

TARNISHED STARS: THE DISCOURSES OF CELEBRITY IN THE BRITISH TABLOID PRESS¹

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Abstract: This study analyses the discourse of celebrity in texts from the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun*. The analysis focuses on the linguistic resources deployed in association with celebrities, and the typically vernacular voice with which the writer engages readers and claims to speak for them. The article then discusses factors underlying the subject positions offered to the readers and the nature of the rhetorical relations that are established. Conclusions are drawn about the operation of tabloid newspapers as social mediators that are irreverent without being threatening, generating populist discourses that contrive to engage mass audiences in an age of fragmentation.

Key words: Tabloid press, celebrity, discourse, subject position.

Estrellas deslustradas: El discurso sobre las celebridades en la prensa sensacionalista británica

Resumen: En este estudio se analiza el discurso referido a las celebridades en la prensa popular inglesa. El análisis se centra en los recursos lingüísticos utilizados en este contexto, y el discurso informal que se emplea para atraer y representar a los lectores. Se procede a un estudio crítico de las posiciones de sujeto ofrecidas al lector, y las relaciones retóricas que se establecen. En las conclusiones se subraya la función de la prensa popular como mediador social, irreverente sin ser amenazador, que genera discursos populistas para enganchar una audiencia de masa en una época de fragmentación.

Palabras clave: Prensa popular, celebridad, discurso, posición de sujeto.

1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse of the British tabloid press has emerged as an area of interest for both linguists and cultural theorists over the last twenty years. Issues as varied as the representation of gender or ethnic minorities, reporting on social protest, handling of political crises or the propagation of health scares, have been studied from various perspectives, particularly by critical discourse analysts and scholars focusing on popular culture (Fowler 1993; Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 1988; Conboy 2001). At the same time, specific linguistic features of newspaper texts, such as noun phrases, headlines or narrative structures, have been analysed as language phenomena (Bell 2003; Biber 2003; Villacañas et al. 2006; Ni 2003). However, relatively little research attention has been paid to the area which has now effectively become the mainstay of tabloid journalism, namely that of celebrity gossip. A considerable proportion of tabloid content centres on the lives of the rich and famous: it

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has been estimated that only 8% of the editorial content of *The Sun* and *Mirror* is devoted to public affairs, while the rest focuses almost exclusively on gossip and sports (Rooney 1998). In these newspapers, news has effectively been denatured, converted into a branch of entertainment (Franklin 1997), and radically depoliticised (Sparks 1992; Corner and Rees 2003). Similar trends have been observed elsewhere in the English-speaking world (Turner et al. 2000; Carroll 2002). In view of the overwhelming presence of this type of content, surprisingly few studies have focused on the linguistic means by which tabloid newspapers promote interest in celebrities and negotiate the relationship between readers, press and stars.

The present study therefore sets out from a textual analysis of articles about celebrities in the British tabloid *The Sun*, focusing on the linguistic resources deployed in association with the famous person and the typically vernacular voice with which the writer engages readers and claims to speak for them. The article then moves on to discuss factors that may underlie the subject positions offered to the readers and the nature of the rhetorical relations that are established through tabloid articles. This analysis is then used to draw conclusions about the way tabloid newspapers operate as social mediators that are irreverent without being threatening, generating populist discourses that contrive to engage and hold a mass audience in an age of fragmentation.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Media discourses are language acts through which symbolic constructs are made real. Discourse entails the negotiation or construction of reality by individuals or groups through the use of symbolic tools. The media – in this case, the press – use these constructs not simply to make sense of reality but also to formulate in a particular way the world that surrounds us. The tools of linguistic analysis, such as study of cohesion, allusion and connotation, hortatory rhetoric, vernacular registers, and so on, can be employed not just to discuss style, but also to open up an inquiry into the social meaning of the texts under consideration (Fairclough 1995). This approach to critical discourse analysis has here been applied in order to describe and interpret the media texts under scrutiny.

This basic theoretical perspective is also influenced by agenda theory, which is concerned not so much with how the media persuade people of one thing or another, but with how they depict social reality and present a list of issues that people need to have an opinion on and/or talk about (Jacobson 2002; Rokeach 1982; Shaw 1979). These theorists contend that the mass media not only set the agenda, but also define the terms in which phenomena should be understood and debated. The media thus provide topics, symbols, images and narrative structures as well as ideologies and values that may be used in public and private discourse.

In the present case, the tabloid discourses on celebrities cannot be understood without the explanations afforded by agenda theory, because however much a particular presentation of a celebrity might draw linguists' attention, it cannot offer an adequate explanation as to why such an article might be offered to the public in a national newspaper.

3. THE TEXTS

The texts in the present study were all selected from *The Sun*, a down-market right-of-centre tabloid owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International, in 2006-7. *The Sun* has long been the most popular daily in Britain, with a daily circulation oscillating around three million copies.

Since the study focuses on celebrity news, four internationally famous figures were chosen, and ten articles were located about each of them from the last quarter of 2006 and the first quarter of 2007 (see Appendix for a full list of articles). The people were: Victoria Beckham, Britney Spears, Naomi Campbell and Paris Hilton. It should be noted that the study focuses on what has been called their mediated personae (Evans and Hesmondhalgh 2005: 17), images which are only loosely attached to the real people involved, and which are entirely dependent on the media for their creation and perpetuation.

4. RHETORIC OF GLAMOUR: THE IDENTITY CHAIN

The use of the identity chain, a series of co-referential elements deployed to refer to the same person throughout a text (Hasan 1993; Morley 2002), is one of the main ways in which cohesion is achieved in newspaper texts. This phenomenon has received some attention from critical discourse analysts (Fowler 1995), who have noted how what is intrinsically no more than a basic mechanism of textual cohesion is exploited by journalists to add colour and human interest to their articles, and how this subjective element sets the ideological tone of the finished text. In newspaper articles, it is conventional for large numbers of instantiations and co-referential tokens to be employed by the writer, nominally in order to provide information in a suitably condensed form, but probably also in order to ensure that the reader is reminded of background information that he or she may have forgotten. For example, the broadsheet newspaper which refers to "Silvio Berlusconi, 67, media mogul and former Prime Minister of Italy" is not just adhering to a newspaper convention regarding heavy noun phrases (Biber 2003) or adding new information (for most readers, most of this is not likely to be completely new), it is also establishing the common ground on which the writer can reasonably hope the rest of the article will be understood. It thus fulfils both a function of textual cohesion, as part of a chain of epithets referring to the same person who is the subject of the text, and a function of social cohesion, in that it builds the foundations of a shared understanding between writer and readers. Moreover, as the identity chain is usually perceived not as an opinion or an assertion, but as "given" information, it may easily be accepted uncritically by readers, whose level of attention is probably not particularly high (O'Halloran 1993). Although low attention might mean that readers remain unaffected by ideologies in the text, it is likely that long-term exposure to the same media ultimately takes its toll, and readers may gradually imbibe more of the newspaper's ideology than they themselves realise. It is therefore crucial to explore the nature of identity chains in the type of article under scrutiny, in order to reach a deeper understanding of the way the texts function both linguistically and ideologically.

When specific examples of tabloid articles on celebrities are reviewed, various characteristic features of such identity chains come to light. First, the "star" status of the celebrity

is constantly underlined. Thus, Victoria Beckham is referred to as “fashion icon” (V1, V2), “ex-Spice girl” (V1, V8), with a “star-studded lifestyle” (V7). Similarly, Britney Spears is labelled as “pop’s princess” (B6), “the princess” (B1, B4, B8), “the star” (B4, B8, B10), “superstar” (B2), while Naomi Campbell is labelled “supermodel” (N1, N2, N5, N7, N9). This in itself is worthy of attention, not least because of its evident redundancy. Although the readers of *The Sun* surely know that these people are “stars” (after all, if they were not, why would anyone be writing about them?), *Sun* writers evidently perceive the need to underline this constantly, perhaps in order to reinforce the importance of their story. As Connell notes (1998), it seems to be linguistically necessary to establish extraordinariness as an excuse for newsworthiness by inflationary lexis (actors become stars, and stars become superstars), despite the evident redundancies. By relying so heavily on epithets of stardom, tabloid writers boost the ideology of the star, the mystique of the celebrity, the handy consensus (particularly useful for the journalist) that there are some people who are “newsworthy” just by existing.

At this point, we should note that “stars” are not the only type of person who is treated in this way. The tabloid writer’s repertoire only contains a limited range of categories into which the protagonists of news stories can be slotted, all of which function as simplifying labels that signify in particular ways within the systems of meaning that operate in the tabloid press. Epithets like “stunna”, “pervert”, “fiend” and “love-cheat” have become a staple of the way tabloid writers categorise the main players in the stories they write. As Conboy (2003: 47) points out, these constitute populist categories which function as a “compressed form of cultural allusion” that tends to reduce reality to a finite set of stereotyped scenarios which preclude deeper analysis. The more elaborate members of the identity chain, involving heavy noun phrases such as “glamorous 65-year-old ex-Beatle” or “the self-styled king of pop”, are particularly likely to function as an agenda-setting device which collapses debatable issues into uncontested information bites.

5. RHETORIC OF GLAMOUR: THE SIMILARITY CHAIN

Identity chains are simple to detect, because in the tabloid context it is obvious that the synonyms, instantiations, noun phrases, reference words, and so on, all refer to the same person, in this case, the celebrity. The notion of the similarity chain is less precise, the association between elements being the rather loose one of “the same kind of thing” (Hasan 1993). Although the links may be more tenuous, the relationships are still important, because the overall cohesion of the text is underpinned by such connections. Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that there is an element of subjectivity in the identification of similarity chains which is not present for identity chains, and the assertions made here are doubtless more open to criticism on these grounds.

In the case of the articles under scrutiny here, it is evident that the similarity chains surrounding the “star” also bear traces of the need to assert the star’s glamorous qualities. For example, the star’s surroundings, clothes, cars, and so on, are often mentioned even though this would not strictly be necessary to narrate the story. In “star” stories, glamour is usually present, even if the circumstances are unprepossessing. Thus an article about Britney Spears focusing on her mental breakdown is careful to mention that she “checked into an Antigua

rehab clinic (...) after hitting rock bottom during a four-day booze bender in New York (...) Before returning to California, where she briefly visited her sons in Malibu” (B6). This piling up of exotic settings is not just part of the story, it is a thumbnail sketch that fills in some of the glamorous backdrop to the lives of the rich, something that is essential in the context of the “star” story. For, as Baudrillard (1970) pointed out, in a society orientated towards consumption, our heroes are framed as the “idols of consumption”. “Great wastrels” like movies stars and sportsmen, who fulfil the function of profligate expenditure, are idolised precisely because they take consumption to an extreme: they occupy the top rung of the ladder of consumption which ordinary citizens are programmed to scale.

Although readers’ purchasing power is of its nature more limited, the aura surrounding the material attributes of glamour tends towards a celebration of consumer values (Conboy 2001) which draws readers seductively into its golden web. For ultimately, as Baudrillard (1970) points out, consumption is not something people do: the consumer society projects a structure that is external to and coercive over individuals, held together by an ideology that leads people to believe that they are affluent, fulfilled, happy and liberated. This ideology is underpinned by the narratives of the tabloid press, which hold the icons of the consumer creed tantalisingly before our eyes.

6. RHETORIC OF FAMILIARITY

The third object of our current analysis confronts us with a paradox. At the same time as the tabloids celebrate the trappings of wealth and fame, they also manage to convey the message that stars are “just like us”. This may seem trivial, obvious or merely symptomatic of the general reporting principle of relating what is new and different to what is already known, in order to ensure common comprehension (Moscovici 2000). However, closer examination of this phenomenon brings out details that are worthy of deeper consideration. On the surface, the human interest of stories such as Britney Spears’s breakdown or Naomi Campbell’s rage attack lies in the possibility that readers may in some sense be able to react to them on a familiar level, albeit with disapproval.

At a deeper level, the voyeuristic vantage point offered to readers is rhetorically camouflaged by a spurious air of domesticity (Bell 2003). When we read that Britney “is terrified her estranged hubby will take sons Sean Preston, one, and five-month-old Jayden James away from her” (B6), it is evident that the reader is being engaged on a common human level. “Attacker Naomi is ‘so sorry’” (N9) is less likely to arouse sympathy, and more probably intended to provoke derision. In such examples, the vernacular discourses of the tabloids address the reader directly in their own peculiar pseudo-slang that verges on self-parody. Texts are peppered with words such as “hubby” or “pal” that can hardly be identified with any real working-class language variant today, but which have come to form a kind of stylised vernacular “tabloidese” (Smith 1975). Although such abbreviations may have originated for completely unrelated reasons connected with the lack of space available in the large headlines typical of the paper tabloid, they have now become a conventional part of the tabloid register. The use of such pseudo-familiar language helps to create a sensation of cosiness, of intimacy with the stars described, as though they were the girl or boy next door, which enables the journalist to exploit better the emotional appeal of the story.

Thus the journalist who refers to Britney's "hubby" (B6) is playing on the most basic of human emotions, creating a sense of commonality with the reader and community between readers. As Conboy (2003: 48) points out, the tabloids' claim to speak for the people, with the people and "in its own voice", is essential to its undertaking to create cohesion among its readership – and this notion of a community of readers is itself vital for the survival of the tabloid press.

Arguably, in claiming to establish a direct, familiar, cosy relationship with celebrities, the tabloids are building a reading community –with common foci of interest, shared emotions and open-ended storyline– much in the way that a soap opera leads to the formation of a viewing community. The dramas of the rich and famous fulfil the function of a nationwide or even global soap opera, in which readers can intermittently identify with, sympathise with or detest the protagonists, but always within the bounds of a common agenda set by the media themselves. Moreover, the multiple, decentred narrative of soap operas, which breaks the illusion of unity and closure offered by classic realism (Modleski 1980), allows almost infinite potential for celebrity stories to be generated, regenerated, contradicted and denied, adding the flavour of uncertainty and half-truth that usually accompanies real gossip. Once the media have established that a particular event is newsworthy and launched it onto the tabloid stage, almost any twist or turn of events is possible – except, of course, an outright denial that the story in question is worthy of the public interest. As Conboy has noted (2001), in many contexts the tabloids superficially seem to exploit open-endedness but ultimately use it to close down genuine debate.

7. RHETORIC OF DISRESPECT

Finally, the discourses of stardom are rarely without a note of *Schadenfreude* or downright ridicule. The stars are richer than the readers, and what is more, the stars often behave in ways that are inappropriate, and the readers know this. Sometimes, a star's downfall can be richly deserved, and in this case the unholy rejoicing of the tabloid press (and not only the tabloid press) may even contain elements that recall the Aristotelian theory of tragedy. However, in the tabloid press, the tendency to mock requires little or no misbehaviour on the part of the star. Just as some people are stars just because they are stars, others (or the same people) may be ridiculous just because they are deemed to be ridiculous. The tabloids thus entice their readers into a running joke which can be activated by almost any trivial detail. For example, it is a truth universally acknowledged in the tabloid world that Victoria Beckham is an airhead, and that David Beckham is not too bright. Hence any story including these characters may contain a reference to the running jokes: indeed, one sometimes suspects that the stars in question may have started to join in the game. In an article headlined "Being Posh is 'massive stress'" (V1), we learn, supposedly from Victoria herself, that "Nowadays I multitask, planning outfits while I'm doing something else – getting ready for bed, or taking a bath." In another, about Victoria nipping out to buy food at Macdonald's, we learn that she may be going to pick up "some toys for David" (V6). Similar jibes are levelled at Paris Hilton, another butt of the tabloid press, who is photographed as she "nips out to buy a Barbie toy" (P9), and videoed as she stalls her Bentley convertible because she forgot to put petrol in.

Foolish mistakes and air headed behaviour are often the butt of tabloid humour, as the journalist invites the reader to join the game of ridiculing the stars. But in some sense they are merely peripheral to the main game of starwatching. For the aspect of the stars which occupies a central position in tabloid discourses – and does not depend on serendipitous misbehaviour on the part of the celebrity – has to do with their main role as stars and the way in which they are playing it. Like theatre critics discussing actors' performances, tabloid journalists comment on, criticise and praise, the way in which each star lives up to his or her personal stardom. Their populist discourses claim to articulate their readers' own ambivalent stance, inviting them to collude in ridiculing the people who were previously held up as objects of envy and admiration.

Let us take the case of articles like "Posh's Annus Horribilis" (V3), which begins its chronicle of 2006 with "Where did it all go wrong for Posh? Once the WAG we all wanted to be, Victoria's faced wrath and ridicule this year." Such texts invite readers to react to the star, criticise or revile her, but also sympathise with her, as a variety of subject positions are set up throughout the article which readers may choose to occupy. The immediate proximity of online discussion boards in which *Sun* readers may add their own comments heightens the sense that the readers here are being invited to act as the jury, pronouncing judgement on the celebrity, on the one hand, and signalling their solidarity or disagreement with each other as members of a community, on the other. If anything, the new interactivity of news has the effect of blurring still further the boundaries between information and comment, objective and subjective, news and entertainment (Lewis 2003). In the case of celebrity news, interactive features echo and complement the populist discourses of the stories, conspiring to reassert community over and above the apparent tolerance of dissent.

Another running theme in this area fits well with the journalists' unspoken motto that hypocrisy is to be sought out at all costs. For example, Victoria Beckham's promise to use "larger models" for her fashion label (V5) is mocked because of the contrast with her own "skeletal" frame, with hints that she is merely doing this in order to appear even slimmer herself. Readers are "roped in" to the game of spotting the hypocrite by the use of direct speech, "Yes, that's right. Size zero Posh – who can make skinny jeans look baggy – does not want women like her to model her new denim range." The gambit of sharing the joke with the readers again forms part of the strategy to claim common ground, as by distancing the celebrity, writer and reader are drawn into proximity.

The twin stratagems of disrespect for the celebrity and synthetic communion with and between readers is seldom more clearly represented than in *The Sun*'s "Bizarre" section, in which irreverent stories and pictures are filed alongside discussion groups that invite readers to contribute their own views. The nature of the online edition is such that stories from the "Bizarre" section are indexed down the side of any story about that particular star, so that an article about Britney's breakdown (B6) is indexed to "Brit's hair on e-bay for £500k". The cumulative effect of this is both to reinforce the mystique of the star, and to subtly undermine it. This disrespect, sometimes spilling over into mockery, has been identified as characteristic of tabloid discourse. In a slightly different context, Conboy (2003) has argued that the populist irreverence of the tabloid press destabilises deference for the political process and trivialises politics, thereby forestalling any genuine political engagement. In the case of the "stars", the actors are not political figures, and so the ideological implications

of mistreating them are less obvious. Yet quite why the tabloid formula enables mockery to be added to the equation without loss of glamour is not entirely clear. It could be that by making fun of the stars, the (socially and economically less privileged) readers are helped to work out their own frustrations, some of which are simultaneously being exacerbated by the gilded overlay of stardom. Such an approach would tap the therapeutic force of the carnival, which releases inhibitions and licenses unseemly emotions, acting out a chaotic catharsis to relieve the tensions within society.

On the theme of carnival, the interplay between photographs and text which has always been part of the tabloids' repertoire has now taken on new dimensions, with hypertext links to other stories or to video clips, discussion groups, interactive questionnaires, and so on. In the case of tabloid celebrity reports, these features heighten the sense of carnival. At the same time as the story appeals for our sympathy or condemnation, the discussion groups are directly calling for us to add our own comments. Meanwhile the links on the right-hand margin are reminding us about peccadilloes committed by the star in question, or informing us about how we can get a waistline like theirs, or obtain their hair on e-bay.

8. CONCLUSIONS

We have considered the way in which tabloids handle celebrity stories, identifying their claim to relevance, their assertion of glamour, their engagement of common human emotions and their piquant invitation to criticise the objects of admiration. In their handling of the "star" story, the tabloids thus display a range of strategies that strengthen their hold on a mass circulation in the face of social fragmentation: first, they manage to sell their own definition of what is newsworthy to a willing public, and then they consolidate their territory by drawing on the lowest common denominators of human emotions. What remains is to delve more deeply into what has been termed the interpretation and explanation of this phenomenon (Fairclough 1995).

On one level, the economic interests furthered by the tabloid reading community are obvious. It is hardly necessary to state that newspaper empires are massive business enterprises. Conboy (2001) has amply demonstrated the way in which recent developments in tabloid journalism are directed towards furthering the economic interests of the press barons. But the ideological structures that underpin the tabloid world view are less transparent and worthy of greater attention. Discourse itself embodies ideological assumptions which sustain and legitimise existing power relations within society (Foucault 1972). However, because the received ideas and relations are assumed rather than consciously adopted, discourse remains relatively opaque to interpretation by participants. As Bourdieu (1977) noted, subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing, and what they are doing has more meaning than they know. At first sight, the tabloids perplex critical readers by bombarding them with contradictions and incongruities. Far from offering a monologic discourse, the tabloid seems at first sight to embody heteroglossia, inviting readers to admire, mock, vote and even purchase online in a carnivalesque array of diverting choices. In a spirit of spurious camaraderie, the tabloid press holds out an assortment of subject positions, which gives the illusion of choice that public consensus deems so necessary in this consumer age.

Yet this freedom is illusory. For one thing, none of the positions offered to the readers is socially radical or culturally critical. No one asks why the topics on offer are worthy of interest, why these particular people are in the public eye, or even whether the stories told bear any resemblance to the truth. Whether the reader takes up the consumerist role of vicarious participant in the glamorous lifestyle, the flattering role of peer or the even more gratifying role of judge and jury, she or he acquiesces in the basic principles of the consumer society and, most importantly, the essential role of gossip newspapers in cementing this society together. This argument might seem to be somewhat circular, since people not interested in celebrity gossip exclude themselves from the outset by refusing to purchase this type of newspaper. But it is only necessary to consider the massive readership of *The Sun* and periodicals like it in order to sense the crucial importance of celebrity gossip in forming and reproducing the mindset of vast sectors of British society.

Ultimately, the negotiation and reconstruction of reality in tabloid discourse tends to create and perpetuate the myth of the star. Paradoxically, the shifting nature of all tabloid discourse, and the kaleidoscope effect of the different positions and tangential narratives on offer, only serve to strengthen and promote the cult of celebrity. By painting in a vast and variegated panorama around their chosen icons, the newspapers further the cause of celebrity devotion even when they most seem to be undermining it. It is arguable that this process of myth creation serves an important purpose beyond the crude economic interests of a few individuals. At least since Plato's time, we have known that stories have crucial importance in shaping society (Plato 1955: 119). In binding together the fragments of post-modern society for a massive community of readers, tabloid celebrity culture moulds the collective subconscious, providing the basic frames of reference through which life can be ordered and interpreted. Baudrillard (1970: 193) argues that the consumer society "has not found an equivalent myth to embody the metaphysics of consumption". However, it is at least tenable to suggest that the consumer society is constantly generating its own ephemeral pantheon around the foundational myth of the star. The manifold expressions of stardom and the multiple stances offered to the reader act together in a pattern of shifting difference that dazzles enough momentarily to disguise the lack of transcendence. But like most of what the tabloids promise, the myth itself never quite materializes, and the promise of glamour succumbs to banality. As Baudrillard points out (1970: 193), "myths, like the faculties of speech, reflection and transcription, are indissociable from transcendence". The debased mythologies of the tabloid press can never satisfy, for they lack the essential quality, but their unsatisfactory nature is itself symptomatic of the inherent tensions of the consumer society. By generating needs that can never be sated, they perfectly obey the underlying logic of the consumer society that they represent and promote.

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APPENDIX: ARTICLES FROM *THE SUN*

- V1 Being Posh is "massive stress", 16 October 2006
 V2 Harding slams "anorexic" Posh, 14 November 2006
 V3 Posh's annus horribilis, 13 December 2006
 V4 Posh admits to food issues, 3 January 2007
 V5 Posh bans size zero models, 31 January 2007
 V6 Store blimey, it's Posh, 19 February 2007
 V7 I love my glam LA life, 28 February 2007
 V8 Vic is one posh beach babe, 28 February 2007
 V9 Posh: I cry if David is away, 8 March 2007
 V10 Is that Posh? Of corset is! 27 March 2007
- N1 Naomi's catwalk comeback, 21 November 2006
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