

Preface

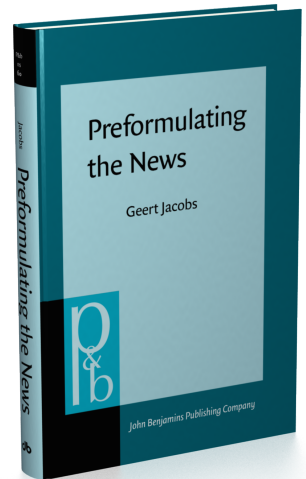
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**Preformulating the News: An analysis of the
metapragmatics of press releases**

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Preface

Valdez and After

It was in the summer of 1992 that I first got interested in press releases. At that time, while I was working on a preliminary research project on the pragmatics of crisis, I happened to lay hands on a collection of some sixty press releases that had been issued by the American multinational Exxon in the wake of the widely publicized oil spill at Valdez, Alaska. This is the dramatic opening of the first press release in that corpus:

(Exxon, Houston, Texas: 27 March 1989)

LIGHTERING, OIL SPILL CLEANUP EFFORTS CONTINUE IN ALASKA

The Exxon Valdez, a 987-foot tanker carrying 1.3 million barrels of crude oil, ran aground on Bligh Reef about 25 miles south of the Trans Alaska Pipeline Terminal at Valdez about 12:30 a.m. Alaska time on Friday, March 24, while maneuvering to avoid ice. There were no personnel injuries. However, the vessel ruptured a number of cargo tanks, and an oil spill estimated at 240,000 barrels occurred in Prince William Sound.

I felt that I was very lucky with the data: while previous researchers had been forced to analyse the rhetoric of emergency response through various types of news reporting (cf. Rubin 1987 on the incident at the nuclear power station on Three Mile Island; Tyler 1992 on the Exxon Valdez oil spill; Triandafyllidou 1995 on the Chernobyl fall-out), here was a unique record of first-hand documents that had been specifically intended to anticipate such news reporting.¹ With the Valdez press releases I had gained direct access to the very sources of the *mediating* texts that others were

using as their primary materials in examining what has come to be seen as a classic case study of 'miscommunication'.²

Soon I got carried away by the discursive intricacies of Exxon's 'news management' efforts and I decided to focus on the language of press releases as a subject worthy of research in its own right. I started working on a broader, more diverse corpus if only to fight down the dangerous urge to make 'the analysis live up to what is being analysed', the persistent assumption that 'something dramatic should get a monumental analysis, one proportional to the drama being addressed'.³ It soon became clear to me that the Valdez press releases could by no means be considered a representative sample. To do so would lead to inordinate conclusions. Moore's analysis of the accident with the space shuttle Challenger is a case in point, resolving a complex engineering problem into a simple issue of inappropriate linguistic politeness (1992).⁴ Similarly, Deborah Tannen (1995) provides a breathtaking, yet hardly plausible account of how misunderstanding between the pilot and co-pilot caused the 1982 Air Florida crash in the river Potomac in Washington.⁵ With the oil business's 1,800-page contingency plan in South Alaska having been described as 'the biggest piece of American maritime fiction since *Moby Dick*' (Tyler 1992: 152), I realized that there was a distinct danger that, in focusing on the Valdez press releases only, I would be trying to match the sheer drama of what had happened. That is why I set out to exponentially increase my data, trying to get a better view of 'ordinary' press releases, which, in sharp contrast with those in the Valdez corpus, have been called 'dull', 'unimaginative' and 'simply brief recitations of some facts about an event' (Hess 1984: 77; 1989: 46).⁶

What, Why and How?

The present research report covers more than 500 press releases.⁷ In particular, I shall explore the peculiar audience-directedness of press releases as a type of indirectly targeted, projected discourse and, drawing from corpus-based research, I shall argue that it can be traced in the various metapragmatic patterns that are characteristic of the data. In concentrating on the discourse of 'news management', I also set out to help document the

asymmetrical relationships between some of the institutions involved in the news.

Crucially, as I hope to demonstrate, what makes press releases unique - and what constitutes the prime object of my investigation - is that their only *raison d'être* is to be retold: in particular, I shall provide evidence from the data that they are meant to be 'continued' as accurately as possible, preferably even verbatim, in news reporting.⁸ Indeed, it could be argued that press releases just do not exist unless they are also, in some way or another, 'picked up' by journalists. Significantly, while most of the business organizations that I contacted were able to supply me with meticulously ordered files of press releases that had been issued by them even several years back, the journalists that agreed to collect press releases for this research project afterwards reported that they had had to constantly remind themselves of their promise to do so and, even then, dozens of the press releases I received from them showed obvious signs of crumpling: clearly, for press releases there is no middle course between a sad end in the waste-paper bin or the glory of coverage in the press.

The question could now be raised: if, for press releases, to be copied in the news is a question of life and death, what is the journalist's verdict determined by? From formulas for calculating newsworthiness over the impact of political or business interests down to sheer good luck, a wide range of factors have been shown to play a role in the media's 'gate-keeping'. In this book, I shall look at the frequently voiced claim that stories that are 'written and available' may well be retold ahead of stories that have to be researched from the ground up. In the words of Allan Bell, who is a linguist as well as a journalist, "the extent to which input materials can be reproduced rapidly and with little editing is a major factor in their being selected for publication" (1991: 59). I have to point out here that my interest lies not primarily in whether such 'prefabricated' stories are indeed selected. Instead, focusing on various metapragmatic patterns, I aim to find out what it really means to say that press releases are prefabricated.

All this has serious repercussions for the set-up of my research. From the very beginning, I decided to look at press releases only and not, for example, to compare them with the news reports they give rise to. For one

thing, I believe that the complexity of the many factors determining journalistic gatekeeping would render such a contrastive effort largely fruitless anyway.⁹ In a way, the question of the effectiveness of press releases simply falls outside the scope of my study: whether a press release gets copied verbatim or not, does not change anything to the observation that it is prefabricated in the first place. Even more importantly, to concentrate on how journalists retell press releases would actually obscure how press releases are meant to be copied by them: starting from what journalists do with press releases, it might well be impossible to identify the prefabricated nature of a particular pattern if, for one or other reason, it proved ineffective.

This is, of course, not to say that the issue of uptake should be left out altogether. On the contrary, it plays a central role in my study since, I shall argue, it determines what press releases look like. Indeed, more broadly, the main target of this research is to contribute to the emerging view of a 'history of discourse' at the heart of the media business. By focusing on how the language of news reporting is anticipated - 'preformulated', I shall call it - in that of press releases, I aim at complementing previous work in the field, demonstrating that what we read in the papers and see on TV does not stand on its own, but is the product of an intertextual dynamics. In other words, I shall look at how the news is actually a diachronic phenomenon, one that consists of a chain of textualizations, right from 'news management' over 'newsmaking' to 'news consumption'.

Before I return to the set-up of my research, I would like to argue that the concept of 'genre' proves very useful for my purposes. From the discredited typological efforts of literary theory and critical practice, it may be assumed that genre cannot be illuminating with respect to the more down-to-earth linguistic processes we will be looking at. Certainly, no rigorously taxonomic generic classification is aimed at here, but rather a fine-grained empirical, core pragmatic analysis of selected features of language use within a well-targeted investigation of what might variously be called 'institutional', 'professional' or 'organizational' discourse.¹⁰ What makes the concept of genre - and especially linguistic anthropologists' use of it - so interesting for my purposes, however, is that it draws attention to "the matrix of longer discourse" within which texts are distributed (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 138). In particular, I shall argue that, for my analysis of

press releases, genre does not only foreground the status of the utterance as a 'recontextualization' of previous discourse, but also, and most prominently, as a 'precontextualization' of subsequent discourse.¹¹

Furthermore, just as the fit between a particular, isolated text and its generic model can never be perfect, the projection of news reports by press releases that I hinted at above is bound to leave a 'gap' too. It is on how this intertextual gap is manipulated that my research will concentrate, in particular on the so-called strategies of 'entextualization' through which the distance between press releases and news reports is minimized. In an earlier paper, Bauman and Briggs (1990) introduced the term 'entextualization' for this "process of rendering discourse extractable", of "[lifting a stretch of linguistic production] out of its interactional setting" (73; cf. also Silverstein and Urban 1996) and I would argue that it could serve as a particularly suitable characterization of the way press releases can be almost imperceptibly transformed into news reports. Throughout this study I shall use the term 'preformulation' to refer to the discursive resources of entextualization, i.e. those specific language features that make press releases look like news reports and, in doing so, interactively accomplish the "prepared-for detachability" that, I have suggested, is crucial to the genre (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 74).

As for the set-up of my research, it is interesting to note that Briggs and Bauman (1992) distinguish between synchronic and diachronic perspectives on genre. Apart from the obvious relevance of a diachronic perspective on genre, they also strongly believe in a synchronic perspective. In a formula that seems to summarize my own approach, Briggs and Bauman argue convincingly that, "[v]iewed synchronically, [genre provides] powerful means of shaping discourse into ordered, unified, and bounded texts"; it is this "generation of textuality" (147) in press releases, this entextualization that I set out to investigate in this book.

Finally, in doing so, I shall focus on the metapragmatics of press releases. This means that my analysis is to be situated at that "metalevel at which verbal communication is self-referential to various degrees" (Verschueren 1995d: 367) and fits in with the research tradition represented in John Lucy's (1993) collection of papers on *Reflexive Language*. My interest in metapragmatics should not be surprising since, as Bauman and Briggs (1990) point out, "[b]asic to the process of entextualization is the

reflexive capacity of discourse" (73). Significantly, apart from such marked metapragmatic features as third-person self-reference (chapter 3) and explicit semi-performatives (chapter 6), it is quotation, perhaps the intertextual device *par excellence*, that will occupy a central position in my analysis of preformulation in press releases (cf. chapters 4 and 5).

It should be clear by now that, in examining preformulation in press releases, I shall concentrate on the 'texts' that together make up my corpus, trying to relate the genre's peculiar audience-directedness to the specifics of the language use. This means that my analysis is an inductive one. Crucially, however, as I have suggested, the findings that follow from this 'closed' study will also have to be fully integrated in a wider theory of the news as an intertextual crossroads and, hence, an arena for power and ideology. After all, as Briggs and Bauman (1992) conclude, "generic intertextuality cannot be adequately understood in terms of formal and functional patterning alone - questions of ideology, political economy, and power must be addressed as well" (159).¹² From one point of view, then, the present study offers only a starting-point for further, ethnographic, research into the social practices by which power alignments are negotiated and distributed in the news:¹³ comparing press releases with the news reports they give rise to - and drawing from the findings of the present study in doing so - is only one of the many challenging tasks that lie ahead.

Overview

In the first chapter, I shall explain in greater detail what this book is about. I hope to situate the questions my analysis sets out to answer with respect to some of the larger issues in the field as well as indicating relevant literature. Within a pragmatic perspective, the following three-step research method is proposed: first, to identify what press releases are supposed to do; next, to investigate how this goal can be traced in actual linguistic choices; and, finally, to describe some of the implications all this may have for the character of the overall interaction and its outcome. In particular, it is suggested that my research will focus on how the peculiar audience-directedness of press releases can be related to a number of metapragmatic features

in the corpus and how this sheds light on the asymmetries of what can be termed the 'newsmaking' and 'news management' processes.

This peculiar audience-directedness of press releases is further explored in chapter 2. Drawing from corpus-based evidence, I shall decompose the concept of receiver into a number of minimal constituents. This will allow me to characterize press releases as indirectly targeted, i.c. 'projected', discourse, with the journalists serving as mediators and the journalists' own audiences as absent ultimate destinations. I shall argue that in view of such audience-directedness press releases need to be 'preformulated'.

The following four chapters present a data analysis of the metapragmatics of press releases.

In my effort to trace the peculiar audience-directedness of press releases, the first metapragmatic feature that I shall look at is the special brand of self-reference in my corpus (chapter 3). I shall argue that it is part of a point of view operation with the writers of press releases switching out of their own perspective towards that of the journalists. It is suggested that such self-reference plays a complex preformulating role. Evidence is provided from reflexive person, place and time deixis. While this data supports claims for a social-interactional view of the deictic field, it is suggested that self-reference in press releases may also serve less harmonious purposes.

The fourth chapter is the first of two to deal with what is probably the single most interesting feature of the metapragmatics of press releases, viz. self-quotation, including so-called 'pseudo-direct speech'. On the basis of evidence from the corpus, self-quotation in press releases is contrasted both with the more orthodox forms of non-reflexive quotation and with the reproductionist view of quotation. I shall suggest that while quoting normally serves as a *reformulation* of another's words, self-quotation in press releases may well play a *preformulating* role, projecting how the writer's own words are to be retold in news reporting. In a final section, self-quotation in press releases is related to Bakhtin's notion of double-voicedness and to Voloshinov's distinction between the linear and pictorial styles.

In chapter 5 I shall argue that the typical brand of self-quotation in my corpus is part of a point of view operation: just like the special self-reference that I examined in chapter 3 it allows writers of press releases to

anticipate some of the concerns of journalists. A number of traditional functions of quotation in the news are identified and, for each of them, it is demonstrated how self-quotation in press releases may serve a purpose of preformulation. In particular, as far as the issue of objectivity is concerned, ample corpus-based evidence is provided to show how self-quotation plays a negotiating role, i.e. it seems to help reconcile the widely divergent ambitions of those who issue press releases and those who receive (and retell) them; on the other hand, it is argued that, even if self-quotation makes press releases look more objective, no real objectivity is possible in the news and, instead, a notion of 'objectively-voiced' text is proposed.

The final interesting feature of the metapragmatics of press releases that I shall look at is the distribution of explicit semi-performatives in my corpus (chapter 6). Drawing from various approaches to the concept of performativity, it is argued that, like self-reference and self-quotation, such explicit semi-performatives can be shown to play a preformulating role in the data, once again striking some kind of balance between the various parties' conflicting requirements.

Chapter 7 presents a case study of the Valdez corpus. Zooming in on the metapragmatics in this set of data, I shall try to bring together some of the major points in my study of preformulation in press releases, documenting how Exxon managed the news over a longer period. The central purpose is to confirm that what I have discussed in a number of separate chapters of in-depth language analysis blends together into a holistic study addressing a narrowly defined research question.

In the eighth and final chapter I shall first look back and present an overview of the main issues in my study of preformulation in press releases. Then, with a view to further efforts in the field, my research findings will be related to the concept of commodification and it will be suggested that they seem to support a hegemonic view of the news. At the end, I shall also engage in a brief reflexive exercise, inquiring into the ideologies that have informed my own analytical practice in this study. It will be argued that, in Briggs and Bauman's terminology, this book is not just a description of how press releases are precontextualized, but that very similar contextualization processes are at work in my own description of press releases.

Scope and limitations

Clearly, from one point of view, this study is wide in scope. Apart from its obvious relevance to the analysis of media discourse, it bears a specific interest in the issue of 'hearers' and 'overhearers', in the metapragmatics of deixis, quotation and performativity, and in matters of ideology and hegemony. In addition, I shall draw attention to how some of the principles of interaction, which are traditionally restricted to the analysis of conversation, can be useful for investigating written data; in doing so, I have drawn inspiration from such apparently very different figures as Goffman and Bakhtin.

At the same time, though, as I hinted at above, throughout my research I have been driven by a narrowly defined research question, exploring preformulation in press releases, and the structure of the report strictly reflects the various steps of the method I have developed and used. This has resulted in a long series of limitations: for every problem that I am beginning to provide a solution for, at least two or three other problems remain unsolved. Surely, if few researchers of the media have focused on press releases, there are a lot of aspects of the news that I have not been able to incorporate in my own study and that deserve further research. For example, it is a central tenet of this study that the news is part of a history of discourse; as a result, in choosing to focus on press releases only, I have decided to present no more than a single phase of what is a long and complex process of telling and retelling. Even within the limited scope of press releases, my concern with metapragmatics serves to obscure a wide range of alternative text features that might carry at least equal weight (although, as I shall argue later on in this book, there is a sense in which metapragmatics play a pivotal role in media discourse). The present study should therefore be seen as a starting-point for more ventures into the domain.

Finally, it should be pointed out that, although this research started with an interest in the Valdez corpus and although the concept of genre is in some ways very relevant to my purposes, this book - strictly speaking - is not about press releases. It is about preformulation in press releases. That is why I have not avoided using such informal quantifications as 'exceptionally', 'usually' and even 'typically'. After all, they are only meant

to provide background information, to answer the question if there are a lot of such preformulating metapragmatic features in press releases? Put simply, I am looking at self-quotation, for example, not because it is a frequently occurring phenomenon in my data - which it is - but because it is such an interesting phenomenon. In fact, self-quotation in press releases would not be any less interesting if it occurred only once.

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