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La Mo **Languages and Modalities**

The generic features of frontpage news items

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Abstract

The article considers the role of frontpage news items in creating a political or a social event, and with reliance on the BBC Web news bulletin seeks to prove that frontpage news items are a special type of multimodal text with recognizable generic characteristics: a headline, a picture and an abstract. Structurally, the present paper consists of three sections, each of which is devoted to a certain aspect of the problem in question. Firstly, the author looks into the history of scientific investigations of genres. Considering both fundamental works and the latest achievements in this field, the author stresses the social role of genres and maintains the view that different types of texts appear as a response to social expectations. Secondly, the issue of multimodality is brought up, and frontpage news items are described as texts written in two semiotic modes. The combination of a written text and a picture serves the purpose of constructing a social or a political event informing and influencing the reader at the same time. Thirdly, analysis of seven BBC frontpage news items is done to prove that frontpage form of news presentation is a special genre that has both technological and social roots. This genre has recently evolved from a traditional way of introducing news and has a number of distinctive features, like a short and meaningful headline provided with an abstract different from the headline of the linked article, an image that often conveys a meaning different from that of the headline. The contradictory meanings serve to construct events and form opinions; suggestion is made that the more meanings there are, the more politicized the event is.

Key Words

Introduction

The language of news media has always been an issue of scientific interest. With the advance of new technologies, Internet newspaper editions rapidly replaced printed editions often giving more space to pictures than to the written word. This form of news presentation, along with a different attitude to the event, which is now generally believed to be constructed in a text rather than described in it, gave rise to a new wave of research in the field of media discourse (Dijk 1985, 1988; Demiankov 2004; Lewis 2004; Vorontsova 2017).

Addressing the BBC official site we noticed that frontpage headlines are in most cases different from the headlines of the linked articles, which gives reason to consider the frontpage news bulletin as a special practice, and

suggest that the headlines and pictures on the front page belong to a special type of text and are meant to construct events. In this paper we argue that the four factors, namely, the technologically new way of communication, the practice of constructing events instead of describing them, the combination of verbal and non-verbal modes, and the practice of creating a front page with the news in brief, have determined the emergence of a new media genre which requires special research. To analyze the empirical data the methods of linguistic, semiotic and multimodal sentiment analysis are employed. The analysis is conducted along the following lines: 1. the meaning of the frontpage headline is identified; 2. the headline and the related image are compared in terms of the meanings they generate; 3. the frontpage headline is compared with the headline of the linked article in terms of meaning. All

in all, the analysis is carried out with a view to proving that frontpage headlines and the attached images can be regarded as a special genre and are intended to construct conceptual events and form opinions even before the reader attends to the linked articles if, that is, he/she is interested. A point of special interest is that the frontpage headline and the picture often convey different meanings, contributing to the creation of a coherent textual event; the headline of the linked article may focus on an aspect of the referential event that is different from the one accentuated in the news bulletin headline, thus – supported by the article – creating a different textual event; gradually, a conceptual event that comprises cultural (evaluative/ ideological) meanings is constructed. Thus, the important thing is that, being a member of a certain culture and relying on its system of values, an average reader is quite content with the well-structured information on the front page he/she is offered. It means that the new genre is meant to reinforce the existing system of values. Experts or more sophisticated readers follow the link so as to be better informed and make their own judgements.

Theoretical background

The history of genre studies

Traditionally, discussions of genre issues, both in Russian and European linguistics, start with references to M. M. Bakhtin's Theory of Speech Genres that lay the basis for further investigations in this field. According to M. M. Bakhtin a speech (rhetorical) genre is a special type of text, and the term can refer to short remarks (like fragments of everyday conversation), to a story or a letter, to a military order, to any kind of business papers, to a public speech, scientific reports, and the whole variety of literary genres (Bakhtin 1996). It is worth mentioning that in the European tradition Bakhtin's theory is often compared with Speech Act Theory by J. Austin and J. Searle, which brings to the forefront the linguo-pragmatic and social role of genres (Andersen 2015).

Another Russian philologist whose ideas have been influential in shaping contemporary genre studies both in and outside Russia is Y.N. Tynjanov. In his theoretical works Y.N. Tynjanov emphasized the dynamic nature of genres, stressing that the recognition of genres depends on the properties of the text rather than on the reader's interpretation (Tynjanov, 1977). This idea is crucial for the present research as it suggests that frontpage news bulletins are structured according to the same pattern with only minor variations.

It is also worth mentioning that another Russian linguist to make a significant contribution to the theory of genres – literary genres in particular – was B.V. Tomashevski who stressed that the dynamic nature of genres results from hybridization – that is a process under which properties of a certain genre cross its boundaries and interlace with features of another genre. The important idea expressed by this linguist is that new genres are formed on the basis of one successful piece of writing (Tomashevski, 1996).

With the advance of cognitive linguistics, a new approach to genre studies evolved. Looking into the issue of genre, K. H. Jamieson and K. K. Campbell wondered whether different genres could be regarded as means of categorization and paid special attention to the fact that the term *genre* suggests a certain level of generalization, or abstraction of entities it applies to. Defining genres as distinctive and recurring patterns of rhetorical practice, the scientists stressed their being dynamic and situational, also distinguishable from each other. The disputable point is that if one genre is to be meaningfully distinguished from another there should be a larger class of rhetorical practices (Jamieson & Campbell 1978: 17–33).

Thus, the following ideas expressed by 20th century researchers are crucial for this work. Firstly, we stick to the point that a certain rhetorical pattern develops on the basis of existing patterns and comprises a number of general properties inherent to an unlimited number of texts. Though the practice of combining a headline with a picture has existed as long as the news genre itself, the recently established pattern is different from the traditional one as in printed texts there is only one headline that introduces an article, whereas in electronic editions one article has two headlines that may highlight the referential event differently, thus creating two textual events. Secondly, we argue that genres are means of categorization which takes place at different levels, as certain recurring patterns convey either more concrete or more abstract meanings. A good example is the genre of toast which possesses certain structural and linguistic features that vary depending on the occasion (birthday, marriage, a business event, etc.) and are different in each situation. The same applies to literary genres; for instance, a theatrical play follows a certain general pattern with a comedy, a tragedy, or a drama possessing their own recognizable features that are compulsory for all plays of a certain type.

Contemporary linguistics tends to consider the genre within the recently developing social cognitive paradigm with a special accent on the social parameters that determine the choice of linguistic means and provide for choosing certain speech patterns. Having developed from sociolinguistics, social psychology and cognitive semantics in the second half of the 20th century, cognitive sociolinguistics (or, social cognitive linguistics) has also borrowed their basic concepts, methods and approaches to describe the process of meaning-making with the help of social knowledge structures, like ad hoc categories, stereotypes, contextual and cultural models (Iriskhanova, 2014, p. 6). The sources of cognitive sociolinguistics, its terminology and research methods provide a solid foundation for further investigations of speech (rhetorical) genres, viewed as patterns of communication used to achieve the pragmatic effect.

Though within the socio-cognitive paradigm the social and the cognitive factors correlate very strongly, one or

the other may be dominating, which is the reason for two approaches to genre studies in cognitive sociolinguistics. In terms of the first approach all knowledge about genres is received from experience, it exists in the human mind in the form of cognitive structures and – once anyone finds themselves in a certain typical situation, it makes them arrange their speech in an appropriate way. The second approach regards genres as communicative and behavioral patterns that are formed ad hoc, which means that people decide what linguistic and stylistic means to choose so that their speech would suit a certain communicative situation. From this perspective the choice is also made with reliance on a certain prototype and previous experience, however, the patterns are argued to be not that rigid and obligatory but quite dynamic and adaptable categories. Being – to a certain degree – non-conventional, genres are quite consistent frame structures that shape patterns of oral and written communication as well as rules of interpretation (Chandler, 1977; Smedegaard, 2015; Caballero, 2008). Thus, within the socio-cognitive paradigm expectations of a certain community are an important prerequisite of a genre formation.

The recently developing branch of linguistics – Internet linguistics – founded by D. Crystal brought about a revolution in genre studies. Originally, D. Crystal described four types of Internet communication: e-mails, used for interpersonal communication; chatgroups that typically involve several people who are often anonymous, with message exchanges continuing indefinitely and dealing with a wide and unpredictable range of issues; virtual worlds, which are imaginary, go by different names, but their most common generic designation is with the acronym MUD (Multi-User Dungeon); the Web, which comprises texts that are connected by hyperlinks, or, the way D. Crystal puts if 'anything being potentially connected with anything' (Crystal 2004).

Following the ideas expressed by D. Crystal, Russian linguists launched a series of investigations of digital genres and have so far come up with a number of theories and virtual genres typologies that may be crucial for the formation of Virtual genre theory. With all the scientific interest in speech (rhetorical) genres in Russia, the Saratov school of linguistics seems to be the most advanced. The scholars of Saratov University are known to have been doing a lot of research within the social cognitive paradigm seeking to construct a mental model that would contain a variety of elements representing genres in the minds of those who produce and recognize texts as belonging to a certain type. Another way to study and describe speech genres is in terms of the prototypical approach according to which some texts are regarded as model, or exemplary, whereas others are described as peripheral and showing features of other genres (Tarasova, 2018). The task of creating a universal model applicable to texts in different languages seems to be quite ambitious as this kind of model is to be of a very high level of abstraction, on the one hand, and to take into account the flexibility of speech genres, a tendency towards

hybridization that they exhibit, and the cultural aspect of genre-formation, on the other hand.

With all the latest research in mind, the current research is conducted within the framework of cognitive sociolinguistics that considers genres to be patterns of verbal behavior employed in relevant situations in order to achieve the pragmatic effect, and is based on three ideas expressed by Russian theorists: 1. structural properties of a text are important for understanding its message; 2. genres follow certain patterns that generate abstract meanings; 3. genres set the framework for interpretation. Thus, in this paper we argue that Net frontpage news items are a special genre, which is a type of multimodal text that combines a written text (a headline and an abstract) with an image, and serves to construct a textual event and form attitudes and opinions.

The event in media

Viewed as a special category, the event has recently received a lot of consideration in linguistic research. There are, in fact, two major approaches to describing this phenomenon: the ontological and the interpretative ones. The ontological approach is rooted in A. N. Whitehead's philosophy in terms of which everything people face is an event (Whitehead 1929). Within the interpretative approach the event is believed to be part of reality constructed by language. The French philosopher and postmodern theorist J. Baudrillard was among the first scientists to pay attention to the fact that no events highlighted in mass media are real as they are all created by language and cannot be regarded as reliable (Baudrillard 1998). The idea of language as the constructor of events, especially in the press, has received general recognition.

The nature of language as a highly constructive mediator, used to build ideas and form opinions is brilliantly revealed by R. Fowler, who specifies that anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position <…> and stresses that in determining the significance of events the papers and their readers make explicit or implicit references to social stereotypes. Thus, the formation of news events, and the formation of news values, is in fact a reciprocal, dialectical process in which stereotypes are the currency of negotiation (Fowler 1991). In this paper we do not intend to consider the role of stereotypes in the event construction; however, we assume that each newly constructed event relies on a number of generally accepted meanings; in texts new meaning may evolve and create the basis for further interpretations. In this sense, we share the views of D. Matheson who emphasizes that news is part of social life and argues that the meaning of the news is the deployment of shred interpretative resources, thus each news item not only makes sense in a social and cultural context but is to be analyzed in a wider social context (Matheson 2005).

Developing a semiotic approach to the event, the Russian linguist V.Z. Demiankov differentiates between the

event as a concept – that is a kind of idea that unites unrelated events; the actual (referential) event which serves as the preimage of later events; and the textual event – that is the interpretation of the original event that can be either smooth and logical or contradictory. The important point is that the same referential event can be described in different words, which will inevitably change its meaning (Demiankov 2004). In this paper we have already resorted to the terms *conceptual event*, *referential event* and *textual event* and intend to stick to these terms when analyzing the empirical data. We understand the *referential event* as the story, or the occurrence, that serves as the starting point of further interpretations; we equate *the textual event* with the news item itself; the event as a concept, or *the conceptual event* is defined as a field of social or cultural meanings in terms of which each news item is interpreted. The conceptual event does not include all meanings that textual events contain, as it is a kind of ideological container that accepts mostly meanings that correlate with a certain system of values and tends to reject meanings that may 'undermine' the ideological foundation of a culture. In this sense, a conceptual event is a mental model of the referential event which is highly evaluative and is constructed from culturally relevant meanings that textual events produce. There is, of course, a possibility for new meanings to – figuratively speaking – cross the border; however such violations take place rather seldom and gradually lead to changes in the whole system of values.

Another important concept we use talking about event construction and meaning-making is *focus*. It is worth stressing that in terms of cognitive linguistics, any change of meaning may be viewed as a result of focal shift accompanied by a different attention distribution which results in a larger or a smaller degree of salience of certain elements of an object or a situation (Iriskhanova 2014).

Assuming the ideas that online news items are conspicuous for their structure and social significance, and that the main function of news is to set the framework of interpretation, we argue that today any frontpage news item is a carefully constructed event. Maintaining that change of focus is crucial for the event construction, we argue that the two modes of frontpage news presentation – verbal and visual – focus on different aspects of the event – either the referential event or the conceptual event, thus giving a more or less coherent idea of the constructed – textual – event.

Results and discussion

Addressing the topic of online news in terms of their genre properties D. M. Lewis points out two important issues. The first thing to mention is that with the spread of electronic communication the ways of structuring news and the ways of perceiving news are changing; the second one is that each text belongs to a particular genre which is determined by its form and its distribution conventionally associated with some socially established tasks. It is

stressed that meaning is derived from both the form and the distribution. Considering online news as a genre, the author stresses that the content of each news item is layered so that news is presented at several levels of detail. The hypertext structure of online news secures that different news items are linked to a wider content, so that a summary outline of one news item can simultaneously be a detail of another. D. M. Lewis claims that these news clusters reveal a new genre which is different from print and broadcast as theme-based groups of news objects are held together graphically, overlapping with other such groups. <…> Like printed news, online news items are narratives, however, they have become shorter and are parts of much larger and more complex narratives (Lewis 2004). Thus, this author identifies two essential generic properties of online news, namely their layered structure that is supported by the hypertext form of their presentation and the functions they perform.

Unlike D. M. Lewis, who believes theme-based groups of news to be a special genre, we claim that the frontpage form of presenting news – a combination of a headline, a picture and an abstract – is a special type of text whose function is to describe a certain occurrence (a referential event) and to construct an event (a textual event); this textual event is linked to a number of other events concerning the same topic and above all to the event constructed in the article linked to the frontpage headline. Different textual events united by the same topic make up a conceptual event – that is a field of meanings shared by a certain community.

For analysis we have chosen the World section on the front page of the BBC site dated July, 14th 2021. The morning variant of the front page was presented by seven stories from different parts of the world, each consisting of a headline, an abstract and a picture. Interestingly, the titles of the linked articles, as well as the pictures, turned out to be different from the titles and the pictures on the front page. This particular fact makes us argue that the title, the abstract and the image on the front page are the three aspects of a textual frontpage event, which is a special type of text, or a genre, the main function of which is to form attitudes and opinions, thus contributing to the construction of the conceptual event. Readers who are willing to be better informed and to make their own judgments follow the link; however, most people derive their knowledge about what is happening in the world from what they are shown as soon as they open the site.

The Cuban event

The top story of the issue is a piece of news coming from Cuba with the title *Death Confirmed in Rare Cuban Protests*, an abstract telling the reader about a victim and no one to take the responsibility, and an image of *unrest* on the front page.

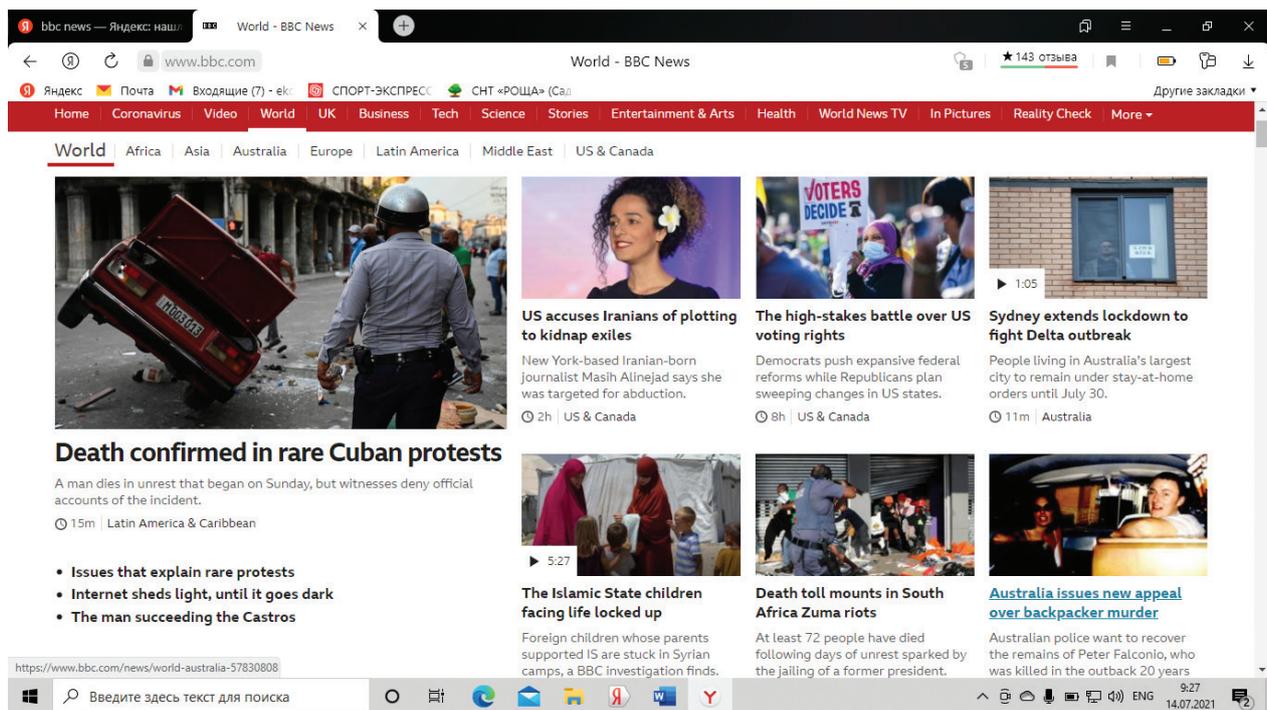Considering the frontpage news representation more closely it seems important to stress that the title directly

Figure 1. A screen shot of the issue. https://www.bbc.com/news.

tells the reader about a death, whereas the picture shows a littered street, a half-upturned car, a policeman and a couple of onlookers. The dirt and the car are probably meant to convince the reader of previously held demonstrations; however the bystanders and the only policeman – though interested – do not seem much involved. The focal point of the image is the red car. The choice of the color is important, though it remains unclear, who put the car in this particular position and how it manages to stay the way it does.

The two semiotic modes serve to construct an event that has two focal points: a protest and someone's death. The more general idea of unrest is accentuated in the picture, the more concrete information about someone dying is reflected in the verbal part pf the text. Thus, the frontpage Cuban event has two focal points; all further information on the same topic provides more details, contributing to the creation of a conceptual event.

The linked article goes under the title *Cuba: Man confirmed killed in anti-government unrest* and carries more or less the same message as the frontpage headline. Unlike the frontpage headline, it focuses on the political nature of the unrest. Though both titles bring to the forefront the death of someone unnamed, the frontpage title is more laconic with the capitalized words Death and Cuba to immediately attract attention. The article itself reports on nation-wide demonstrations over food and medicine shortages in which – according to the report – thousands of people took part. Being complementary parts of the same conceptual event, the frontpage event and the one created in the linked text seem a bit different as they stress different ideas.

The fact that Cuba is known for its dictatorial political regime with demonstrations being illegal, goes to explain why more space is given to this news rather than to oth-

er reports on the frontpage. The frontpage image, which does not look totally convincing, points to the fact that the constructed event is highly politicized.

The kidnap event

The next news headline is *US Accuses Iranians of Plotting to Kidnap Exiles*. The headline is accompanied by a picture of a rigidly smiling nice-looking young woman who is introduced as an Iranian-born NY journalist claiming to be targeted for abduction. The image of the smiling lady contradicting the appalling content of both the headline and the text below, however, goes to prove the information that native born Iranians are threatened. The headline focuses on US accusations against the Iranian authorities and stresses the idea of the planned victims being exiles. Thus, the constructed event seems to be about the role of the US in providing security for Iranian citizens whose rights are claimed to be endangered.

The wording of the headline of the linked article *Masih Alinejad: Iranians 'plotted to kidnap US, Canada and UK targets* bears a different meaning as the whole story is presented as a story told by an Iranian woman. Unlike the frontpage title, the main title specifies the origin of the targets without, however, giving any indication of their Iranian roots. Besides, the frontpage headline communicates the meaning of the 'beneficial' role of the USA, whereas the second one has the meaning of the 'menace' coming from the Iranians. The main article is supported by a video of the same woman who looks stressed and claims to be furious about the intentions of the Iranian authorities. Thus, due to the different focus the linked

headline creates a different textual event. Possible misunderstandings between the frontpage event and the linked one are bridged in the article where the Iranian journalist expresses her gratitude to the FBI for warning her of the danger. The different focuses of the two headlines are important to create as many meanings as possible thus pointing to the highly ideological nature of the event.

The US voting right event

Next comes the title *The High-Stakes Battle over US Voting Right* with a picture of presumably a Muslim woman carrying the slogan 'Voters decide'. The frontpage event is probably meant to attract the attention of US migrants to the fact that people of different origins and religions are involved, however, in this part it is quite misleading. The thing is that the linked title is *Voting rights: How the battle is unfolding across the US* with the main article commenting on a dispute between the Republicans and the Democrats over the voting law and containing no mention of the migrant issue. Thus, the frontpage event is different from the main one; the ambiguity of meanings points to the highly political nature of the constructed conceptual event.

The Sydney lockdown event

Piece 4 goes under the title *Sydney extends lockdown to fight Delta outbreak* and contains a picture of a man looking out of the window with a notice 'Send beer' glued to the glass. The headline is informative, whereas the image appeals to emotions and is probably meant to arouse sympathy for the desperate man deprived of life's simple joys. Although the frontpage image can be interpreted differently, as the picture of the man can be regarded as a call to stay at home despite all the inconveniences, or point to the fact that people are getting more and more depressed, it doesn't seem to bear any ideological implications. The related article is entitled *Australia Covid: Sydney extends lockdown to fight Delta outbreak*. There seem to be no contradictions between the meanings of the two titles, both of which are straightforward and contribute to the creation of a rather coherent conceptual event.

The European-children-in-Syria event

Piece 5 is entitled *The Islamic children facing life locked up* and is supported by a picture of two Muslim women and some fair-haired children, with the abstract beneath specifying that the news is about *foreign* children whose parents supported the IS. Thus, the three sources of information on the front page convey three different messages, claiming that the event is about: Islamic children, foreign children and (obviously) European children (in the pic-

ture). The three controversial meanings point to the fact that the constructed textual event is highly ideological.

The title of the linked article *The Islamic State children in Syria face a lifetime in prison* is in fact a reworded frontpage title and is no less misleading, as the article is actually about children, including British kids, who are facing a lifetime imprisonment in Syrian jails. The fact that neither the frontpage, nor the linked title, puts the idea straightforwardly with the picture only hinting at the actual problem, gives reason to suggest that the issue in question is highly ideological. All in all, the chosen means of constructing textual events contribute to the creation of a rather controversial conceptual event.

The Zuma event

Piece 6 is entitled *Death toll mounts in South Africa Zuma riots* and is accompanied by a picture of total mayhem, a shooting policeman, and running or frightened people. The abstract below informs the reader about the deaths of 72 people following the arrest of the former president. Thus, the title and the abstract convey the meaning of some rebels killing someone or being killed. With the people who do not seem to be causing any particular trouble, it might be assumed that the police are abusing their power.

The linked title, which is *South Africa Zuma riots: Deadly unrest rages across country,* conveys a meaning similar to that of the frontpage headline. The related article provides information about clashes of enraged crowds with the police, cases of looting and shopping centers being set alight. The main article also provides a video of an incident of a baby thrown from a building that had been set on fire after ground-floor shops had been looted. All in all, the generated meanings do not reveal much variety and the conceptual event does not seem to be highly ideological.

The backpacker murder event

The last news item is *Australia issues new appeal over backpacker murder*. The headline is accompanied by a picture of a man and a woman, presumably sitting in a bar or a cafe. The abstract tells the reader about the intention of the Australian police to recover the remains of a man killed 20 years ago. The linked article goes under the title *Peter Falconio murder: Australian police renew appeal to find body* and is about the killing of a young man and his girlfriend and the mysterious disappearance of the man's body. Both headlines convey similar meanings; the meanings of the picture are quite neutral and it is probably meant as a simple way of a more vivid visualization of the event. Thus, the events constructed on the front page and in the main article are closely related and contribute to the creation of a conceptual event that is open to interpretations but is of low cultural value.

Conclusion

Social and political events play an important role in people's lives which accounts for the variety of news and brings to the forefront the importance of its proper presentation. With drastic changes in people's social lives and the advance in new technologies there has been a revolution in the way news is conveyed to the general public. In the so-called information society news has become a commodity that needs to be presented in a way that will make it profitable. As a result of these changes, news is no longer a source of information and a means of describing a certain story (a referential event), but the foundation for constructing textual and conceptual events with the aim of producing the pragmatic effect and generally creating or reinforcing a space of cultural (ideological) meanings.

The undertaken research proves that the mass media of today are looking for new forms of news presentation, with the important point being that *news presentation* and *event construction* have become synonymous collocations. A conceptual event is constructed in accordance with the system of dominant values and on the basis of textual events that may use different semiotic modes, belong to different genres and use different linguistic and compositional means and devices.

An analysis of a BBC homepage news bulletin has shown that structurally all frontpage news items follow the same pattern, combining two semiotic modes of event construction – the verbal and the visual modes. The meanings communicated by the two modes are not only different but also rather contradictory, which provides for the creation of a more or less complete textual event. Analysis has shown that the verbal part provides relatively objective information about the referential event, whereas the picture is responsible for delivering evaluative meanings, adding to the corpus of cultural values. The important point is that the more politicized an event is, the more contradictions there are between the verbal and visual parts of the text, as well as between the frontpage headline and the headline of the linked article.

To sum up, the mosaic form of the front page with up to ten headlines provided with pictures is enough for an unsophisticated reader to get a general – though quite misleading – idea of what is happening in the world. The frontpage headline and the abstract below inform and influence, whereas the picture appeals to imagination and forms ideas, in other words it performs the ideological function. As the linked article also has a headline and an abstract which are either differently worded or convey different meanings compared to the frontpage headline and abstract, we make the conclusion that the frontpage headline, picture and abstract create a special textual event that may be differently perceived by the reader. Thus, we have come to the conclusion that the frontpage way of news presentation (or, event construction) is a special type of text, or a genre that is highly ideological. Although we do not deny the possibility of individual interpretations, it needs to be stressed that individual opinions are still rooted in cultural meanings with each interpretation adding to the creation of a certain reality – a conceptual event – shared by different members of a community.

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