

## A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF NEWS HEADLINES: DIVERSE FRAMINGS FOR A HOSTAGE-TAKING EVENT

Romylyn A. Metila

College of Education, University of the Philippines,  
PHILIPPINES.

[rom.metila26@gmail.com](mailto:rom.metila26@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*In August, 2010, a hostage-taking event in Manila, Philippines led to the deaths of 8 foreign tourists and the hostage-taker himself. The event sparked headlines that serve as a good material for newspaper discourses analysis, specifically the kind of framing for events and subjects. Three Philippine broadsheet headlines on the event were evaluated for information accuracy, perspectives offered, and event- and subject-framing. Ruiz's (2009) three-level sociological discourse analysis (textual, contextual, and interpretation) and Iyengar's (1991) and Pan & Kosicki's (1993) framing classifications were used to answer the following: 1) What linguistic forms and structures were used to present the event and the concerned subject groups? 2) What kinds of framing were used in the headlines? 3) What portrayal of the event and subject groups is offered by the identified frames? The analysis suggests that the figures and exaggerated word choice were used in exaggerating the violence and impact of the event. Inaccurate references to the event location*

*Prioritized news prominence over accuracy. Topicalization and modifiers either heightened or downplayed the hostage-takers agency (culpability). Limited references to the hostages' background, suspect's motives, and foiled negotiations failed to provide a fair and comprehensive news context that could have presented significant social issues. Generally, the sole focus on the hostage-event presented an episodic framing resulting in an incomplete story. Hence, news agencies are recommended to provide accurate data, use fair word choice, and present a comprehensive exploration of different story angles. Consequently, readers should learn to identify structural cues to avoid news misinterpretation.*

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis, sociological discourse analysis, news discourse, headlines, framing, hostage-taking event

### INTRODUCTION

On August 23, 2010, a tourist bus carrying foreign tourists was hijacked at the Quirino grandstand by Rolando Mendoza, a former cop. Despite negotiations with politicians and police officers, the hostage lasted for 11 hours and resulted in the death of 8 Hong Kong nationals and Mendoza himself. Due to the nationwide media coverage of the event in real time, people formed opinions about the hostage-taker and how the incident should have been handled. On the following day, major Manila broadsheets presented headlines and corresponding news stories on the event, which also figured in international news. For succeeding weeks, news and current affairs programs discussed attribution or agency - who should take responsibility for what happened.

While dissecting opinions on the event is interesting, broadsheet headlines deserve some scrutiny as well. As forms of public discourse, newspaper headlines could be analyzed for the framing of involved subject groups. Headlines are important tools as newspapers "reproduce hegemonic knowledge and ideologies, creating public consensus, and sometimes challenging

dominant discourses by maintaining their independence and autonomous agency” (Conslavo, 1998, Kelner, 1995, Louw, 2001, MacDonald, 2003, Piacrd & Broody, 2000, Seedat, 1999, p. 340 as cited in MacRitchie and Seedat, 2008). This is exemplified by a study of headlines and discourses in newspaper reports of traffic accidents in South Africa (MacRitchie and Seedat, 2008). The study shows that “well-crafted headlines and multiple discourses” support dominant views and present different subject groups to portray some roles (e.g. “irresponsible and reckless drivers as ‘unworthy’ citizens, motorists as victims, traffic safety officers as protectors, and emergency care workers as ‘angelic’ rescuers”). This subject group framing is influenced by the subjects’ power status in the context of traffic.

### **The Influence of Headlines**

The power that headlines wield comes naturally with discourse, “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, and statements that – produce a particular version of events” (p. 339, Burr, 1995 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008). Discourse presents “a coherent system of meanings, historically located, support institutions, reproduces power relations, and has ideological effects” (p. 339, Parker, 1992 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008). As sources of knowledge, headlines and other forms of discourse are naturally predisposed to present a specific version of truth, reality, or world order (MacRitchie and Seedat, 2008).

As ‘the most significant message’ about the news (MacRitchie and Seedat, 2008), headlines enjoy a ‘privileged position’ (Baicchi, 2003, as cited in White, 2011) that is explicitly reflected by a distinct layout and typography (White, 2011). This being the case, headlines, therefore present what newspaper agencies regard as the most crucial information readers ought to know. This careful selection and presentation of elements according to their corresponding perceived significance refers to *presence* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969 as cited in Stewart, 2005). Hence, what exists or not in headlines manifests the ability of discourse “to limit or enable the construction of a topic in a certain way” (p. 339, MacRitchie and Seedat, 2008). In news discourse, the information that exhibits headline presence is what news agencies regard as significant.

News stories derive significance according to their *impact* (the scale and effect of the event, e.g. number of deaths), *prominence* (involvement of significant people and places), *proximity* (“the closer the target reading audience is to the event, the greater is the news value”), *relevance* (direct or indirect effect on readers), and *human interest values* (attention and curiosity pull) (Morrison, 2006 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008). This presence, combined with selected linguistic cues, allows media to easily influence readers’ interpretation (Cohen, 1963 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008). Partial constructions of ‘reality’ may also be done through a deliberate choice of information to present a narrow or one-sided view (Luow, 2001 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008). This power to censor or filter information demonstrates the power of news agencies to preserve or abolish the hegemony of social groups.

### **News Framing**

The information that finds its way in the news is skillfully presented via *micro-rhetorical linguistic choices* (Johnston, 2002), subtle structural and linguistic elements that sway readers in forming opinions or interpretations. This careful packaging of information is *framing*, the “select(ion) (of) some aspects of a preconceived reality and mak(ing) them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p.

52, Entman, 1993 as cited in Stewart, 2005). This linguistic maneuvering creates a frame that draws readers' attention to selected information. The more subtle the presentation is, the more effective and subliminal the message.

Iyengar (1991, as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008) distinguishes between *episodic* and *thematic framing*. The former focuses on concrete events while the latter concentrates on causes, effects, and corresponding issues. Episodic framing draws people's attention to individual responsibility or agency rather than social responsibility, while thematic framing mitigates individual culpability and gives attribution to institutions or uncontrollable factors.

A set of four common news frames are likewise cited in the literature (Pan and Kosicki, 1993 as cited in Stewart, 2005): *conflict frame* (clash between people or groups), *human interest* (personal or sentimental slant), *responsibility* (culpability of a person or group), and *economic* (effect of event's financial repercussions). These frames present a specific reality, and since headlines are often the only lines seen by busy readers, these concise reports are usually the bearers of the only information that readers have about a story (Stovall, Self, & Mullins as cited in Smith, 1999). This somehow explains why much of framing in news discourse is done in headlines (Pan and Kosicki, 1993 as cited in Stewart, 2005).

### **The Need for a Discourse Analysis of Headlines**

Headlines fulfill several functions, and one of these is presenting the truth. Unfortunately, headlines can be notoriously misleading, inaccurate, or ambiguous (Turner, 2009). At times, ambiguity is created intentionally to mislead readers (Brône and Coulson, 2010 as cited in White, 2011). Even with one story or theme, the slant and framing of news agencies could be highly variable due to discourse participants' diverging worldviews and interests (MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008).

Identifying linguistic cues that cunningly impose diluted views and 'truths' become more and more important as readers face an onslaught of headlines. The network of social relationships and issues should likewise be explored because they could act as the base for such critical and sociological discourse analysis.

## **OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Objectives**

The analysis asked the following: 1) what linguistic forms and structures were used to present the event and the concerned subject groups? 2) What kinds of framing were used in the headlines? 3) What portrayal of the event and subject groups is offered by the identified frames?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This sociological discourse analysis of three broadsheet headlines aims to check for accuracy of information, analyze perspectives offered and the framing of the event and concerned subject groups.

The study employed a three-level sociological discourse analysis (*textual, contextual, and interpretation*) (Ruiz, 2009). The *textual* analysis that determined the composition and structure of the target text was inspired by content analysis (breaking down of text into pertinent units), ground theory (identifying hidden implications in the text), and semiotic analysis (investigating how linguistic elements present meaning). The *contextual* analysis explored concrete details about the event (Ruiz, 2009) in the light of the five values of news

stories (Morrison, 2006 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat). Finally, *interpretation* explained discourse with regard to social issues.

### Steps

The current study took the following steps: 1) Broadsheet headlines were selected, 2) Forms were identified and analyzed for meanings and patterns, 3) Dominant and non-dominant discourses in the portrayal of subject groups were identified, and 4) Social implications were explored.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three event-related headlines published on August 24, 2010 came from broadsheets that were selected for their 1) wide readership and 2) prestige in Philippine society. Each headline precedes a discussion that merges the levels of analysis for a more flowing and efficient discussion. The summary provides the social analysis for the target texts.

### 4 Hostages Confirmed Dead

Gunman killed in Luneta drama (The Manila Times, 2010)

The use of statistics (4) to describe the number of deaths indicates the slant towards evidence-based reporting. Combining this with “confirmed dead” provides some leeway for more possible deaths and results in a framing that downplays the incident’s potential magnitude. The conservative figure reflects objective reporting, but it also reveals a guarded treatment of the incident. This could be partial representation, because of its focus on the event outcome rather than the back story (Shah, 2005 as cited in MacRitchie & Seedat, 2008), the extended negotiation nor Mendoza’s motives. This suggests an episodic framing which draws attention only to the event’s resolution.

The magnitude of the event is downplayed because of absent significant details. For instance, victims were labeled as ‘hostages,’ not ‘foreigners’ or ‘tourists.’ This deserves scrutiny because foreigners are ‘high value targets’ of terrorist acts (Bloomfield, 2001), and their involvement gives the event a higher impact value. Ignoring this significant background invites speculation. The framing fails to portray the victims for who they really are, thereby failing to fairly represent the event’s prominence.

The modifier ‘gunman’ juxtaposes Mendoza with negative synonyms (‘terrorist,’ ‘murderer’) that heighten his agency. However, the headline likewise presents the angle that Mendoza himself was ‘killed.’ The topicalization afforded to him emphasizes his significant role, while the chosen verb ironically portrays a powerless gunman, a killer-turned-victim. The passive construction without a mentioned doer implies that the usual authority, the police, was responsible for putting down Mendoza. The non-mention of a perpetrator implies that the doer’s identity is not as important as the gunman’s death. Since death is the ultimate punishment for a crime, the gunman’s demise implies that justice has been served and that matters, more or less had been resolved.

The mention of a famous tourist spot (“Luneta”) capitalizes on the event’s prominence value and heightens recall via assonance (‘Luneta drama’). However, the hostage did not actually happen at Luneta but at the Quirino Grandstand. This could be an honest oversight, or a deliberate choice to bank on Luneta’s prominence over the lesser known Grandstand whose fame is limited within the Philippines. Additionally, its association with the Philippine national hero, Jose Rizal, gives it historical primacy. Overall, ‘Luneta’ enhances the event’s impact and prominence value at the expense of accuracy. The emotive word “drama” and its

connotations (“theatrics, commotion, turmoil, and disturbance”) arouse reader curiosity through human interest and backstory references. However, missing details like the gunman’s motive was conspicuously absent.

Hence, due to missing significant details about the event, the headline offers a myopic framing that diminishes the real prominence and impact of the news. Although this could be an effort to remain conservative, objective, and concise, the grave omission glosses over relevant issues. The lacking reference to Mendoza’s motive does not draw attention to the corruption in the police force, while the incomplete background for the victims is silent on the potential negative consequences on Philippine tourism. Nonetheless, the headline makes readers ponder on the security of public places like Luneta.

### **Bloodbath at Rizal Park**

Gunman, 7 hostages die in 11-hour bus drama (The Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2010)

The lexical choice “Bloodbath” invites thoughts of numerous gruesome deaths, for it requires: 1) violence and 2) the killing of a large number of people (Oxford Online Dictionary). Placing the term in phrase-initial position capitalizes on the story’s impact value. The inclusion of the death statistic (7), however, contradicts the term’s semantic value, for it should represent much more deaths. Though seven deaths are indeed unfortunate, the figure still falls short of the generally acceptable number for a “bloodbath.” This lexical choice frames the event as something worse than it actually is and, thus, hints on sensationalism.

The reference to ‘Rizal Park’ likewise presents an inaccuracy that could have been deliberate to boost the event’s prominence. The juxtaposition of ‘Rizal,’ the Philippine national hero, with ‘bloodbath’ ironically contrasts national pride vis-à-vis national embarrassment. The choice, ‘park,’ heightens irony by drawing attention to a public recreation area that should be safe. This irony is simply too well crafted to be a coincidence. This framing implies that public places in Manila are not exempt from violence, a deviation that heightens the story’s proximity and relevance value since park goers are rendered vulnerable to violent acts. The headline then succeeds in making ordinary readers, tourists or otherwise, relate to the crime.

The topicalization accorded to the gunman’s death, that it takes syntactic precedence over the 7 hostages’ death, implies that the perpetrator’s demise is more crucial information. Even as he was labeled as ‘gunman,’ the verb ‘die’ mitigates its effect and leaves little implication that the victims did not just ‘die’ but were killed. Note that dying is a natural occurrence, but killing showcases the role of an agent, the killer. The preference for the neutral, non-emotive intransitive verb ‘die’ versus an alternative like the more aggressive transitive verb ‘kill’ results in a confused attribution for Mendoza.

Even if ‘bus drama’ contextualizes the deaths, other possible reasons are also offered. Hence, even if Mendoza is tagged as ‘gunman,’ the combined reference to the deaths, highlights the same fate that both Mendoza and the victims suffered, a framing that weakens his agency and portrays him as a victim too.

References to the victims’ foreign backgrounds or their visiting purposes are absent, implying that the main news is the hostage and the deaths, not Mendoza’s motives.

The use of a two-digit figure as a quantifier (‘11-hour’) aims at objective reporting (versus a subjective modifier, ‘long’) that likewise presents a concrete and convincing evidence of the event’s overextension. It is also an interesting detail that invites readers’ curiosity.

The label “bus drama” sensationalizes the whole incident by implying that the hostage was emotional. The reference to the bus speaks of a novelty in the Philippine context, and the invited assumption that the vehicle was in transit when it was hijacked adds excitement to the drama. Combined with the choice ‘bloodbath’ which connotes a multitude of deaths, the reference to ‘bus,’ a vehicle with a big passenger capacity, lends support to the stated number of casualties.

### **Grandstand Carnage**

Axed cop hijacks tourist bus, kills many of 25 hostages (The Philippine Star, 2010)

The text gives importance to the scene of the crime (i.e. Quirino Grandstand) and the gore that accompanied the event through ‘carnage’ and its associations with ‘slaughter,’ ‘massacre,’ ‘butchery.’ This results in an ironic contrasting of ‘carnage’ and ‘grandstand,’ a roofed place for spectators of sports or race events.

The Quirino Grandstand, in particular, is often the site of concerts and political or religious rallies, but it is most famous for holding presidential inaugurations. This venue, which often holds celebrations and other spectacles, was framed as a site of gore. Diction capitalizes on the impact and prominent values of the hostage-taking and frames it as a violent crime made even worse by the debasing of the place.

A strong, definite agency to the suspect was accorded by several linguistic elements. First, the phrase ‘axed cop’ (Mendoza) is in phrase-initial position, a structural slot for agents/doers. With ‘axed cop’ as agent, attribution is further heightened by two transitive verbs (‘hijacks,’ ‘kills’). ‘Axed’ becomes more meaningful especially when contrasted with other neutral alternatives (e.g. ‘former,’ ‘dismissed,’ ‘ex-’). ‘Axe’ refers to a dismissal from one’s job, albeit suddenly and ruthlessly, semantic nuances that are absent in neutral labels like ‘former’ or ‘dismissed.’ ‘Axed,’ therefore, serves the triple purpose of agent label, motive (purpose) indicator, and *topic-triggered metaphor* (Koller, 2004, Semino, 2008 as cited in White, 2011), since an ax is a tool for butchery and mutilation.

Second, negative connotations for ‘hijacks’ and ‘kills’ vividly frame Mendoza as a criminal. The challenging execution of a hijack implies premeditation, and if this is the case, then Mendoza’s crime is all the more heightened. Third, the presence of the adjective ‘tourist’ suggests its significance. To hijack a bus is already a grave offense, but taking tourist passengers as hostages in a country that projects itself as a major tourist destination makes the crime more deplorable.

Although tourists’ nationalities were not mentioned, this is easily understood in the Philippines as a reference to foreigners. The choice framed the hostages as helpless, innocent targets who did not at all deserve what happened especially because they were guests who bring revenue to the country.

The combination of indefinite quantifier and figure (‘many of 25’) as a reference to the casualties also heightens Mendoza’s agency. It aims to justify the use of ‘carnage.’ However, ‘many’ implies ‘most of’ or ‘at least more than half’ of the total number,’ but there were 20 tourist passengers, of whom only 8 died. Using ‘many of’ implies that deaths are at least 11. This reporting of a bloated number could be a way of exploiting the event’s impact.

All the given structures contribute to a framing that heightens Mendoza’s agency. The headline initially frames the event as a violent crime, and then Mendoza is presented as the guilty suspect.

## SUMMARY

By excluding crucial information, The Manila Times' headline creates a framing that the hostage-taking event is less complicated than it actually is. Lacking details render the report gravely incomplete, and consequently puts readers in a dangerous position of making opinions on the basis of a myopic narration. The headline could insist that it champions objective conciseness; nevertheless, the limited scope and data presented jeopardize an attempt at a truthful presentation. Shunning sensationalism and exaggeration is commendable, but important issues on corruption, poor rescue training, and lacking rescue tools and equipment of the police require news presence.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer headline creates a framing that: 1) the event resulted in several gruesome deaths, 2) at a prominent place in the country. Likewise, 3) although Mendoza was labeled as 'gunman,' he was also presented as a victim in 4) an event that extended way too long. The framing draws attention to the scale of the event that results from the failure of the police force and local government to provide security and a peaceful resolution to the incident. The unconventional framing of Mendoza as a victim despite his obvious culpability deserves a deeper scrutiny. It invites curiosity as it intimates that other individuals or groups, aside from Mendoza, are as guilty. The attention given to the prolonged event hints that negotiations were poorly handled. As more fingers point at the direction of the police and the government, less are directed at Mendoza.

The Philippine Star creates a framing that a) a revenge-driven dismissed cop is responsible for 2) a big number of gruesome deaths. The headline assigns sole attribution to Mendoza whose act is heightened by brutal details that heightens his guilt. Mendoza is portrayed as an incompetent cop who got dismissed and used innocent tourists as pawns for bargaining or means for revenge. The focus on Mendoza's motives and his actions attempts to present the complete story, but ends up magnifying his culpability. Details on Mendoza's dismissal put the blame on him, but details exploring another angle for culpability were not presented. For one, a bungled negotiation at the hands of different people was not even hinted at. In the end, although the headline captures the cause and effect of the situation, crucial peripheral details about the police force and the local government were unrepresented. The headline, however, shows that regardless of his reasons or the pressure he felt, Mendoza was nevertheless responsible for the eight deaths, including his own.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The headlines showed various framing for the involved subject groups, most diverse and interesting of which is Mendoza's framing which swings from vengeful suspect to innocent cop from headline to headline. The use of episodic framing via impact, prominence, and proximity values heightened Mendoza's attribution. The absence of details relating to his backstory-- his motives and the backgrounds of the tourists could have composed a thematic framing that could uncover issues like tourist security, diplomatic relations, corruption and poor police training on negotiation and rescue. As 'news-makers,' the agencies' silence on thematic ideas implies the valuing of sensationalism over comprehensive reporting. This is manifested by exaggerated diction at the expense of accuracy in identifying the crime scene and number of deaths. Similarly, downplaying is also as bad as exaggeration, for it is still misrepresentation, albeit in another form. Hence, readers are encouraged to be critical in basing their opinions on headlines alone. News agencies cannot be blamed for framing the news in a certain way, but ultimately, a reader who allows himself to be swayed by unfair framing would only have himself to blame.

To serve their noble purpose in society, news agencies should value accuracy over stylistic or pragmatic concerns. In the case of the target texts for this study, objectivity in framing could be achieved through accurate data presentation, fair word choice, and a comprehensive exploration of different story angles. In a realistic sense, framing is inevitable in the field, but it should be one that is mainly guided by the quest for truth in the hopes of social transformation.

## REFERENCES

- Bloomfield, K. (2001). Hostage taking and government response. *RUSI Journal*, 146(4).
- Hughes, E. & Rodgers, J. (1999). Changing times in diabetes care. *Diabetes Primary Care*, 1(1), 4.
- Li Yu-ping. (2007). The hidden power of the language in web-news headlines. *US-China Foreign Language*, 5(3), 1-8.
- MacRitchie, V. & Seedat, M. (2008). Headlines and discourses in newspaper reports on traffic accidents. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 38(2), 337-354.
- Manila Times (2010). 4 hostages confirmed dead: Gunman killed in Luneta Drama. *Manila Times*, p. 1.
- Pedroso, K., & de Guzman, L. (2011). PDI is no. 1 newspaper, says readership poll. In *Inquirer News*. Retrieved on January 2, 2013 from <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/107495/philippine-daily-inquirer-keeps-no-1-ranking-in-readership-poll>
- Philippine Daily Inquirer. (2010). Bloodbath at Rizal Park: Gunman, 7 hostages die in 11-hour bus drama. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, p. 1.
- Philippine Star. (2010). Grandstand carnage: Axed cop hijacks tourist bus, kills many of 25 hostages. *Philippine Star*, p. 1.
- Ruiz, Jorge R. (2009). Sociological discourse analysis: Methods and logic. *Forum: Qualitative research*, 10(2), Art. 26.
- Schaffer, D. (1995). Shocking secrets revealed! The language of tabloid headlines. *Et Cetera*, 52(1).
- Smith, E.J. (1999). Leadlines may be better than traditional headlines. *Newspaper Research Journal*. 20(1).
- Stewart, C. O. (2005). A rhetorical approach to news discourse: Media representations of a controversial study on 'reparative therapy.' *Western Journal of Communication*, 69(2). 147-166.
- Turner, N. M., York, D. G. & Petousis-Harris, H. A. (2009). The use and misuse of newspaper headlines: Lessons from the MeNZB™ immunisation campaign. *The New Zealand Medical Journal (online)*, 122(1291).
- White, M. (2011). Cracking the code of press headlines: From difficulty to opportunity for the foreign language learner. *International Journal of English studies*, 11(1).