupposes that belong to the reader's own cultural context. The comment article *Beyond believe* published in *The Guardian* provides evidence of this: reference to known authors (Tolstoy, Wells and Don Delillo), to films (Skyscraper, Backdraft and Independence Day) and to the Greek tragedies. By contrast, the only reference that is present in *The Sun* editorial *Tragic proof* is the indirect reference to the Bible: The Great Satan, for the extremist

Muslims, America. Ultimately, this is a clear proof of cultural differences between the papers and their audiences. In this way, the technical expression of the lexis as well as the sources of intertextual references are significant for the characterization of the field of discourse.

5.2. Tenor of discourse of comments

"Tenor refers to the interrelations among participants in terms of status and role relationships" (Halliday 1978:62). The tenor of a text is associated with the realization of interpersonal meanings, which in turn are influenced by the nature of the relationship —close or distant, and the formality of the communicative situation. Tenor expresses the participation or "intrusion" of the speaker/writer in the communicative situation through the expression of attitudes and judgements, and by seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of others (Halliday 1978).

Interpersonal meanings then are concerned with communication as interaction and how this is achieved. When we use language to interact we establish a relationship with the other participant through dialogue or an exchange of meanings, and in doing so, we assume different speech roles. As it is the case in communication via static texts, there is no face to face communication between the writer and the reader since there is no possibility of personal contact. In this sense, the relationship between the author and the reader is somewhat neutral. Nevertheless, when being aware of the tenor of discourse, there is a chance to form a context in which the writer adopts a role that is desired by the readership.

Claiming a link between language and context, Poyton (1985) considers tenor along the line of the three continuum of power, affective involvement and contact. These aspects of the role occupation in a given situation have an impact on how we use language. Power concerns "whether the roles we are playing are those in which we are of equal or unequal power"; contact deals with "whether the roles we are playing are those that bring us into frequent or infrequent contact"; and affective involvement concentrates on "whether the roles we are playing are those in which the affective involvement between us is high or low" i.e. the extent to which "we are emotionally involved or committed in a situation" (Eggins 1994: 64).

According to the tenor dimensions, the relationships between participants can be formal or informal. In an informal situation, for example, power is equal, contact is frequent and affective involvement is high; while in a formal situation, there is "unequal hierarchic power, infrequent, or on-off, contact and low affective involvement" (Eggins 1994:65). It, therefore, follows that informal language is characterized by attitudinal lexis, colloquial lexis, abbreviated forms, slang, swearing, interruptions, first name/nickname/diminutive typical mood choices, modalization to express probability and modalization to express opinion; while formal language is characterized by neutral lexis, formal lexis, full forms (of words), lack of slang, politeness phenomena, careful turn-taking, titles/no names, incongruent mood choices, modalization to express deference and modalization to express suggestion (Eggins 1994:67). The relationships among interactants may call for more specificity or require descriptions other than the broad formal or informal style. For example, between these relationships may be located styles such as frozen, semi-formal, consultative, etc. Sometimes however, overlaps occur where formal language is used in an informal situation and vice-versa.

These correlations between the dimensions of power, contact and affective involvement and language patterns are shown in the genre under study. Comparing the opinion articles from *The Guardian* and *The Sun*, it is shown that in the texts from *The Guardian* the

relationship between the writer and the reader shows unequal power, infrequent contact (derived from the formal relationship) and low affective involvement, aspects typical of a formal situation. Given this relationship, it is clear that the sentiment and intimacy involved in the quality discourse differs from that of the tabloid publications. This striking difference between the quality and the sensational press reflects the gap between British social classes. The discourse in *The Sun* opinion articles is characterized by equal power as the writer relates his experience with the reader, sharing the experience with him and forming some impressions. In this context, affective involvement is high, that is, the writer has a sentiment he wants to transmit to the reader. He does this through his lexical and syntactic selections. After analysing the sample texts, it is observed that there are differences which may be interpreted as being caused by dissimilarities in the specific context of situation for both publications in relation to culture-bound features. Firstly, the differences include different vocabulary choices, as can be seen in the sample texts: *cumuli*, *obscenity*, *networks*, *ruins*, *denial*, *intent*, *denia*l, in *The Guardian* opinion article; and *grief*, *attack*, *shock*, *evil*, *enemy*, *heart*, in the editorial from *The Sun*. In *The Guardian* attitudes tend to be expressed in an objective language, but in *The Sun* it is frequent to express evaluation through attitudinal lexis (*twisted*, *grieving*, *racist*, *bigotry*, *quarrel*, *cut off*, *frightened*, *stunned*, *emotional*). *The Guardian* uses complete lexical items and avoids slang. However, in *The Sun* it is common slang, abbreviated forms and interruptions. An illustration of this last aspect is the fragmented discourse in the comment articles from *The Sun*; this is shown by nearly inexistent long paragraphs and, by contrast, by the use of short paragraphs consisting of just a few lines. This activity focus is schematized in Figure 2 below.
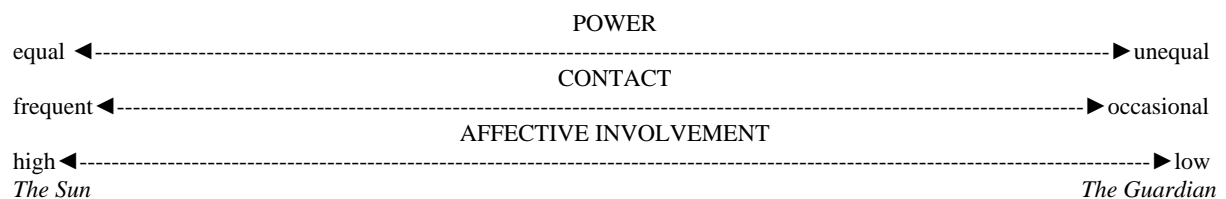
POWER
equal ◄--►unequal
CONTACT
frequent◄--►occasional
AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT
high ◄--►low
The Sun   *The Guardian*

Figure 2: The power, contact and affective involvement continua in the study

Names and terms of address offer optional resources for the realization of interpersonal meanings. Leech (1999) lists seven formulations of terms of address in English in an approximate ranking from most familiar/intimate to the most distant/respectful, from terms of endearment and family terms, through familiarized first names, first names in full, title and surname, to honorifics. Poyton (1984, 1985) develops similar categories into a network mapping composition, form and type choices, with regard to naming practices in Australian English. Using personal names will highlight a particular individual's identity, while the use of titles in terms of address will highlight the status and roles they occupy. In this sense, a choice not only carries its own connotations, but can also serve 'an important contrastive social-marking function' (Leech 1999:112), in contrast that is, to the choices not made. Any choice will encode and negotiate the three interpersonal dimensions of power, contact and affective involvement, to the point that there 'is virtually no affectively neutral vocative' (Zwicky 1974:796).

What is interesting to note about the use of vocatives in the sample study is in relation to the presence of two different types of situations in *The Guardian* and *The Sun* publications, that is, the formal vs. the informal situation. In this line, the correlations between the

dimensions of power, contact and affect, and the choice of vocatives in the comment articles from *The Guardian* show the infrequent use of vocatives; in fact, when they are present, news actors are referred to by formal given names. In *The Sun* publications, however, news actors are called by their first name, it is high the use of diminutive forms of names and terms of endearment and, occasionally, even nicknames. In relation to this, the focus in *The Sun* articles is on the individual, whereas in *The Guardian* it is emphasized the status and role of the news actors. In short, this approach draws a contrast between the two types of newspapers, the formal *The Guardian* and the informal *The Sun*.

Finally, I would like to mention briefly one further area in which tenor differences impact on language use, the grammatical systems of mood and modality. Mood and modality express the speaker's attitude or opinion regarding the contents of the sentence or what the sentence proposition entails (Palmer 2001). Comparing the data from *The Guardian* and *The Sun* it is observed a major difference between the two publications, concerning the choice of clause structure. In the informal version, exemplified by *The Sun*, many actions are carried out using imperative clauses, the typical choice of clause type to signal the recognition of the equal power or frequent contact between the writer and the reader, and to provide a realization of the dimensions of affective involvement as well. By contrast, in the formal situation exemplified by *The Guardian*, it is frequent the use of modal verbs like *would*, *could*, *mind*, which function indirectly modulates or attenuates the expression of opinion.

5.3. Mode of discourse of comments

The mode of discourse is the actual medium (i.e., written, spoken, interchange between monologue and dialogue, etc.) through which messages are communicated, and it is reflected in grammar. Martin (1984) recommends that mode should be considered in terms of two concurrent continua which go in the way of language and situation distance: *spatial* or *interpersonal* distance and *experiential distance*.

In the words of Eggins (1994:53), the spatial or interpersonal distance "ranges situations according to the possibilities of immediate feedback between the interactants". The relative distance of the feedback is illustrated in casual conversation, telephone, e-mail, fax, radio and novel. The experiential distance, on the other hand, "ranges situations according to the distance between language and the social process occurring". This is exemplified by situations such as playing a game, running commentary, recounting experience and constructing experience. As mode delves into the issues of spoken and written media of communication, it should be noted that the spoken language situation is interactive, face-to-face, language as action, spontaneous and casual, but the written language does not exhibit these features. Considering these characteristics of the spoken and written situations I will end this section with a discussion on them, pointing out aspects about how language is used in British quality and popular comment articles.

In relation to the spatial or interpersonal distance between the interactants, the channel of the sample texts is the written medium. In this situation, there is no visual or aural contact between the writer and the reader, and the author may not know what the reader feels about his discourse and the ideology and sentiment he has peddled. Thus, there is no possibility of immediate feedback and even the possibilities of delayed feedback are somehow limited (as letters to the editor or procedures for dealing with readers' complaints).

Describing the continuum of experiential distance, which ranges situations according to the distance between language and the social process occurring, writing a comment article in

a newspaper is placed between two polar extremes, between a situation where language is just one of the means being used to achieve on-going action, and a situation where language is being used to reflect on experience, rather than to enact it (Martin 1984: 27). This distance is represented in Figure 3.

language as ACTION ◄---►language as REFLECTION

Figure 3: The experiential distance continuum in the study

By taking the end points of each continuum, it can be characterized the basic contrast between spoken and written situations of language use. In this respect, although all the texts in the present study exhibit the same genre, the opinion discourse in *The Guardian* and *The Sun* corresponds to different positions in the mode continua.

The Guardian is closer to the written medium. It is marked by the absence of abbreviations, colloquialism and slang, showing a formal relationship between the writer and the reader. The channel is characterized by major sentences. These strategies employed get the writer's view and experience across to the reader. The medium in *The Sun*, by contrast, is characterized by ellipsis, contractions, colloquialism, and a mixture of major and minor sentences. Its syntax is broken up into short speech-like information units by frequent commas and other punctuation marks. These markers allow information to be shared appropriately between the writer and the reader. In fact, a channel which shares similarities to the oral medium creates an informal written language and establishes consequently a friendly and casual relationship with *The Sun* readers.

It is obvious from the above that field, tenor and mode are interdependent and overlap. The description of these three variables as presented above suggests that the setting, the activities taking place and the participants are the most prominent features of the three factors that determine register, and that they play a crucial role in choosing the appropriate language for a specific context. These dimensions primarily and ultimately provide us with clear meanings of the texts and the different attitudes that are expressed through the use of language. Finally, the fact that field determines ideational meanings, tenor interpersonal ones and mode textual ones suggests that the three metafunctions of language are also interdependent and overlap.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this work it has been shown that comment articles are analysable into the dimensions of field, tenor and mode of discourse. The results of the study indicate that opinion discourse in the British quality and popular national press exhibits different fields, divergent relationships (tenor) and varying modes, each of which is further marked by other related or dissimilar features such as vocabulary, syntax, power, affective involvement, contact, distance and channel. These dimensions primarily and ultimately have provided us with clear meanings of the texts and the different attitudes that are expressed through the use of language. To a large extent, the features identified in the sample of this study can be generalized for most comment articles in the British national press.

Bearing this in mind, my main concern here has been pointing to the importance of studying opinion discourse looking into the social context within which it is embedded. It is in this vein that register is considered as an ideologically, situation-specific meaning potential since, in fact, the codification of meaning appropriate to a situation is ultimately a function of

the ideological formation. To this respect, most of the language choices in the corpus are explained in connection with situational factors of the specific context of situation for each text. Furthermore, as we have seen, when the same selection of meanings occurs in comment pieces from different types of newspapers, their ways of expression present variations. These variations are caused by differences in the range of options of their respective meaning potentials.

I would like to end stating Halliday's thought as a good summary of the issues discussed here which are related to all the efforts made by many linguists who seek to analyse and explain how people use language to make meanings, and how language itself is organised to enable those meanings to be made: "I am going to talk about context first, for the reason that, in real life, contexts precede texts. The situation is prior to the discourse that relates to it." (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 5).

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Appendix 1

Beyond belief

Yesterday's apocalyptic scenes far outstripped anything Hollywood has ever imagined. Amid the confusion, only one thing seemed certain, says Ian McEwan - the world would never be the same again

Special report: Terrorism in the US

Ian McEwan
Wednesday September 12, 2001

The Guardian

These were the kind of events that Hollywood has been imagining these past decades in the worst of its movies. But American reality always outstrips the imagination. And even the best minds, the best or darkest dreamers of disaster on a gigantic scale, from Tolstoy and Wells to Don DeLillo, could not have delivered us into the nightmare available on television news channels yesterday afternoon. For most of us, at a certain point, the day froze, the work and all other obligations were left behind, the screen became the only reality. We entered a dreamlike state. We had seen this before, with giant budgets and special effects, but so badly rehearsed. The colossal explosions, the fierce black and red clouds, the crowds running through the streets, the contradictory, confusing information, had only the feeblest resemblance to the tinny dramas of Skyscraper, Backdraft or Independence Day. Nothing could have prepared us.

Always, it seemed, it was what we could not see that was so frightening. We saw the skyscrapers, the tilting plane, the awful impact, the cumuli of dust engulfing the streets. But we were left to imagine for ourselves the human terror inside the airliner, down the corridors and elevator lobbies of the stricken buildings, or in the streets below as the towers collapsed on to rescue workers and morning crowds. Eyewitnesses told us of office workers jumping from awesome heights, but we did not see them. The screaming, the heroism and reasonable panic, the fumbling in semi-darkness for mobile phones - it was our safe distance from it all that was so horrifying. No blood, no screams. The Greeks, in their tragedies, wisely kept these worst of moments off stage, out of the scene. Hence the word: obscene. This was an obscenity. We were watching death on an unbelievable scale, but we saw no one die. The nightmare was in this gulf of imagining. The horror was in the distance.

Only television could bring this. Our set in the corner is mostly unwatched. Now my son and I surfed - hungrily, ghoulishly - between CNN, CBC and BBC24. As soon as an expert was called in to pronounce on the politics or the symbolism, we moved on. We only wanted to know what was happening. Numbed, and in a state of sickened wonderment, we wanted only information, new developments - not opinion, analysis, or noble sentiments; not yet. We had to know: was it two planes or three that hit the Twin Towers? Was the White House now under attack? Where was the plane the airforce was supposed to be tracking? An information

junkie inside me was silently instructing the cameras: go round that tower and show me that aeroplane again; get down in the street; take me on to the roof. Never had those words, flashed by all the channels - Breaking News - meant so much. And so much, so many people, were breaking. Only briefly, in this orgy of "fresh" developments, was there time to reflect on the misery to come for all those who would learn the news of a loved one lost, a parent or a child. There was barely time to contemplate the cruelty of the human hearts that could unleash this. Were they watching with us now, equally hungry to know the worst? The thought covered me in shame.

About that time, the news networks began to steady themselves. They had, understandably, fumbled as the wires choked with news. Anchormen, at first, had not seemed to believe the events they were presenting. The pictures obliterated the commentary. Now the operation was becoming smoother. Professionalism was surpassing sentiment. Was this a kind of acceptance? Or avoidance? Dozens of affiliated television stations began to feed in. Cameras, at last, were everywhere, just as I was sickening of this surfeit and horrified at myself for wanting it. Now it was punishment to watch, and see replayed from new angles, the imploding towers, 102 storeys enfolding into their own dust. Or see the conflagration at the "exit hole" of the second tower. Or see two women cowering in terror behind a car.

From the vantage point of the Brooklyn Heights, we saw Lower Manhattan disappear into dust. New York, and therefore all cities, looked fragile and vulnerable. The technology that was bringing us these scenes has wired us closely together into a febrile, mutual dependency. Our way of life, centralised and machine-dependent, has made us frail. Our civilisation, it suddenly seemed, our way of life, is easy to wreck when there are sufficient resources and cruel intent. No missile defence system can protect us.

Yesterday afternoon, for a dreamlike, immeasurable period, the appearance was of total war, and of the world's mightiest empire in ruins. That sense of denial which accompanies all catastrophes kept nagging away: this surely isn't happening. I'll blink and it will be gone. Like millions, perhaps billions around the world, we knew we were living through a time that we would never be able to forget. We also knew, though it was too soon to wonder how or why, that the world would never be the same. We knew only that it would be worse.

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Appendix 2

The Sun

Tragic proof

Published: 21 Sep 2001

ADD YOUR COMMENTS

THE beautiful girl on Page One is tragic proof that the terrorists are not fighting for Islam.

THE beautiful girl on Page One is tragic proof that the terrorists are not fighting for Islam.

Tragically, his daughter is gone now.

Sarah Ali was a British Muslim, who was married to an American. Like everyone on the four hijacked planes and all those at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, she was an innocent victim of evil men with no regard for human life.

In the twisted world of these extremists, The Great Satan, America, is the "enemy'' of Islam ? but they took away the life of one of their own faith.

And probably many more, too. Sarah's grieving father, Syed Ali, demonstrates to us all that Britain has nothing to fear from the millions of decent Muslims who live and work here.

For Mr Ali is a loyal servant of the Crown. He worked at the Department of Trade and Industry.

He loves this country almost as much as he loved his precious daughter.

Our enemies are the men who murdered more than 5,000 people like Sarah Ali.

Tragically, his daughter is gone now.

The Britain he chose to be his home, and which he has served so well, now has a duty to help him in his time of great grief.

It goes without saying that our hearts go out to him. But that is not enough. We must not allow the racist bigotry of those who have turned on British Muslims to pervade our minds.

We must stand firm in our genuine belief that we have no quarrel with the Islamic faith.

But we will never forget them. Or any of the others who died.

Our enemies are the men who murdered more than 5,000 people like Sarah Ali.

True friend

NEW Yorkers will never forget Tony Blair. It is impossible to explain what his visit means to them.

Astonishingly for a nation so vast, America feels alone.

Cut off. Frightened.

Britain is the one old friend America can rely on. And when we are needed, we are there for them.

Blair embodies everything that Britain feels for America.

His stunned, emotional face reflected the state of shock we are all still coming to terms with.

When he says "America is our closest ally and friend" and pledges that the links between our two peoples have been further strengthened over the past week, he is speaking for us all.

But yesterday in New York the PM was also opening his heart to the families of the hundreds of Britons killed in the attack.

Many of them are so far unnamed and most of their bodies may never be found.

But we will never forget them. Or any of the others who died.