

Chapter 12

Online Discussion and Interaction: The Case of Live Text Commentary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This contribution discusses linguistic aspects of discussion and interaction in a new genre of journalism—live text commentary—that has recently come into existence thanks to new communication technologies, most notably the Internet. Live text commentary is a professional journalistic text that is produced online contemporaneously with the event that it describes. The technology enables the text's consumers to provide instant feedback to the author, thus enhancing interpersonal interaction. Structurally, the resulting texts contain elements of discussion because readers' comments are used to co-construct the texts, while also manifesting numerous linguistic features of reader-oriented interactivity. Live text commentary is viewed as an instance of mediated quasi-interaction. This is because the readers interact in a virtual space, discursively enacting their membership in an imaginary community, rather than participating in a real interpersonal interaction. Using material from live text commentaries of sports events, this contribution provides an analysis of such online discussion and interaction from the perspective of discourse analysis and sociolinguistics.

INTRODUCTION

While some of the chapters in this volume deal with cases of online discussion and interaction in contexts which are interactive by their very nature, e.g., chat groups, Internet forums, personal and professional blogs, etc., this chapter documents the occurrence

of interactive communication fostered by the use of modern information and communication technologies in an environment that is not inherently inclined towards discussion and interaction: Live reporting of factual events in the media. Generally speaking, the media are concerned with transmitting messages to their audiences, most typically represented by the canonical genre of news reporting (though there are other, interactive, genres, such as

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televised political debates and interviews, which are based on discussion).

This chapter focuses on one particular kind of reporting: Live text commentary, as represented by the written reporting of sports events online and in real time. While live sports reporting is an established spoken genre, online commentary is a relatively new phenomenon. The article shows how modern technology, in this case the Internet, may provide an opportunity for journalists to engage in unorthodox and innovative methods of journalism by inviting online discussion and interaction from their audiences during the process of the construction of the text.

The resulting product then integrates the functions of information-provision and interpersonal engagement in a text with a highly elaborate structure comprising two layers of narration. The description of the language and structure of live text commentary reveals that it is organized in complex thematic threads, which resemble other kinds of online interactions, e.g., chat communication. Noting the specific nature of live text commentary, this article offers a sociolinguistic explanation for this emerging genre. By relying on conversational language, dialogic structure and staged interpersonal interaction, the texts articulate the discourse participants' identity of belonging to a virtual group of sports fans.

Interaction in Mass Media Communication

In order to appreciate the interactive nature of live text commentary with all its implications and specificities, this novel genre needs to be situated in the context of mass media communication. Thus a general description of mass communication will first serve as a background against which interaction and interactivity will be discussed and several specific ways of increasing the interactivity of media texts will be noted. Then, online interaction mediated via the Internet will be considered in connection with the traditional journalistic genres

of news reporting, leading to a close discussion of live text commentary as a hybrid text type. Interactiveness and interaction in live text commentary of sports events will then be illustrated with specific examples, whose analysis will be followed by an interpretation of the social and interpersonal function of live text commentary.

Mass communication—in the most general sense—differs from interpersonal face-to-face communication in numerous respects. Most importantly, it is mediated by technology on account of the lack of any immediate physical contact between the participants. Because such communication is oriented towards an indefinite number of potential recipients rather than a specific group of addressees, it ranks as an instance of 'mediated quasi-interaction' rather than merely 'mediated interaction' (cf. Talbot, 2007). Although the mass nature of the communication seriously limits (if not blocks) direct contact between the senders of media messages and their recipients, modern ICT technologies may actually give rise to genres which go beyond this traditional limitation (as is the case with live text commentary).

Mass communication is typically described in terms of several models (for an overview, see, for instance, McQuail, 1987, Dominick, 1993, etc.). Regardless of their differences, most theorists point out the organizational—rather than the personal—origin of the message, with the journalists playing numerous roles (cf. Goffman's roles, outlined in Bell, 1991). The transmission of the messages is machine-assisted and reaches numerous recipients, who are typically unknown to each other and unknown to the source of the message. Importantly, unlike interpersonal communication, mass communication does not allow for easy or immediate feedback, which is one of its most significant differences from face-to-face or machine-mediated interpersonal communication – one that has serious implications, among others, for the linguistic shape of the message.

Although it is easy, as a result, to think of the audience as relatively passive 'recipients' of mes-

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