

ARE WRITERS COMMITTED TO WHAT THEY REPORT? A TAXONOMY OF REPORTIVE VERBAL EXPRESSIONS IN THE BRITISH AND SPANISH PRESS

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Abstract: *The degree of writer's commitment or the way in which the stance towards the truth-value of the reported information is suggested in reporting verbs, has been the centre of analysis in various linguistic studies (Thompson 1996; Chen 2007). This paper examines this parameter by means of a corpus-based survey, starting from the understanding of commitment as a graded phenomenon, as well as the value readers' intuition has to judge when evaluating the signals embedded in reporting verbs. The results uncover the subtle interplay of voices in the quality press, without adversely affecting the supposed intertextual impartiality of the text.*

Keywords: *commitment, evidentiality, implicature, journalistic discourse, reporting verbs*

1. Introduction

The notion of commitment and its connection with reporting verbs has been extensively discussed in linguistics in the last few years (Thompson 1996; Hyland 2004; Chen 2005; Morency et al. 2007). Generally speaking, this concept may be claimed to denote “a specific individual's mental state”, as it belongs to the “speaker's ‘intimate’ cognition” (Morency et al. 2007: 198). Basically, propositional commitment is connected with the mental representations that people create in their minds about others' *inner* intentions by means of their linguistic production, as well as the *image* that is created in the mind of the speaker about the veracity of her/his statement and the way in which it will be accepted or not by hearers. Therefore, commitment is both message-oriented and addressee-oriented.

In journalistic discourse analysis, and more specifically in the study of media reports, approaches to commitment expressed by reporting verbs may bediverse. Conclusions can differ, depending on, for example, the unit of analysis (the source of evidence, the reporting verb or thereported information) or the commitment's *recipient* that one considers, i.e. the element to which the unit of analysis is addressing its *involvement* (mainly the author of the assertion or the reported information).

Citing another source commonly entails an evaluation of the reported information. As Sinclair (1985) states, media articles are goal-oriented, and journalistic discourse is full of evaluative signals, which aim at persuading readers to take a stance on the quoted information, the reporting verb being one of its main elements of assessment.

However, in journalism, news reporters' evaluation may concern instead the source of this information. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980: 115) points out that writers may also indicate “their attitude towards the speaker rather than the message”, which is often determined by the ideological orientation imposed by the newspaper. This nuance is usually depicted in the pre-citation segment that defines

the source of evidence; for instance, the inclusion of professional modifiers (*school chief*; the *Foreign Secretary*) or the use of capital letters in the definition of the source normally indicate a positive stance towards the source.

Another level of commitment can be established between the original author of the assertion and the way s/he is committed to the veracity of the information that a writer is reporting in a media article. Nonetheless, as news reports frequently involve evaluation more than reproduction, “there is no way of safely attributing commitment to OS [original speaker] via RS’s [reported speech] interpretation of OS’s original utterance” (Morency et al. 2007: 215). Moreover, some times researchers have no direct access to the assertions made in the original utterance; in these cases, whether or not the initial author is actually committed to the implicatures suggested by the journalist in the report cannot be checked in any way.

In this paper, I am particularly interested in exploring the writer’s commitment to the truth of the quoted proposition embedded in reporting verbs; from the range of possibilities described above, concerning the degrees of *involvement* that can be exhibited in reports, this overtone is somehow more feasible to infer than others taking solely into account the implicatures present in the discourse due to the meaning of the reporting verbs.

2. Writers’ commitment to the validity of the reported proposition

Assessing how news reporters depict their engagement to the veracity of a quoted statement implies an inferential process on the part of the readers. As implicit meaning is normally difficult to grasp, it is the readership who is “responsible for some of the assumptions mobilized in deriving the implicature” (Morency et al. 2007: 210) and consequently, writers do not need to retract what they have implicitly suggested in the text, because at no time have their intentions been made “publicly manifest” (Morency et al. 2007: 210) at the discourse level. This fact attached to the notion of commitment is the paramount *ingredient* upon which journalism relies: in case misunderstandings have not been caused in the inferential process, news reporters still have the possibility of not responding to the inferred implicatures and even “deny having endorsed implicit contents, by communicating to the [reader] that [s/he] was somehow wrong in inferring an implicature which was never intended in the first place” (Morency et al. 2007: 211).

Notwithstanding this lack of responsibility on the part of the reporter, it is well-known that “language users are not simply passive recipients of textual effects” (Hyland 2004: 40) and, even if in journalism writers claim not to have suggested any connotations in the text, implicatures can still be ascribed to their perspective.

2.1. Survey: commitment attribution

The classification of reporting verbs that takes into account the notion of writer’s commitment is addressed in this study by means of a corpus-based survey for both English and Spanish native speakers (see *Appendix*) that attempts to minimize possible misattributions in the interpretation. The survey is basically aimed at determining the position of a fictitious news reporter (Angela) in relation to the content of the reported clause previously uttered by a defendant (David), on the grounds of the implicatures embedded in the reporting verb that the news reporter uses. The suspect is depicted as

someone to whom a supposed illegal contract was given and now he has been taken to court to report against his company.

The corpus is made up of 40 articles published in four British and Spanish broadsheet journals, namely *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *El Mundo* and *El País*, from which 76 verbs, widely present in the press, have been chosen for analysis at sentence level. The examples have been evaluated by a group of 34 participants of different nationalities, who had to decide on the reporters' commitment to the content they were reporting, by means of a 10-degree scale. In the analysis of the writer's engagement to the reliability of the information, participants had to follow their intuition, as there was no conclusive nuance in the sentences about whether the journalist was reporting the author's information impartially or, otherwise put, was judging its validity in a positive or a negative sense.

In order not to obtain disparities in the interpretation, all reporting clauses were written in the past tense, although in some examples their reporting style changes slightly and, therefore, their content, due to considerations of style (e.g. "David ACCUSED his employer of hiring him illegally" vs. "David HIT BACK: 'the employment contract I signed wasn't legal'"); direct and reported speech are mixed in the questionnaire because, as Morency et al. (2007: 209) point out, "there is no significant difference between direct and indirect reported speech with prefaces signalling faithful reports as to the way the hearer attributes commitment to OS [original speaker]". Moreover, some verbs were rejected, as a consequence of the fictitious *stage* that was created for the survey (for instance, 'to rule' and its Spanish counterpart 'decretar'). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary 'to rule' is "to make a legal decision about something", and the agent connected with this verb is usually related to justice departments, e.g. 'the Supreme Court', 'the jury', 'the board'; so a supposedly ordinary person like David, the fictitious defendant, cannot *rule* in this sense. Besides, one verb chosen at random ('to shoot back' and 'admitir' [to admit] in the Spanish questionnaire) appears twice in each of the surveys in order to check the level of reliability of the results.

2.2. A revised taxonomy of reporting verbs

Over the last decades, a number of scholars have centred their analyses on the classification of reporting verbs reflecting the writer's commitment and various attempts to classify them in this way have emerged (Thompson and Yiyun 1991; Chen 2005, 2007). Ken Hyland (2004: 38) believes that "the selection of an appropriate reporting verb allows writers to signal an assessment of the evidential status of the reported proposition and demonstrate their commitment, neutrality or distance from it". Nonetheless, previous taxonomies are not always as clear as Hyland's whether the engagement refers to the truth of the quoted information or to the author of the statement, considering these levels of analysis compatible or perhaps correlative. For example, Thompson and Yiyun (1991) defend the idea that the writer's commitment is concerned with the truth of the reported information, but once they describe the possible options with regard to this factor, they mainly allude to the writer's commitment to the author of the quoted information. In my view, being on the author's side does not necessarily imply approving her/his quoted evidence, and vice versa, though there is a tendency to make both positions match in the discourse.

Apart from this lack of consensus in relation to the scope of writer's commitment, there is also no common agreement regarding the commitment connotations encoded in the reporting verbs analysed in previous classifications.

For instance, Thompson and Yiyun (1991) consider that the verb ‘claim’ gives no clear signal of the writer’s attitude towards the author of the reported assertion, whereas Chen (2005) thinks that it presents an element of doubt with respect to the person whose words are being reported. Thus, the former taxonomies should be regarded as not entirely satisfactory.

My division categorizes reporting verbs in connection to the writer’s commitment to the truth of the reported information parameter as follows:

Writer’s commitment	General stance	Specific stance	Definition
Qualified	Negative	Highly sceptical	The writer does not appear to trust the information at all
		Sceptical	The reporter seems to be critical of the information
	Positive	Favourable	There are overtones of approval of the reported information
		Strongly in favour	The reporter appears to believe in the evidence to a great extent
Non-qualified	Unbiased	Impartial	The writer may keep herself/himself close to a neutral position

Table 1. Classification of reporting verbs regarding the writer’s commitment to the truth of the reported information

By using qualified reporting verbs, the writer gives indications of her/his commitment to the truth of the proposition, either in a positive or negative way; whereas non-qualified reporting verbs do not exhibit any sort of engagement to the veracity of the reported information. Within each of the qualified groups, the writer’s attitude can be measurable, contemplating two grades for each of the writer’s possible positioning. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the lines separating the groups can be blurred in actual practice and sometimes the implicatures ascribed to reporting verbs might not clearly reveal the journalist’s attitude towards the veracity of the assertion; for this reason, these subtypes should be considered as tendencies that can be conveyed in journalistic discourse in a more or less reliable way.

When reporters are positively committed to the truth of the quoted information by means of a reporting verb, they seem to be presenting the reported content as correct, a verbal category that Thompson and Yiyun (1991) previously described as ‘factive’ and Chen (2005), years later, defined as a ‘positive verbal process’.

On the other hand, negative commitment implies that “the writer portrays the author as presenting false information or an incorrect opinion” (Thompson and Yiyun 1991: 372). In journalism, the presence of a negative evaluation by means of a reporting verb is almost imperceptible or at least, more subtly embedded in the verb. News reporters tend to avoid overt criticism and negative overtones can instead be implicitly deduced through other linguistic devices, such as the context in which the source of information is inserted. For instance, the verb ‘say’ in a sentence like ‘Mr. Smith says that entrepreneurs have nothing to do with the ailing national economy’ could be classified at first as ‘impartial’; but if the report were as follows (constructed example):

The Labour leader had stated last month that companies were the principal element in the recovery of the British economy; however, *now* Mr. Smith says that

entrepreneurs have nothing to do with the ailing national economy. So, UK citizens are starting to think about...

Would the verb 'say' be still categorized as non-qualified to the truth of the reported content? Explicitly yes, but the implicatures that arise from the context of the assertion seem to be telling readers that the writer is presenting an opinion contrary to her/his own viewpoint and even that the reporting voice is conveying scepticism (Hutchby 1996). Since such complex cases appear recurrently in the analysis of authentic cases, my division has focused on the semantic, context-independent meaning of the verb, so as to reduce the ambiguities of interpretation.

Finally, by using neutral verbs, "the writer chooses neither to offer endorsement nor disparagement of what the person being reported is saying" (Chen 2005: 38). These kinds of verbs fulfil satisfactorily the desirable detachment of the reported content that news reporters *pursue* in their articles.

2.3. Results and discussion

The distribution of reporting verbs in relation to the writer's commitment to the veracity of the reported information in the British and the Spanish press is shown in Table 2 below. Groups are distributed according to the mean (M) score commitment obtained in the survey, which ranged from 4.00 to 8.30 and, since the number of verbs chosen for analysis differ in each press group, results are just given in the columns N (numbers).

Classification	Score (M)	British press	N	Spanish press	N
Highly sceptical	<5	Suggest; think; claim	3	Comentar [comment]; agradecer [thank]; opinar [believe]; considerar [consider]; hablar [talk]; estimar [estimate]	6
Sceptical	5-6	Call; believe; signal; respond; announce; report; blame; say; describe	9	Explicar [explain]; relatar [tell]; anunciar [announce]; hacer [make, do]; señalar [point out]; sostener [maintain]; atribuir [confer]; entender [understand]; recordar [recall]	9
Impartial	6-7	Add; tell; argue; deny; agree; accuse; warn; criticise; inform; caution; explain; point out	12	Justificar [justify]; decir [say]; avalar [support]; comunicar [communicate]; advertir [warn]; apuntar [note]; indicar [indicate]; manifestar [express]; aclarar [clarify]; calificar [describe]; defender [defend]; concluir [conclude]; remachar [stress]; destacar [highlight]; añadir [add]; asegurar [claim]; amenazar [threaten]; insistir [insist]; responder [respond]	19
Favourable	7-8	Maintain; shoot back; stress; recognize; hit back; acknowledge; admit; insist; testify	9	Identificar [identify]; confesar [confess]; afirmar [state]; denunciar [denounce]; comprometerse [commit oneself]	5
Strongly in favour	>8	Reiterate; make (it) clear; confirm	3	Admitir [admit]	1
Total			36		40

Table 2. Distribution of verbal groups in the British and Spanish press ordered by increasing level of commitment [my translation]

The survey results reveal that the distribution of verbs varies with language. In Spanish newspapers, for instance, the presence of ‘favourable’ verbs is significantly lower than in British journals, whereas the latter prefer using many more impartial verbs than the Spanish press (see Figure 1 below). Besides, writers tend to avoid both over-criticism and approval and prefer showing impartiality instead.

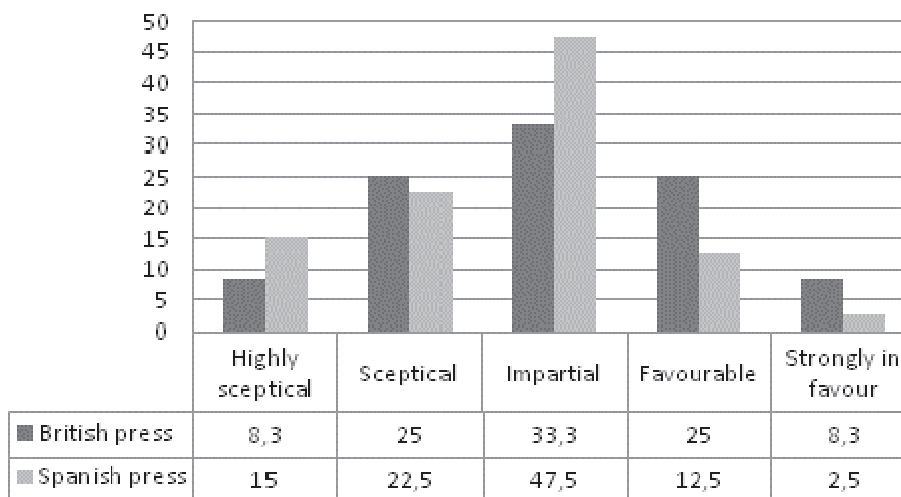


Figure 1. Percentages of reporting verbs in the British and Spanish press

One may notice the presence of few parallel cases in the groups analysed. Some pairs of verbs, regardless of their similarity in meaning, exhibit great differences in use, according to participants’ perception; for instance, ‘explain’ is classified in the British press as impartial, while Spanish native speakers classify its counterpart (‘explicar’) as sceptical. These variations in the commitment attribution may be connected to the use of reporting verbs in context, i.e. to the evaluative signals present in the surrounding information. Then, even though participants had to evaluate commitment at sentence level in the questionnaire, they still evaluated verbs on the basis of the news rhetoric in which they were used to seeing these reporting verbs.

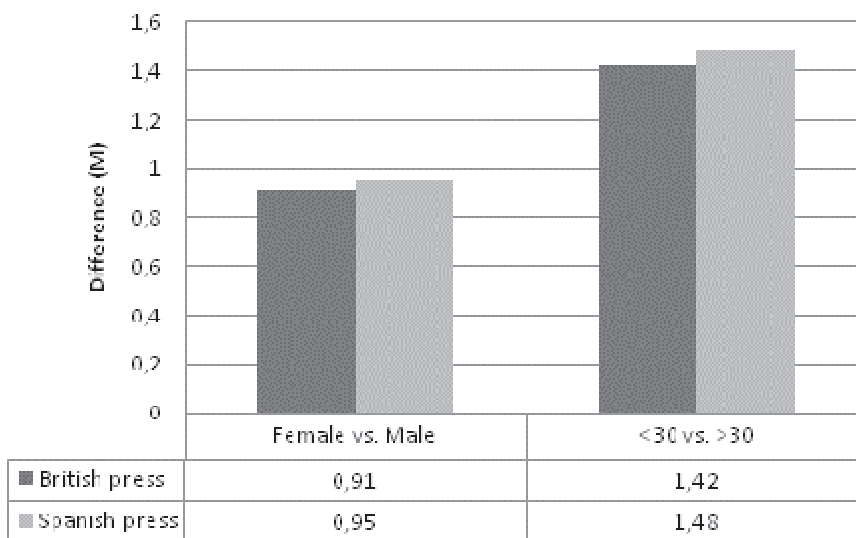


Figure 2. Gender and age differences concerning commitment attribution

Moreover, the age and gender of participants are factors that influence the perception of commitment. There are some verbs in which the general score was significantly variable, depending on the profile of the participants; for example, the English verb 'deny' was classified by female participants and persons over 30 years old as 'favourable', whereas the other groups considered it as 'highly sceptical'. Figure 2 shows the general mean of these differences found in the evaluation of reporting verbs, when taking into account the profile of the participant. The highest discrepancy among contestants has to do with the age factor; in fact there is over a 1.40 point gap in the scale in both the British and the Spanish press, the English native participants under 30 being the most sceptical evaluators. This suggests that the age-graded variation in linguistics is a crucial aspect when evaluating the level of acceptance of reported information; thus, results are likely to reveal a variation in a diachronic study depending on the age of the participants that take part in the study.

3. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to clarify the notion of writer's commitment in journalistic discourse by means of the use of a survey evaluated by a small group of contestants. The pilot study seems to prove not only that this parameter is difficult to evaluate, but also that reporting verbs are used in such a way that they contribute to the creation of a subtle interplay of voices, without putting at risk the supposed intertextual impartiality of the article.

The critical approach of the survey participants when they assigned a degree of commitment to each verb leads me to conclude that news reporters might be underestimating the power which reporting verbs have to reveal their true intentions. However, as Morency et al. (2007: 198-9) point out, "there is no infallible means of safely attributing commitment to an implicitly conveyed representation"; so often the issue of whether or not the journalist agrees with what is being reported is marked in the reporting verbs in such a subtle way that it is rather complicated to determine the attitude of the reporter with complete certainty. Even though I have tried to reduce the possibility of misattributing commitment, the margin of error is ever-present, making the informants' inferences susceptible of being disputed.

Lastly, the study appears to reveal the influence that the readership profile and the language of analysis have in the inferential process, though this still requires further research. It would be advisable then to increase the number of participants in future investigations in order to analyse these variables in depth, as well as to evaluate the writer's commitment at discourse level in order to check the (non-)existence of clear contextual divergences regarding parallel cases in media reports.

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Appendix (excerpt from the English survey)

How sure is Angela that what David says is true?

In this survey you will read several sentences written by Angela (a fictitious journalist working for a newspaper) about what David (a fictitious defendant) said in a trial. The aim is to deduce (if possible) Angela's opinion about the veracity of David's information by focusing your attention on the reporting verb (in capital letters) she uses. You have to write in the black box a number from 1 to 10 depending on the degree of certainty that you think Angela has about what David said in the trial (if you are not sure about her positioning just write number 5).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
she is not sure		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	she is very sure	

	David TOLD them that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David INFORMED the court that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David MADE IT CLEAR that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David DESCRIBED the employment contract he had signed as illegal
	David RESPONDED "the employment contract I signed wasn't legal"
	David CLAIMED that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David ACKNOWLEDGED that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David ACCUSED his employer of hiring him illegally
	David THOUGHT that the employment contract he had signed was legal
	David ANNOUNCED that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David RECOGNIZED that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David MAINTAINED that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal
	David ADMITTED that the employment contract he had signed wasn't legal