



Critical Multimodal Discourse Analyses of News Discourse on Facebook and YouTube

Chi Wui Ng

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China

Introduction

A traditional approach to discourse analysis, which is conventionally conceptualized as investigations into language beyond a sentential level in the grammatical hierarchy, is predominantly concerned about interactions between language and context (Nelson, 1998; Paltridge, 2012). All the same, the advent of novel conceptions of the notion of ‘discourse’ has revolutionized and effectuated alternative approaches to discourse analysis.

Three perspectives of discourse analysis have been identified by Jones (2012). Whilst formal discourse analysts (e.g., Harris, 1952) are interested in distributional analyses of texts, functional and social discourse analysts go beyond such analyses in that the former (e.g., Widdowson, 1973) analyze social functions of texts whereas the latter (e.g., Gee, 2010) uncover social identities as well as the realities embedded within texts. For all disparate foci of the three aforementioned perspectives, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an attempt to integrate formal, functional, and social analyses of discourse in a bid to unveil roles of discourse in the legitimization of dominance relations, facilitation of social reproduction, and alienation of thought (Haralambos & Holborn, 1995; Marx, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993). In particular, Fairclough (1995) put forward a three-dimensional framework for CDA concurring with formal, functional, and social approaches to discourse analysis, respectively. Despite chiefly capitalized upon in analysis of political discourse, such as speeches delivered by government officials (e.g., Flowerdew, 1997, 2004), CDA can also be exploited to analyze power and dominance in discourses in other fields (Van Dijk, 1997).

Not only has the breadth but the scope of discourse analysis has also been evolving. Speech has long been conceived to be disparate from writing in multiple respects, yet relationships between the two are complicated (Elbow, 1985; Yule, 2014). The emergence of electronic communication as a third mode of communication further problematizes such a distinction in that electronic grammar has been discovered to be distinct from that of spoken or written language (Herring, 2012). More importantly, visual images, which are subjective, polysemous, and culture-laden, are incorporated into online texts every now and then for the conveyance of associative meanings (Leech, 1974; Wilkins, 2012). For such a reason, besides Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) (e.g., Herring, 2004) and Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2008), Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which analyzes meanings conveyed by means of a combination of text and images, can certainly be employed to study online discourse (Kress, 2011).

Literature Review

Characterized as an independent genre, news stories, which are stories not temporally sequenced, possess one-of-a-kind structural and linguistic attributes as well as attendant register variables (Rose, 2012, 2014). Being a type of media discourse performing specific sociocultural functions, never is news objective in terms of language use, for language structures are context-dependent and ideational (Van Dijk, 1985).

There have been attempts to incorporate CDA and MDA into analysis of news discourse. Analyzing news articles correlated with racism and feminist alcoholism respectively, Van Dijk (2000) and Day, Gough, and McFadden (2004) put the essence of CDA into practice through an explication of meanings conveyed and beliefs promulgated in news discourse, such as pejorative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and women drinking. Adopting a multimodal approach, Caple (2006) analyzed news stories in broadsheets and found that visual images constitute nuclei of news stories. In spite of the efficacy of CDA and MDA in providing alternative perspectives for analysis of news discourse, the overwhelming majority of antecedent studies utilizing these approaches undoubtedly zeroed in on news in press, and generalizability of such findings to online news discourse is in doubt out of deviation of electronic language from standard written language.

Limited studies have used CDA and MDA to research online news discourse. Whilst Knox (2007) attempted to compare visual-verbal structures between print and online news, Mellese and Muller (2012) as well as Wessler, Wozniak, Hofer, and Luck (2016) conducted comparative analyses of multimodal news frames via the comparison of text-visual frames of distinct online newspapers. Analyzing news stories on official websites of online newspapers, barely did the aforementioned studies take into consideration novel online platforms available for news broadcasting. Being a social networking site, Facebook provides a digitally mediated context for media to share links to news stories and for netizens from all over the globe to respond to those stories (Sharma, 2012). In a similar vein, YouTube, a video sharing site deploying multiple semiotic modes, provides a highly dynamic environment for sharing news videos as well as multiple authorship in response to those videos (Benson, 2015). Both websites enable the sharing of and response to online news discourse, yet the two sites are definitely distinct modes.

Possessing distinct textual attributes, the two modes of online news broadcast plausibly perform distinct interpersonal and ideational functions. Integrating CDA and MDA, the present study aims at comparing news discourse on Facebook and YouTube, both of which are online media, for the sake of illuminating respective roles of news presented by a single publisher on the two social media platforms. In particular, grounded upon Fairclough's (1995) model of CDA, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are textual attributes of news discourse on Facebook and YouTube similar to and different from one another?
2. How is news discourse on Facebook and YouTube consumed similarly and differently by netizens?
3. How are ideologies promoted by news discourse on Facebook and YouTube similar to and different from one another?

Methodology

The current study is a qualitative discourse analysis whereby three sets of data were collected: online news discourse, netizens' comments, and a focus group interview. Five pieces of online news discourse published in April 2018 were selected from the Facebook page and YouTube channel of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) for analysis with one-to-one correspondence in terms of topics to enhance the validity of comparison. Netizens' comments on the 10 pieces of selected news discourse were collected to illuminate consumption of those texts.

A focus group interview comprising four participants, who had read the 10 pieces of selected news discourse in advance, was conducted. Three interview questions (see Interview Protocol in the Appendix) were asked to investigate participants' consumption of news discourse on the two platforms. The focus group comprised a small number of four participants in lieu of nine to eleven as most focus groups do; the reason was that discourse analysis of news discourse on Facebook and YouTube was the crux of the study, so by no means does the focus group interview constitute the primary source of data. Instead, it solely provides methodological triangulation for all levels of analysis and supplements the researcher's analysis of responses to the news discourse.

The first research question, which is concerned with the analysis of texts, was addressed using cohesion, intertextuality, and visual grammar. Analyses of endophoric reference, which comprises cohesion and coherence of the text, and exophoric reference, which pertains to interactions with external texts or context, of collected online discourse were integral to textual analysis. Such analytical tools have been verified in antecedent studies (e.g., Gardner & Luchtenberg, 2000; Lee, 1998; Thornbury, 1997).

The second research question, which is concerned with the analysis of the interpretation of texts, was responded to by using qualitative content analysis, exchange structure, and speech acts. A content analysis of netizens' comments demonstrated the content of consumers' responses whereas analyses of the exchange structure amongst netizens and types of speech acts performed by netizens in their online comments established the mode of consumers' responses (Adams & Bishop, 1989; Trosborg, 1995).

The third research question deals with an analysis of the context of the texts. Texts were analyzed with respect to ideologies, identities, and engagement. Not only did the two aforementioned layers of analysis form the basis for analyses of intended ideologies promoted by producers of the news discourse as well as the intended identities presented by producers, they also laid the foundation for an analysis of producers' positioning in relation to consumers as discourse participants (Hyland, 2005).

Results

Text Analysis

News on both Facebook and YouTube have undeniably been discovered to achieve coherence by means of linguistic devices, intertextuality, and multimodality.

Facebook news predominantly achieves coherence through situational reference, intertextuality, and multimodality. Not reporting news stories in their entirety, the BBC provides a short phrasal or clausal delineation and a visual image of each news story on Facebook and directs readers to the online version of full texts of news articles on the BBC website (see Figure 1 as an example). Situational reference, which involves the use of definite articles pointing to entities known from the situation, is frightfully prevalent in the short delineation of news stories to highlight key players yet to shun linguistic repetition (Biber, Leech, & Conrad, 2002). For instance, "The MoneySavingExpert.com founder" is a situational reference in Facebook News 5 to denote Martin Lewis. Besides reference, intertextuality is also an indispensable attribute of coherence on Facebook news in that links to full news articles are available to connect texts on Facebook with external texts. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, incorporation of a large and centred visual image into the page supplements written texts by further hooking readers' attention to a selected focus of the news story (Evans & Green, 2006).

YouTube news also achieves coherence by three means, the overriding of which is the multimodal element. Presented as video clips, news on YouTube is akin to news reports viewed on television. Laying emphasis on both visual and auditory elements, YouTube news possesses distinct sources of (moving) images as the visual element and lexical chains as the auditory element to provide viewers with extensive information on the news stories concurrently (see Figures 2a and 2b as examples). For instance, YouTube News 3, which was pertinent to the US-North Korea relation, embodied flashbacks (Mays, 2013), which were clips depicting meetings between the two countries occurring before, and repetition of lexical items

(Jackson & Amvela, 2007) within the semantic field of North Korea, namely ‘Pyongyang’, and ‘Kim Jong-un’, in the voice-over). In terms of intertextuality, speeches delivered by prominent figures in news stories, such as the one by Donald Trump in YouTube News 3, are incorporated into videos to back what is reported by reporters.



Figure 1. Annotated selected Facebook news 1.



Figures 2a and 2b. Selected frames from selected YouTube news 1.

Interaction Analysis

Attributed to the aforementioned textual distinctions between Facebook and YouTube news, news on the two social media platforms have unquestionably been found to be consumed disparately by people.

On the basis of analyses of content and exchange structure amongst consumers of Facebook news, it appears that netizens lack a convergent focus of consumption. Should the Initiation-Response exchange structure (Adams & Bishop, 1989; Benson, 2015) be capitalized upon to analyze netizens’ comments on Facebook news, the news and netizens’ comments are presumed to be initiation and response, respectively. All the same, focusing on multifarious perspectives of the news stories, netizens on Facebook possess a tendency to respond to target news by putting forward indirectly relevant arguments

sprinkled with some irony, which generates humorous effects (Aiken, 1999; see Figure 3 with top comments on selected Facebook News 1 as an example); they appear to play a minor role in response yet a major role in initiation. For instance, even though Facebook News 1 simply concerned the birth of a royal baby, there were a small number of comments closely relevant to this core topic; on the contrary, the overwhelming majority-initiated deliberation upon indirectly relevant issues, such as sexual orientation, perceptions of the royal family, and even poverty in the UK. Netizens “responding” to such “initiations” might even be further distracted to topics irrelevant to the original news story (see Figure 4 with replies to one selected comment on selected Facebook News 1).

Comparatively speaking, YouTube news appears more successful in hooking consumers’ attention to target foci as displayed in a higher degree of compliance of netizens’ comments with the typical Initiation-Response exchange structure with the news and netizens’ comments serving as initiation and response respectively. The vast majority of comments on YouTube news are observed to be directly relevant to the news (see Figure 5 with top comments on selected YouTube News 1 as an example). For instance, with YouTube News 1, being a jubilant and joyous one, some netizens exploited direct performative speech acts (Cruse, 2011) such as ‘congratulations’ to perform expressive speech acts, which merely expressed their attitudes towards the news. Following netizens’ comments were replies to those comments, which served as “responses to responses” (see Figure 6 with replies to one selected comment on selected YouTube News 1). Comments on YouTube news chiefly staying on the topic, responses to those comments are also identified to be more closely relevant to the news story when compared to those observed on Facebook news feeds.



Figure 3. Annotated comments column of selected Facebook news 1



Figure 4. Annotated replies to a selected comment on selected Facebook news 1



Figure 5. Annotated comments column of selected YouTube news 1



Figure 6. Replies to a selected comment on selected YouTube news 1

Context Analysis

Textual and interpersonal attributes of news on Facebook and YouTube are doubtlessly influential in the dissemination of ideologies, the presentation of author identities, and the engagement of consumers.

Facebook news is argued to be more efficacious in engaging consumers than promoting ideologies. Notwithstanding the absence of explicit engagement devices, namely reader pronouns and questions, the BBC attempts to engage readers as discourse participants in their Facebook news via links to full news articles, which invite viewers to explore more about the news stories, and receive a short description of each news story, which functions as personal asides marking personal identities and presenting the author's personal views of the news story (Hyland, 2005). For instance, a direct quotation of Trump's words in Facebook News 4 implied the author's identity as a person going along with the quote as well as his/her personal opinions on the incident. That said, as observed in the diverging foci as well as the perspectives of consumers' comments, such use of social media finds limited success in the promulgation of intended beliefs. In particular, whilst the author of Facebook News 4 has attempted to portray Trump's image as a peace-keeper, some consumers still frowned upon such a portrait and decried Trump by drawing upon prior events. As such, the efficacy of Facebook news in conveying intended meanings or reproducing intended power relations is in doubt.

In contrast, YouTube can be said to be more effectual in promoting ideologies than engaging consumers. Providing comprehensive news reports, YouTube news appears to present news stories objectively to consumers; that said, the selection of facts for presentation has indeed been carried out by virtue of the presence of an infinite amount of facts associated with each news story (Poincare, 2001). For instance, reporting the missile threat more from a Russian perspective, YouTube News 4 attempted to exhibit Russia's worry over the US. For a partial report of the incident, providing consumers with an impression of comprehensiveness, YouTube News 4 conveyed intended meanings rather successfully insofar as consumers' comments largely revealed a negative attitude towards the US. All the same, an objective image of the news was established at the expense of the author's personal identities or engagement of readers; this was corroborated by limited explicit identity markers or engagement devices in selected YouTube news.

Discussion

On the whole, at a textual level, news discourse on Facebook and YouTube have been discovered to be contingent upon distinct devices to achieve coherence or reader-friendliness, yet a set of three devices, namely linguistic devices, intertextuality, and multimodality, are shared by both media. The former possesses a disposition to draw upon its strength as a social networking site, which stresses networks, and hinges more upon linkage with external texts to assist consumers in making sense of news stories; in contrast, the latter possesses a propensity to make use of its strength as a video sharing site and counts more upon multimodal elements to hook consumers' attention. Out of the blue, participants of the focus group interview commented that multimodal elements in both media, which are visual images on Facebook and moving images on YouTube, first caught their attention; this surely suggests that news agents ought to take heed of multimodal elements whichever online media is employed for news broadcasting.

At an interactional level, responses to news discourse in comments columns on YouTube have been found to be more closely relevant to target news stories when compared to those on Facebook. Reporting news stories in a more detailed fashion, YouTube news enables consumers to comprehend target news on a more comprehensive basis; it is thereby reasonable that these consumers' responses to the news are more focused. In contrast, having read solely a short delineation of a news event on Facebook news, consumers possess more autonomy to interpret the event from their own perspectives unless they access the link to the full news article, so their responses to the news are likely to be less focused yet more divergent. After all, both media are capable of triggering consumers' exchange on news events, yet YouTube appears to manage to initiate more focused deliberations. One additional noteworthy issue is that almost all comments left by consumers are written in English; this could assuredly be attributable to the status of English as a contact language on the globalized Internet (Bauman, 1998; Sebba, 1997).

At an ideational level, the promulgation of ideologies and the engagement of readers appear to be two opposing functions performed by news discourse on Facebook and YouTube. More specifically, Facebook news and YouTube news perform better in engaging consumers and disseminating ideologies respectively on account of their inherent nature. Being a social networking site, Facebook facilitates interconnectedness amongst users, and the reader-friendly textual attributes of Facebook news, namely concise texts accompanied by clear and large images, motivate consumers' responses. For instance, when asked about the piece of information in Facebook News 3 that struck them most, participants of the focus group interview possessed frightfully diverging views in that some mentioned the tension conveyed by the image whereas some noted the phrase "secret meeting" in quotation marks. In contrast, being a video sharing site, YouTube skillfully conveys meanings and ideological beliefs embedded in news by means of visual effects in the video. Interviewees mostly commented that they were impressed by a timeline depicting changes in the US-North Korea relation in YouTube News 3, which pinpointed progress made by the US in ameliorating the relationship between the two countries. The selection of online media for news broadcast thereby absolutely ought to be highly dependent upon intended social functions.

Conclusion

By and large, it is in evidence that elements of coherence, intertextuality, and multimodality are present in news broadcasts on both Facebook and YouTube; all the same, performing disparate interactional and ideational functions, the two online platforms offer distinct opportunities for news agents to publish news stories for netizens. Whilst Facebook, which provides more room for personal interpretation of news stories, is more efficacious in engaging with consumers and triggering discussions on a larger scale with broader topics, YouTube, which possesses particularly rich visual elements, is more effectual in conveying intended meanings or promoting ideologies to consumers. Above all, being a preliminary study, it is suggested that the present study be replicated with an ameliorated research design, such as an

increase in the sample size, a more-in-depth analysis of data, more detailed focus group interviews, and the incorporation of quantitative analytical tools to further illuminate the potentials of the two social media platforms for news broadcasting.

The Author

Chi Wui Ng is a Graduate Master in an aided secondary school in Hong Kong as well as a Master's student in Applied English Linguistics in the Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests in the field of Applied Linguistics are English Grammar, Second Language Development, Second Language Instruction, and Pedagogical Grammar.

Email address: ngchiwui@link.cuhk.edu.hk

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Appendix

Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. What first caught your attention when you first looked at this piece of news?
2. Which piece of information in the news strikes you most?
3. How do you view this piece of news presented on Facebook and this piece of news presented on YouTube similarly or differently?