

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Why Do Journalists Quote Other People, Or On The Functions Of Reported Speech In Argumentative Newspaper Discourse



The main purpose of any newspaper article is to make the reader agree to share the journalist's viewpoint. That is why newspaper discourse is necessarily argumentative. And it is mainly by means of language that the journalist tries to persuade his reader to accept his argumentation.

If we look at any newspaper article we'll readily notice how often any journalist quotes other people. Naturally we can conclude that if reported speech is so frequently used it plays some important role in building argumentation. In the present work we try to figure out the functions of reported speech in argumentative newspaper discourse.

The research was based on the articles of quality British papers (*the Times, the Guardian, the Financial Times, the Herald*) and yielded the following results.

Analysis showed that in the structure of argumentation reported speech can be found in two possible positions: in the position of the thesis and that of an argument.

Only one third of the argumentations analyzed used reported speech as the thesis. This can be easily understood: if a journalist formulates the thesis himself he is free to put it any way he likes and further interpret it accordingly. And if his thesis is a quotation from some other person's utterance, he is bound by what was actually said and not so free in interpretation. In spite of this, a number of argumentations still had its thesis in the form of reported speech. Then we must ask ourselves, what are the advantages of this use that compensate the abovementioned inconvenience.

As the thesis of argumentation reported speech performs the following functions: function of additional support of the thesis at the very stage of its proclamation, function of a shift of responsibility, aesthetic function and indication of the

authorship of the article.

Function of additional support of the thesis at the very stage of its proclamation is the most important one. Here the thesis partially gains characteristics of an argument. As soon as the thesis is proclaimed it is immediately supported by the authority of a person who said it.

(1) In Liverpool last week, Tony Blair himself said: “We need to renew ourselves for times to come” (*Guardian*, Wednesday July 9, 2003, p. 22).

As soon as we see such a thesis, even before any support is given, we already tend to believe it or at least take it less critically, especially if the quoted person is an authority to us (as Tony Blair is, or at least was at the time the article was published, to the majority of British citizens, as the elections showed). It is interesting to note that the wording itself coincides with the name of an argument to authority: “ipse dixit” = “himself said”.

We called the next important function of reported speech as the thesis of argumentation “function of a shift of responsibility”. By this we mean that the author of the article uses reported speech to introduce an antithesis that will be refuted further on in his article.

(2) “History will forgive us,” bleats Blair. (*Herald*, Monday, July 21. 2003, p.13).

The same person as in (1) is quoted, but the attitude to his words is quite different. The selection of the word “bleats” clearly indicates the author’s intentions. Such a function of reported speech is characteristic of articles full of sharp criticism and denunciation.

However, the same function of a shift of responsibility can be met in its more moderate form in the articles where the author doesn’t show his position at all and stays neutral. Usually in such cases he investigates two contradictory viewpoints and takes responsibility for neither.

(3) Just as strongly as northern regions press their case for special treatment, the regions in the greater South-East argue vociferously for re-investment. (*Financial Times*, March 6/March 7, 2004, p. 9).

Here both viewpoints are introduced by reported speech, though no exact names are given. The two functions discussed above can be most often figured out in newspaper argumentation using reported speech as its thesis. There are however,

two minor functions: aesthetic function and indication of the authorship of the article.

Sometimes an attractive utterance of some person helps to capture the reader's attention, makes him read the article, influences him:

(4) Britain should protect its citizens "against injustice and wrong" (*Guardian*, Wednesday July 9, 2003, p. 22).

Quotation in this article clearly belongs to the bookish elevated style and in this respect stands apart from the argumentation that follows. Sometimes reported speech as the thesis of argumentation simply introduces the author of the article.

(5) The former teacher has taken a vital role in the president's re-election campaign, writes James Harding (*Financial Times*, March 6/March 7, 2004, p. 11).

It looks as if the thesis is introduced by the newspaper editorial board, and the task to prove it is delegated to a certain journalist.

Thus as the thesis of argumentation reported speech can both add weight to the proposed claim and withdraw responsibility for the claim from the author of the article and is a convenient means of argumentative persuasion.

However, in most cases reported speech can be found in the position of an argument, where it is mostly used for the purposes of convincing and persuading (the borderline between the two can not be always clearly defined). Here we can observe an interesting feature of constructions with reported speech that makes them an effective means of persuasion. In most cases these constructions function as two-faced units, a unity of two types of arguments. The first is represented by an introducing proposition (author's words) and is inevitably an argument to authority. The second argument is represented by the quoted words of the authority and can be an argument of any type. Lets take as an example a combination "Argument to authority+ Modus Ponens/ Modus Tollens"

If A than B - (6) To win, analysts say, a candidate has to convince Americans he has the stature to be president,

A - a measure on which Kerry excels.

Therefore, B - \*Kerry will win the elections

If A, than B -(7) American voters have to believe a candidate thinks enough like

them, says Anthony Corrado of the liberal Brookings institute, think-tank and a veteran of Democratic campaigns.

Not A - Kerry too often seems aloof, despite his campaign's efforts to change him. Therefore, not B - \*Kerry will not win the elections  
(*Herald*, Saturday March 6, 2004, p. 10)

Here the criteria of success with the American electorate are presented not by the journalist himself, but by competent persons presented as such to the reader: *Anthony Corrado of the liberal Brookings institute, think-tank and a veteran of Democratic campaigns* or just anonymous *analysts*. Modus Ponens/ Modus Tollens are well-justified schemes of argumentation readily accepted by any reasonable judge. But the fact that they are combined with an argument to authority makes convincing/ persuasion even more effective.

A question naturally arises what is the relative contribution of each of these two parts of an argument represented by reported speech to the overall effect. What is more important for the reader: appeal to authority or the argument contained in the quotation itself?

We conducted an experiment to determine the persuasive power of each component of these two-faced units.

For the experiment native-speakers were divided into two groups. Each group was given a text of the article Ban on Parents Using Science to Select Child's Sex taken from *The Times* (Wednesday November 12, 2003. p. 6), devoted to the question how ethical it is to select the sex of your future baby by means of modern medical techniques. To support the claim that this is unacceptable the author puts forward eight arguments presented by reported speech. In the texts presented to the first group of native-speakers constructions with reported speech were left as they were in the newspaper, and in the text presented to the second group appeal to authority was withdrawn, the text contained only the quoted word themselves as if they belonged to the journalist himself.

It is already common knowledge that reaction to argumentation largely depends on the initial opinion of the recipient on the question discussed, his demands, experience, knowledge, background, philosophy, etc. He tends to accept more readily the arguments that coincide with his initial opinion and vice versa (Witte, Brownlee 1991, p. 1064; Kunst-Gnamus 1991, pp. 653-662). Taking this into consideration before presenting the arguments, we asked the participants of our experiment to express their initial opinion on the problem in question (in favour/

more in favour/indifferent/more against/against). At the stage of results analysis we introduced coefficients that were supposed to minimize the effect of the reader's prejudice on his evaluation of arguments. If opinions of the reader and the journalist coincide, the latter tends to give higher evaluation to the arguments. That is why for these cases we used coefficients  $<1$ . In the reverse case arguments are not so readily accepted by the reader, and we used coefficients  $>1$ . The following coefficients were used:

in favour - 3

more in favour - 2

indifferent - 1

more against -  $\frac{1}{2}$

against -  $\frac{1}{3}$

The results of the experiment are shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
Average convincing force of arguments for the two groups of participants

No of argument	Convincing force of the argument for the first group of participants (argument to authority is present)	Convincing force of the argument for the second group of participants (no argument to authority)
1	2	1,6
2	2	1,6
3	2	1,3
4	2	1,6
5	2	1
6	2,5	1
7	2,5	1,6
8	2	1,6

Table 1 - Average convincing force of arguments for the two groups of participants

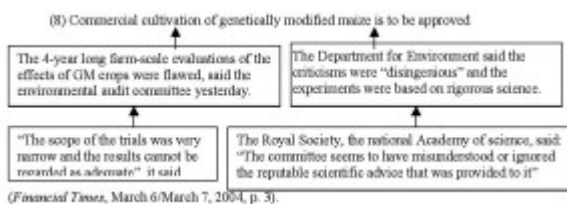
Thus, our experiment showed that though the readers mainly become convinced by an argument contained in the quoted words, a reference to authority adds convincing power to these arguments (in average 1.25 times). But if the main argument doesn't sound convincing to the reader, an appeal to authority can't make it acceptable to him.

Another function of reported speech in the position of an argument is to permit the journalist to conceal his deliberate fallacies in argumentation from the reader. Impressed by the authority of the person whose words are quoted the reader takes the argumentation less critically.

Unfortunately, such cases are not rare in contemporary British press. For example, journalists proclaim one thesis and actually prove another - such a

fallacy in logics got the name *ignoratio elenchi*:

(8) Commercial cultivation of genetically modified maize is to be approved



The initially proclaimed discussion of pros and cons of commercial cultivation of genetically modified maize turns into the argument about reliability of the results of farm-scale evaluations of the effects of GM crops. The reader becomes involved in the emotionally coloured exchange of arguments between reputable organizations (*the environmental audit committee, The Department for Environment, The Royal Society, the national Academy of science*). Using reported speech in the position of the argument the journalist prevents the reader from noticing the fact that the thesis has been changed.

Besides, the reported speech in the position of an argument can be used for the purpose of refutation: the words of the opponent are quoted to reveal weak points in his argumentation and to put forward counter-arguments.

(9) In his spirited rejoinder, Michael Palmer makes the absurd statement that "as a general rule, those who are clever, innovative and hard-working become more wealthy than those who are not".

↑←

A massive amount of wealth is simply inherited, and so it has nothing at all to do with being "clever, innovative and hard-working".

↑

Take figures for the US: the richest 1% inherit about one-third of the inherited wealth, the next 9% inherit another third, whereas the remaining 90% inherit wealth averaging \$ 40,000. (*Herald*, Saturday, March 6, 2004, p.12)

In this argumentation the author first quotes the words of his antagonist when

introducing the thesis (or, actually, antithesis) of his argumentation. Then in his argument, which is further supported by quoting exact figures, he uses again the section of the initial quotation that seems to him most unacceptable. He turns the antagonist's proper words containing his evaluation of the rich against him.

Thus, it is not par hazard that reported speech can so often be found in argumentative newspaper discourse. On all stages of argumentation it comes in handy for a variety of purposes. It permits the journalist to shift the responsibility for a disputable thesis, attracts the reader, persuades and convinces him by the authority of the quoted source and by the force of the argument contained therein, hides the journalist's fallacies and sometimes even "betrays" its author turning its power against him. In a word, the use of reported speech in newspaper argumentative discourse is completely justified by the variety of important argumentative functions it successfully fulfills.

#### REFERENCES

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