INTRODUCTION

Exploring the language of the popular in American and British newspapers 1833–1988

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1. Introduction

There has been a refreshing amount of work undertaken of late on the history of the newspaper in both the USA and the UK; Huntzicker (1999), Campbell (2001), Copeland (2006) and Spencer (2007) in the USA, and Bingham (2004, 2009), Conboy (2004), Hampton (2004), Brake and Demoor (2009) and Williams (2009) from a British perspective to name but a few. Additionally, Wiener and Hampton (2007) and Wiener (2011) have sketched out the mutual influences within Anglo-American journalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is a second strand of work emerging from a more specifically linguistic perspective which seeks to better understand how the language of newspapers has changed over time, with notable work such as the conference in Zurich (2007) organized by Jucker (CHINED) on Historical News Discourse and published as Jucker (2009), while Brownlees (2006) published proceedings of a similarly themed conference from 2004. In 2003, the Journal of Historical Pragmatics produced a special edition (4 (1)) on changes in the language of news media, “Media and Language Change”, edited by Herring of Indiana University. This is complemented by the work emanating from Leeds under the direction of Johnson such as the Language in the Media Conferences, “Language in the Media: Representations, Identities, Ideologies” (2005) and “Language Ideologies and Media Discourse: Text, Practices, Policies” (2007), and the resultant Language in the Media edited collection (Johnson and Ensslin 2007). Work published by Raymond (1996, 1999) at the University of East Anglia has highlighted the stylistic distinctiveness of the language of early English news media.

In order to explore these interrelated themes in newspaper history a broader project (2010–2012) was funded as a Research Network by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council. It was the purpose of the network to bring leading scholars in the field together to discuss how their research interrelated and, more
importantly, how it could be enhanced by broader disciplinary dialogue drawing on the traditions and methodologies of history, language studies, literary studies and journalism studies.

The papers in this special volume of the *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* go back to one of the conferences organised by the research network. It was entitled “Popular News Discourse” and took place in Zurich in January 2012. It brought together contributions from the oft-neglected local and regional press of the nineteenth and twentieth century in Wales; Canada and the USA across areas of populist political engagement; popular prejudice traced across the use of the word “jingoism” in late nineteenth century British newspapers; the rise of football reports in an elite newspaper *The Times*; the broadening out of journalism to include television criticism of the 1950s and 1980s; the representation of popular entertainment in the late Victorian era; and cartoons and public health.

### 2. Research context

Curran (2002) has suggested that the most effective way to write future histories of the media would be to start by charting the social history in which particular media are embedded. This Research Network aimed to contribute to such synthetic ambition by its emphasis on the changing language of a particular part of the media ecology, the popular newspaper, and in particular, the social and political implications of how it deployed language to maximise its commercial appeal to distinct national audiences.

The dates 1833–1988 were chosen to frame the series of seminars as they are key dates in the development of popular discourse within the Anglo-American newspaper. 1833 sees the first development of the Penny Press in the USA which was to provide a distinctive trajectory for commercial popular journalism, while 1988 witnesses the peak in circulation of Murdoch’s British-based popular tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. This long view was planned to reinforce how important historical context is to the understanding of contemporary popular newspapers. Even though this project certainly sought to address some of the wider social implications of the discourse of newspaper language, it proceeded from a thorough textual exploration in the first instance.

As has been often remarked, the word “popular” is one of the most complex in the English language in its range of, sometimes quite contradictory, meanings. The emergence and development of modes of address which were explicitly designed to appeal to the complex of cultural, political and economic issues which could be described as popular (e.g. Gans 1974; Hall 1978; Williams 1978; Hartley 1996; Huntzicker 1999; Conboy 2002, 2006), represent trajectories which can be better
understood within the contrasting contexts of American and British cultural and political conditions. For example, the issue of “race” has particular significance in the US context in fracturing “the popular”, while interconnections with discourses of imperialism and nation within questions of class play a key role in establishing common currency around the popular in Britain.

One of the most interesting processes within the historical development of the newspaper has been the incremental accommodation of influences from non-elite sources whether they were narrative, thematic or presentational. We refer to this process as “popularisation”. It has a commercial driver in that appealing to more readers and through this channel more advertisers brought greater profit to the newspaper businesses. In addition, there is a political necessity within the communication processes, including newspapers, of democratic societies to appeal to the interests of people outside the narrow elite of commercial and political leaders. The success of newspapers as popular artefacts is ultimately a highly pragmatic form of communication. It is captured in Raymond Williams’ (1978) definition of the popular as meaning popular among the many; directed as a mass audience; speaking on behalf of the ordinary people as opposed to the elite.

One of the reasons for the apparent lack of a more consistent cross-fertilisation of research approaches to the language of newspapers had been that, as Jacobs and Jucker (1995) have identified, the historical pragmatic plane of the research agenda had never really “taken off”. Since this observation, however, their work has been complemented by much innovative work on the social construction of popular news media discourses with particular reference to issues such as nation, gender and class emerging in the work of Fairclough (1995), Wodak (2001) and more recently Richardson (2006). While this work has provided essential frames of analytical reference, it remains restricted to developing frameworks of analysis which concentrate on the contemporary. Although research has been produced on these themes, it has not really moved out from the restrictions of discipline-based enquiry to engage with the full research potential of considering the language of newspapers from an interdisciplinary set of perspectives.

Before 1833 there was an elite need for commercial and political news in both the USA and Britain. However, as Smith (1984) has pointed out in the case of Britain, the newspaper was a non-starter as a mode of social communication outside the commercial classes. The same was true in the USA. While political changes in the USA and in Britain from the 1830s began to acknowledge a more active political role of a wider public — the Jacksonian democracy in the USA and the Reform Act of 1832 in Britain, for example — newspaper proprietors noticed the potential in a press which was directed at a broader urban constituency. In order to accommodate this, they began to develop styles of writing which drew more upon the interests and speech patterns of the everyday. While this was evident in the daily newspaper press
in the USA, a similar process was emerging in Britain, predominantly in Sunday newspapers targeted at the working classes. The added attraction of this process of popularisation was that, beyond simple sales on the street, it greatly enhanced the appeal of newspapers to advertisers. The appeal to readers outside the confines of the elite political and commercial classes in both countries was entirely pragmatic to the extent that it enabled newspapers to sell a popular set of interests back to the audience they claimed as their audience. Popular appeal was driven by commercial ambition. Although the process of newspaper popularisation developed in different ways, there is enough commonality of language and enough cross-fertilisation of cultural interests and even newspaper personnel to justify a set of loosely comparative studies. Throughout the nineteenth century, the ambition to increase sales of newspapers which were written to appeal to the largest number and thereby accumulate the greatest profits was driven through a combination of vernacular style and rhetorical claims to be on the side of the ordinary people. Campaigning journalism was a highly effective way of combining the two, backing populist causes in language designed to stir the passions of the masses and persuade them that the newspaper was their spokesperson. This reached its zenith in the USA in the yellow press of Pulitzer and Hearst and later in the first mass popular dailies of Harmsworth and Pearson in the UK from the 1890s to the early 1900s. The popularisation process takes another interesting turn as a more aggressive, populist and sexualised variety of journalism, the tabloid, emerges in the USA in the 1920s and Britain in the 1930s. Although of limited long-term appeal in the USA, the tabloid becomes a resilient and influential mode of incorporating many aspects of a less deferential culture in Britain post World War Two. The climax of this sort of wide blue-collar appeal in a newspaper comes in The Sun newspaper in the late 1980s in Britain. From 1988, although still a considerable force in media terms, its absolute power begins to wane as other media developments combine to trigger a consistent decline in circulation.

3. Conclusion

This project, therefore, attempts to contribute to the field of Historical Pragmatics by comparing and contrasting the various strategies employed by popular newspapers to articulate an idealised version of the interests and language of their readers for profit and political influence. This in turn enables us to explore how modern varieties of popular journalism developed over time as a distinct set of linguistic practices.

One of the benefits of this comparative overview is that it allows us to consider the changing political and social conditions of these two countries within a common set of popular media discourses.
References


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