

SIMPLIFICATION IN THE BRITISH PRESS: BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN CRIME REPORTS

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Abstract

This paper explores crime reports on verdicts and sentences in child/teenager murder cases in the British press with a view to demonstrating that ‘simplification’ is one of the significant values of crime reporting, regardless of the type of newspaper (Jewkes 2004). The analysis illustrates how both quality and popular British newspapers employ ‘binary oppositions’ (i.e. a typical feature of simplification), such as *good* vs. *evil*, in order to communicate to their audiences the social status of victims and killers and at the same time traditional social values and norms. The employment of ‘binary oppositions’ in noun phrases that introduce and/or classify victims and killers thus enables newspapers to appeal to the public and act, or at least try to act, as moral guardians.

Key words

simplification, binary oppositions, crime reports, victim, killer, British press, good vs. evil, noun phrase

1 Introduction

In the modern world, where instant access to information is taken for granted, newspapers face completely new, previously unimagined challenges. In order to at least retain their current readerships in competition with other types of media newspapers are undergoing substantial changes reflected mainly in their content, newsgathering practices, and style of reporting and layout (Franklin 2008). Their commercial success, since they are businesses in the first place and as such need to be profitable for their owners, depends on their ability to appeal to a particular readership/audience. Otherwise, they would experience difficulties in fighting off competition from other papers in the newspaper market and also other modern sources of information that are accessible to the public due to the extremely fast development of modern technology. The constant, ever-present pressure on journalists and editors to produce news quickly, or at least as quickly as others, and mainly low budgets lead to considerable changes in the newspaper industry, whether it is the excessive use of news agency reports instead of investigative journalism or the shift from foreign and political news to human stories and celebrity news. Some media scholars view this process of ‘tabloidization’ of media as particularly alarming and a sign of crisis; others consider it a natural development which simply reflects the current societies and

their values (cf. Biressi & Nunn 2008). Temple, for example, proposes the view that tabloidization or ‘the dumbing down’ of the British press caused mainly by the influence of the most widely sold tabloid and national newspaper in Britain, the *Sun*, should not be seen in a negative light only, since

... the broadsheet press ... have had to give more attention to the areas of cultural politics and wider popular culture, and respond to the expression of widespread (yet largely unacknowledged or hidden) views on, for example, immigration and race (2008: 69).

In the light of what has been mentioned above regarding the current situation in the newspaper market, which has become an extremely competitive environment, and the various constraints placed on journalists and editors, the tendency towards ‘simplification’ in modern reporting appears to be a natural consequence. By no means is this to suggest that only simple events receive media attention and are considered newsworthy enough to be reported on. Events which have the potential to become news “must be reducible to a minimum number of parts or themes” (Jewkes 2004: 43). Immediate events are more likely to be covered in the press than news about tendencies or trends which do not offer any tangible results or conclusions. Human stories, which involve real people and allow personalisation, are considered to have more public appeal than news about abstract ideas since the reader can more easily identify with real people. Also, real people can be presented not only as individuals; they may also be seen as representing a particular social group and certain values traditionally associated with their social roles. Provided that these values can be contrasted, reporting can encompass not only information but also messages to the audience as to what complies with and what transgresses the moral norms of the society. In crime news, as Jewkes (2004: 45) states, it is among others the employment of ‘binary oppositions’ that largely contributes to the polarization of public opinion. In her words, ‘binary oppositions’ can be defined as:

the notion that media (picking up on a human inclination to do the same) present the world through polarized constructions of difference which are fixed and immutable – man/woman, black/white, good/evil, tragic victim/evil monster and so on (ibid.: 222).

For example, *an innocent child killed by a lawless, aggressive criminal* may be seen as personifying *the good* and *evil* respectively; this ‘binary opposition’ of *tragic victim* vs. *evil monster* (linguistically realised as noun phrases) ranks among classic examples employed in crime news (ibid.). Another type of ‘binary

opposition' which can be found mainly in the British tabloid press is *British* vs. *non-British*, the latter often being illegal immigrants, who are depicted as *the evil coming from the outside* and a potential threat to the British society. This particular example of 'binary opposition' illustrates how a polarized view of a society may be encouraged in newspaper discourse; it is an example of the representation of our *in-group* vs. other *out-groups*, i.e. *us* vs. *them* (cf. Van Dijk 1998, 2011). 'Binary oppositions' may thus also support a stereotypical (which often means 'unfavourable' rather than 'favourable') view of certain social groups. Of course, this is not to suggest that newspapers should be blamed for, for example, xenophobic moods towards illegal immigrants, since there are many other influences that shape or govern the views of the public. The influence of media should not be overestimated. It is hard, if not impossible, to measure the real extent of influence that newspapers have on public thinking (cf. Temple 2008), which of course does not prevent newspapers from trying to promote particular views and attitudes. Whatever the real influence of newspapers, contrasting two or more entities, whether people or ideas (if the topic allows such a contrast), seems to be one of the principal and most powerful discursive means for appealing and effective reporting.

2 Crime reports

If there is a type of reporting in which the above described tendencies are displayed to a large extent, it is 'crime reporting'. Crime news is a relatively broad area which does not include only news about specific crimes when they happen, as one might expect, but also reporting on investigations, arrests and trials (Wardle 2008). Although crime in general seems to be an inseparable part of newspapers' agenda regardless of their type (serious or popular, local or national), not all types of crime are considered equally newsworthy. In compliance with what has been stated above, particularly those types of crime which can be presented as 'human stories' are more likely to be covered in the press than crime statistics, for example (ibid.). Such crimes which involve real, ordinary people have the potential to appeal to readers, no matter how rare the crime itself is. Murders, for example, although less frequent than theft, will receive newspaper coverage more frequently than other types of crime, especially if the victim (or offender) is a child or the murder is particularly violent. Another important aspect to be taken into account is the need to reinforce the reader's belief that 'justice has been done' and that 'abhorrent crime is rightly and severely punished in a civilized society'. As previous extensive research into crime news has shown, "the news media predominantly focus on crimes which have been, or are likely

to be solved, and the stories focus predominantly on the process of capture, arrest and charging the accused” (Wardle 2008: 145, cf. also Jančaříková 2010, Jewkes 2004). One might object that reporting should be primarily concerned with facts rather than views or attitudes, which are normally expected to be found in reviews or editorials. But journalism is produced in a particular society and social environment and as ‘a social product’ inevitably has a social nature and social effects (Richardson 2007). As White maintains,

... news reporting is a mode of rhetoric in the broadest sense of the word – a value laden, ideologically determined discourse with a clear potential to influence the media audience’s assumptions and beliefs about the way the world is and the way it ought to be (2006: 37).

Thus even serious papers, for which objectivity and impartiality remain traditional values, necessarily include views and attitudes, although communicated to the readers less explicitly than in popular papers. In crime news, as the analysis below illustrates, the differences are most evident in the style, use of evaluative language and also the choice of information chosen to be included in the report about the victims and killers.

The type of crime report under investigation enables the press to perform this goal because when the case gets to court the identities of the victim and killer are known, and therefore the victims and killers may be depicted not only as individuals but also as people personifying certain values, social groups or lifestyles since their status in the society is definable. Secondly, this kind of reporting offers just one interpretation – the readers are not expected to take different sides but to sympathise with the victim and “come to consensual conclusions about the story”, which in crime news normally “amounts to moral indignation and censure directed at anyone who transgresses the legal or moral codes of society” (Jewkes 2004: 44). As Keeble simply and yet aptly remarks, “today it is the press (and mass media in general) which provide moral tales, stories that give lessons in and define what is good and bad, normal and abnormal” (2006: 27). Thirdly, a child murder is so abhorrent and morally unacceptable that it naturally raises questions about the state of the society, the motives of such behaviour, the punishment, the criminal justice system, etc. Especially when a child is killed by one of his/her parents (i.e. filicide), the press will often cover the murder itself as well as the trial, since a report of such a crime and mainly of the punishment allows newspapers to accentuate certain social or cultural values or even address important social issues. In Cavaglion’s words,

Killing is a horrific act, particularly when parents are the perpetrators and children are the victims. It not only challenges many of our fundamental expectations about the roles of parental caring, but also prompts a sense of confusion, because it constitutes a strong warning about the unreliability of parental instincts as a protection for children (2008: 272).

Although it may seem a strange assumption, even through crime news a sense of community can be constructed and its values reinforced. This is not meant to claim that people enjoy reading about crime but by reading about it, by analysing other people's behaviour and by considering crucial social issues they may make sense of their own existence and formulate their own attitudes to important social problems (cf. Caviglia 2006).

As for the choice of newspapers, in order to demonstrate the employment of binary oppositions in both serious and popular British newspapers, the reports were taken from four national dailies, two broadsheets (*The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*) and two tabloid papers (*The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*). Since the so-called mid-market papers are not included in the corpus, the traditional two-type distinction, i.e. broadsheets and tabloids (serious vs. popular) fully suffices the present analysis, although modern newspaper analysts generally adhere to a three-type categorisation of newspapers (i.e. broadsheets, mid-market papers and down-market papers; cf. Jucker 1992, Richardson 2007, Worcester 1998). However, the use of this two-type distinction in the present analysis should not be seen as promoting the view that British newspapers are of two distinct types, which can be seen as clear opposites; such a view would be somewhat anachronistic (Temple 2008).

3 The research corpus

The corpus comprises 40 reports on ten murder cases taken from four British national newspapers (i.e. four reports per one event). The reports were published in the print versions of the newspapers between 2004 and 2011. The research topic necessitates a) suitable discourse (i.e. newspaper discourse); b) particular type of genre as generally defined by Swales (1990) (i.e. crime news), and specifically the sub-genre of 'verdict reports', and c) a topic which allows newspapers to contrast two ideas, two entities, two views, or two 'social actors' (Van Leeuwen 1996) as representatives of a particular group, community, or individuals that may be associated with particular social roles. Also, since serious and popular newspapers are compared in the analysis, the murder cases had to be covered in four different national newspapers, preferably on the same day. This fact thus

also influenced the collection of material, hence the span of seven years.

The main purpose of the reports was to inform on the verdicts and sentences in high-profile murder cases; they also included a brief account of the event. The victims were either young children or teenagers killed by a parent or a stranger. The unifying feature of these reports is the general binary opposition of the *good* vs. *evil* as reflected in the structure of noun phrases, which is the main focus of the analysis and which is understood here in the broad sense, i.e. those we should sympathize with (victims) vs. those we should condemn (killers).

The corpus material was initially studied to collect data about the naming strategies used in newspapers with a focus on the expression of positive and negative status of victims and killers. The main linguistic focus of the research was the noun phrase, its structure and potential in expressing the social status of victims and killers. The total number of noun phrases (NPs) analyzed is 1,685; 108 NPs in the headlines and sub-headlines, 80 in the lead, and 1,497 in the body copy of the reports. Binary oppositions embedded in the noun phrases are not numerous as it is not the number of occurrences that creates or helps to create the intended effect but rather the inclusion of binary oppositions and their placement as close to the beginning of the report as possible, i.e. in the headline, sub-headline or the lead. Since the analysis is mainly of pragmatic and sociolinguistic nature, qualitative rather than quantitative approach appears more feasible in order to uncover some of the tendencies and practices of the current British press (i.e. after the year of 2000 onwards) with a view to demonstrating the social character of language in newspapers and the polarized depiction of reality, the latter being an example of simplification in the press.

One of the main assumptions is that news reporting is not devoid of views and opinions, and apart from reporting on events newspapers also present or enhance particular social views and values. It is hypothesized that binary oppositions are employed to express and reinforce a number of social views and thus shape the readers' opinion of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The analysis concentrates on how the social status of the victims and killers is expressed and how 'binary oppositions' embedded in noun phrases can aid in defining the *good* vs. *evil*.

4 Results

4.1 Killer father/killer mother vs. the victim

As mentioned above, filicide is an abhorrent kind of crime which will receive the attention of and coverage in the press, mainly due to the fact that in a civilized

society it is generally considered a totally unacceptable and inconceivable act. The parents therefore have failed to fulfil their main social roles and are to be seen as individuals who let down their own children fully dependent on their care (as the victims are usually babies or very young children). This binary opposition found in reports on filicide, i.e. the NPs *evil parent* vs. *innocent, helpless son* or *daughter*, is part of a typical script employed by both serious and popular papers. It should be noted, however, that killer fathers and killer mothers are not depicted in the same way. With killer fathers the motive seems to be important, e.g. the killing is a revenge on their unfaithful wives, although this by no means diminishes the guilt of the father. With killer mothers, the motive is not always mentioned and they are typically depicted as *bad mothers*, who failed to fulfil their basic maternal role, i.e. to be care and love providers for their children. In tabloids, in the *Sun* more typically than in the *Daily Mirror*, such a woman is referred to as an *evil mother*, *evil mum*, *a sadistic mum*, etc. (cf. Examples 1 and 2), which in themselves are unexpected collocations that accentuate the tragedy, assign a very negative status to the mother and are certain to attract the reader's interest (cf. Jančaříková 2009). The fathers, on the other hand, are not primarily referred to as *evil* and their father qualities are not questioned, or are mentioned only marginally or not at all. In my view, their negative status is construed mainly by the mention of the motive (i.e. revenge directed against the mother through the child, which is an evil act per se), as illustrated in Examples 3 and 4:

- (1) *A sadistic mum jailed yesterday for torturing her baby until he died in agony was dragged sobbing and screaming from court – despite facing just FOUR years behind bars.* (*Sun*, March 11, 2009)
- (2) *An evil mother who inflicted appalling injuries on her toddler son as she battered him to death was jailed for life yesterday.* (*Sun*, May 15, 2011)
- (3) *A dad who murdered his little boy in revenge for his wife's affair was jailed for life yesterday.* (*Daily Mirror*, March 6, 2008)
- (4) *A dad who butchered his son to get revenge on his wife after an affair was jailed for life yesterday.* (*Sun*, March 6, 2008)

In serious papers, where evaluative language is not used (or only in inverted commas so that it is clearly attributed to a source other than the newspaper), the opposition is conveyed mainly by the mention of negative or unfavourable information about the killer that contributes to his or her negative status and

creates a contrast between the killer and the helpless child. It can be a mention of previous problems in the family or the killer's background, as it is the case in Example 5 or the killer's nature, motive or some horrible details of the murder, as in Examples 6-8.

- (5) *Former crack addict Claire Biggs, 27, had already seen her first child taken into care when she repeatedly crushed Rhy's chest, causing numerous rib fractures.* (Daily Telegraph, March 11, 2009)
- (6) *A mother who drowned her daughter in the bath because she was ashamed of the four-year-old's cerebral palsy was jailed for life yesterday.* (Daily Telegraph, Sept 24, 2008)
- (7) *A mother who punched and kicked her toddler son to death in south-east London was jailed for life yesterday.* (Guardian, May 15, 2010)
- (8) *A father who murdered his four-year-old son in revenge for his wife's affair was jailed for life yesterday ...* (Guardian, March 6, 2008)

The crime being a filicide in all the cases discussed here, the reports both in the serious and popular papers follow a similar script. The reports accentuate the human story and its tragic character and tragic circumstances by contrasting the evil parent vs. the helpless child; in other words, by presenting the two as evil monster vs. tragic victim, although here the evil comes from where it is not expected, i.e. the child's mother or father, which adds to the tragedy of the event. The result and the desired effect is moral indignation felt by the reader at the parent's horrible and totally inconceivable act, as mentioned above.

It should also be stated that Examples 1-8 are taken from the lead, i.e. the first paragraph of the reports, the purpose of which is to provide a summary of the most important points (Bell 1991). Therefore, it naturally includes a mention of both the victim and the killer as the 'primary participants', which applies to all the reports in the corpus. Whereas the lead presents the main information, i.e. summarizes the story, the headlines either include a mention of both the victim and killer (16 out of 20 headlines in the broadsheets vs. 12 out of 20 headlines in the tabloids) or serve rather as an 'eye-catcher' and mention just one of the participants or neither of them (e.g. *My evil wife, A minimum of 40 years*).

4.2 Stranger killer vs. the victim

Whereas with filicide the status of the primary participants is the same, i.e. a parent and his/her child, with murders committed by strangers binary oppositions reflected in the structure of NPs are obviously more varied, depending on the identities of the killer and the tragic victim. What has been mentioned previously about the differences in the language employed by serious and popular papers applies here too but the variation is considerably wider than in reports on filicide.

Where possible, the killers' negative nature, lifestyle, background (including his/her non-British origin) or unacceptable behaviour will be mentioned, whereas the victim is depicted as an obedient child/young person of lively and good nature loved by his/her family and friends, who was simply so unfortunate as to find himself or herself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Serious papers construe the positive and negative status of the primary participants by inclusion of information which has the potential to enhance such a status. As can be seen from Example 9 below, this can be achieved, for example, by mentioning some negative information which signals the low social status of the killer (i.e. *a cannabis smoking school dropout*), who is contrasted with the victim, a complete opposite of the killer, i.e. *a Roman Catholic altar boy*. Such a reference to the victim clearly emphasises his background, traditional upbringing, etc. In the *Sun*, which is more direct and radical in its evaluations than the *Daily Mirror*, the killer is explicitly negatively evaluated when referred to as *a twisted thug* who murdered *an altar boy* (cf. Example 10).

- (9) *Jake Fahri, a 19-year-old cannabis smoking school dropout, slashed the former Roman Catholic altar boy's neck with a glass dish in a bakery last May. (Daily Telegraph, March 28, 2009)*
- (10) *Twisted thug Jake Fahri was jailed for life yesterday for murdering altar boy Jimmy Mizen – just because the 16-year-old 'disrespected' him in a bakery shop. (Sun, March 28, 2009)*

Example 10 above and Examples 11 and 12 below demonstrate a typical strategy used in tabloids but also in serious newspapers (Example 13) when contrasting the killer and the victim in one sentence. In tabloids, the killer and the victim are referred to by relatively short noun phrases or appositive noun phrases with a minimum of language in between, which makes the contrast more effective, direct and also more emotive, while the serious papers appear less straightforward, more neutral and more factual mostly referring to the person's background, age, etc., as in Example 13.

- (11) ... vile thug Jake Fahri, 19, was found guilty of killing gentle giant Jimmy. 16 ... (*Daily Mirror*, March 28, 2009)
- (12) Scheming loner Michal Hamer lured diminutive Joe to his bedroom with a fake letter after hatching a sick plan for at least three weeks. (*Sun*, Oct 17, 2006)
- (13) A former member of a notorious west London gang who murdered seven-year-old Toni-Ann Byfield ... (*Guardian*, Aug 5, 2006)

As mentioned previously, provided that the killer is of non-British origin, a reference to the killer's background may enhance the view that the evil comes from the outside. Such an explicit reference can be found only in tabloids, since serious papers might be accused of being prejudiced against minorities and therefore not objective. One of the murder cases included in the corpus is a murder of a 7-year-old girl shot in the back by a crack dealer of Jamaican origin who had killed her father and wanted to silence the witness. Whereas neither of the serious papers mentions or at least hints at the killer's origin, in both the tabloids he is referred to as *a Yardie*. This stereotypical reference denotes not only his Jamaican origin but also his involvement in the drug business and can be regarded as an example of 'stigmatization' of a particular social group. In both reports in the tabloid papers the killer is explicitly described as *evil* (cf. Examples 14 and 15).

- (14) An evil gunman who murdered a girl of seven Yardie Joel Smith, 32, shot ... (*Daily Mirror*, Aug 5, 2006)
- (15) An evil Yardie gangster who executed a girl of seven to stop her identifying him as a killer ... (*Sun*, Aug 5, 2006)

Although the visual components such as photographs are not the subject of the present analysis, it is worth mentioning that the *Sun* article includes a photo of both the killer and the victim, the former with a caption EVIL, the latter with a caption VICTIM, whereas in the *Daily Mirror* Smith's photo has a caption THE KILLER. In the serious papers the captions are rather factual, giving the person's name and some important information.

The contrast between the killer and the victim in both serious and popular papers is further enhanced by quotations by police officers, relatives or judges, who comment on the appalling crime or the nature of the killer (Examples 16-18), or the nature of the victim (Examples 17, 19-20).

- (16) *The judge, Lord Uist, described Imran Shahid as a “thug and bully with a sadistic nature not to fit to be free in civilised society”.* (Daily Telegraph, Nov 9, 2006)

- (17) *“Jimmy Mizen is an individual, we all aspire to have a son like him. Jake Fahri is something totally different, a yob from that part of society that we all abhor”.* (Daily Mirror, March 28, 2009)

- (18) *“The Preddies are violent, lawless savages who thought they could escape justice”.* (Sun, Aug 10, 2006)

- (19) *“Toni-Ann was a bright, lovely, respectable and talkative little girl. She had such a bright future and seemed to take the setbacks in her stride. Her love for life could not be dampened until she crossed paths with Joel Smith.”* (Daily Telegraph, Aug 5, 2006).

- (20) *“He was the loveliest, gentlest giant. He was loved by everyone, by the school, the church and his family. I never told him off apart from saying, ‘put your socks in the washing basket’. He really was a beautiful son”.* (Daily Mirror, March 28, 2009)

Similarly to filicide, these reports also follow a similar script accentuating the human story built on the contrasting of the primary participants and the values they represent.

5 Conclusion

Particular kinds of crime, for example murders, display a larger degree of unusualness and drama than ordinary kinds of crime. Reports on verdicts and sentences, which also belong to crime news in its broadest sense, have a wide social and cultural potential, since they enable newspapers to address crucial social issues and promote the traditional values of the society concerned and thus act as its moral guardians.

Depending on the circumstances of the murder and the identities of the primary participants, the victim and the killer can be depicted both as individuals and also as representatives of particular social groups, or at least particular lifestyles or behaviour. Murders of children and teenagers, who represent innocent victims, are especially suitable for these purposes. They can be presented as human stories which involve ordinary people (i.e. people like the reader himself or herself) and

due to the low age of the victims are particularly appealing to the general public. Moreover, human stories allow ‘personalization’, which is an important feature of modern reporting in both the serious and the popular press. Messages and implied meanings (mainly concerning the social status of the participants, their social roles and traditional values associated with them) are very well expressed through a contrast, which can be effectively achieved by ‘binary oppositions’. With filicide it is clearly the opposition of *evil parent* vs. *helpless and innocent son or daughter*; with child murders committed by strangers it is the opposition of *evil gangster or criminal* vs. *unfortunate and innocent victim*. These oppositions are communicated to the reader by means of evaluating adjectives, positive vs. negative adjectives and nouns, expressive classifying nouns, etc., the choice of which depends largely on the type of newspaper and its intended readers and their expectations, as these, at least to a certain extent, influence the rhetoric of newspapers. Whereas serious newspapers express the contrast by the inclusion of mainly factual positive and negative information about the killer’s and victim’s background, nature and lifestyle, popular papers (i.e. tabloids) resort to explicit evaluations that in serious papers will be implied but not stated openly. Evaluative pre-modification by adjectives (e.g. *vile*, *warped*, *evil*, *sadistic*, etc.) is found in tabloids, which do not leave much space for the reader to make his or her own opinion, while in broadsheets such overt evaluations are avoided and the newspapers rather seem to appeal to the readers’ common sense to make particular (i.e. intended) judgments. Post-modification by relative clauses is found in both types of newspapers, for example in the lead, where they serve as a means of identifying the individuals. The difference thus lies mainly in the content, i.e. the type of information stated about the victims and killers in the relative clauses and its presentation (informal vs. neutral language). The contrast between the victim and the killer is established and communicated to the reader as early as possible, i.e. in the headline or the lead (in accordance with the top-down principle). Therefore, victims and killers are clearly classified as representatives of *good* and *evil*.

Both types of newspaper make extensive use of quotations to make the story more appealing. In serious newspapers quotations fulfil another important function – by quoting someone else’s opinion of the killer, for example, serious newspapers may incorporate evaluations in the report without putting their sacred value of objectivity in jeopardy. While the tabloid readers are presented with ready-made evaluations, the serious newspaper readers are guided to arrive at the identical evaluation (although not always so radical) themselves. Whether explicit or implicit, views and attitudes are thus communicated to their audiences by both serious and popular newspapers and may contribute to a particular

picture of the society and its members, and the reinforcement of its values and moral norms.

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