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Let's talk health – the textual efficiency of the discourse of healthcare articles in online women's magazines cosmopolitan (a comparative study)

ABSTRACT

The following article deals with some strategies for enhancing textual efficiency in healthcare articles and is based on a corpus of texts from online women's magazines. Here efficiency is understood in the sense Beaugrande and Dressler suggest, i.e. as a principle which controls textual communication, so that texts are used with "a minimum expenditure of effort by the participants". The object of analysis are articles from three online editions of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine – the American, British and Bulgarian variants respectively. The linguistic and socio-cultural specificities of the different audiences reflected in the choice of topics, their treatment, textual form and structure are of particular interest and are therefore regarded as a crucial part of the underlying context, alongside the role of the nature of the medium itself.

Key words: textual efficiency, media discourse, healthcare articles, women's magazines

1. Introduction

The following article shall acquire a discourse-analytical approach to the study of text as a communicative unit which is "activated" and re-constructed in the process of its utilization. Therefore, it shall be considered more fitting to the analytical task at hand that the selected approach to the analysis deal preeminently with the discourse as a whole instead of providing a narrow, detailed focus upon text as the materialization of the particular discourse. This way attention shall be given as a priori-

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ty to tendencies which concern the actual use of this particular discourse, its context and situation of occurrence, including the participants in the communicative act, and all this with regard to the efficiency of the discourse. Such an approach attempts to bypass the common among linguists (especially those trained in the tradition of the generative and transformational grammar) preoccupation with the construction and testing of various models of text. This study will by no means attempt at devising any such detailed and complex representations and neither will it be dedicated to the application and testing of any of the existing models, such as have been proposed by various and numerous specialists in the linguistic field. Such an abandonment of an obvious course of action for a linguistically-oriented work is informed (along with the complexity and arduousness of the task) by the doubt on the part of the author that such a purely text-linguistic treatment (albeit detailed and intricate) would prove to be enlightening in any substantially original and novel way. The very nature of the problem under scrutiny defies any simplistic, single-view approach, however thorough and precise in terms of linguistic technique it may be. The very nature of human communication in its various aspects (not only linguistic, but also cognitive, social, psychological etc.) and the particular type of "mass-produced", mediated, communicative event is another factor which defies anything short of a multi-faceted look (or more realistically, "glance") at the process of efficient communication of meaning (in the broadest sense).

It logically follows that an approach should correspond to the object of research it is applied to and that, therefore, no method should be imposed from the outside unscrupulously as an exercise in text-linguistic analysis as an end in itself. Instead, there should rather be made a realistic attempt at identifying (what at least appear to be some of the crucial features of the particular discourse) and trying to match the methods of research to those specificities. Thus, both the communicative and social sides of the object of research (a particular discourse) can be encompassed, while at the same time the need to discover the intersection with the subject of the study is kept in mind. This, I shall argue, appears to be an approach which can offer a way of bringing together the various factors which influence the use of texts as communication, which would potentially yield more vivid and multi-dimensional research-analytical results.

2. From textual efficiency to discourse efficiency

The notion of efficiency in linguistics has so far been traditionally explored on a somewhat local and limited textual level which has resulted in its application mainly in connection with the standard of cohesion and the linguistically available cohesive

devices which can promote the efficiency of textual form.¹ Thus the regulative principle of efficiency, understood as "processing the largest amounts with the smallest expenditure of resources"², emerges as an inevitable criterion for assessing the quality of any text when the inherent discrepancy and asymmetry between the discrete elements of surface form and the continuous notions and concepts of underlying content³ are taken into consideration. The instruments which every language provides for "compacting surface expression without damaging the connectivity of underlying knowledge"⁴ ensure that cohesion is upheld in an efficient way which satisfies the requirements of the principles of stability and economy⁵ without compromising the participants' access to the underlying, assumed coherence of the text. This is of course all very well and clear as far as linguistic analysis is concerned but Beaugrande, however, does not seem to be able to provide such neatly organized lists of "devices" to account for the ways in which this regulative principle affects the other six constitutive standards of textuality, apart from cohesion. It hardly seems plausible or even possible that such a basic feature of text in communication, namely the necessity for it to be "easy" in processing terms and thus manageable under the conditions of actualization such as time restrictions, disturbances etc., could rely solely on the capacity of language to compact surface structure.

The efficiency of discourses defined as "socially constructed knowledges of (some aspect of) reality ... developed in specific social contexts and in ways which are appropriate to the interests of social actors in these contexts"⁶ then emerges as a process into which the communicative situation "feeds" (together with past experience) various and numerous clues with which participants are in a dynamic relationship – they provide clues themselves, as well as have the responsibility to employ their communicative competence to decide which clues are relevant and select them as meaningful regarding the ongoing communicative act. As a result of this selection of important clues, certain aspects and elements of the textual side of communication are modified – which can be observed as the way in which discourse efficiency is reflected upon the text through which the particular discourse is actualized.

¹ Robert de Beaugrande, *Text, Discourse and Process*, 1980, <http://www.beaugrande.com/TDPOpening.htm> (31 October 2012)

² Ibid.

³ Romyana Todorova, *Theory and Practice in Text Linguistics*, Konstantin Preslavsky University Press 2000, p.10, 13.

⁴ Robert de Beaugrande, *Text, Discourse and Process*.

⁵ Beaugrande (1980) defines the principle of stability as one which "assigns a high priority to strategies for coordinating surface expressions that share common or contiguous conceptual content" and the economy principle as one which stipulates that "wherever expedient or doubtful, preference should be given to re-using already activated content, rather than activating new content".

⁶ David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen, *Global Media Discourse*, Routledge London and New York, 2007, p. 58, 60.

Beaugrande's views, although at that particular point limited to cohesion, are by no means incompatible with an approach which accentuates the importance of seeing (linguistic) text, alongside other relevant factors of discourse. His own insistence on the importance of preserving "connectivity" features as ground for an attempt on my part to treat the notion of efficiency on a discourse-analytical level by examining here not the strictly linguistic cohesive devices which serve to compact surface form, but also, and more importantly, a number of other aspects of the discourse in question, whose consideration can potentially shed some fresh light upon the ways in which actual communicative situations come to be successful and, what is of interest here, efficient.

3. Case study

Since efficiency as a regulative principle originally presupposes processing with the least amount of effort of the largest possible chunks of information, it would seem interesting to examine which factors in a communicative situation and in what ways enhance the unproblematic processing not of isolated sentences, but of whole texts, and furthermore, groups of texts which coexist within the frame of the same discourse. As such factors emerge, for example, the specificities of the elements of the communicative situation, such as the participants (in terms of culture, language, knowledge, interests, beliefs, intentions, etc.), the medium through which communication occurs (in our case – the electronic medium of the World Wide Web, or Internet in more general terms and the electronic edition of a women's magazine in particular) with its technological specificities, the social and cultural backdrop against which communication takes place, to name but just a few of the most obvious ones.

3.1. *The target audience*

According to the Media Pack of Cosmopolitan magazine⁷ its target audience consists of young women aged between 18 and 34. According to Nielsen Online (2011)⁸ and MRI (Spring 2011)⁹, the demographic profile of the magazine's readership in Bulgaria shows that 55% of the readers are females between 18 and 34, while in the United States the percentage is similar, 58.7%. The majority of those women are working, educated and active, and the main household shoppers. Sano-ma Bliask (the company which presents the magazine on the Bulgarian market)

⁷ Cosmopolitan Magazine Media Kit 2012. <http://www.cosmomediakit.com/r5/home.asp> (31 October 2012)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

and Hearst Corporation (the owner of *Cosmopolitan* magazine) both describe their target audience as comprising young, active and mature women, "fun, fearless females who want to be the best they can be in every area of their lives"¹⁰. Sanoma Bliask¹¹ claim that their goal is to offer to their audience "valuable information" – "unique and interesting articles created by our online editors with high editorial input, daily latest news, useful and valuable information" while the Hearst corporation's editorial section of the *Media Pack* boast of their "well-rounded editorial content" with a prevalence for relationship articles (29%) followed by fashion and beauty articles (at 18.2% and 14% respectively).

3.2. The medium

Another important aspect of the context of occurrence of these texts is the type of medium through which they reach the reader – in our case with the online editions of the magazine, this is the internet. The specificities of this most modern medium of communication and dissemination of information depend partly upon the hardware requirements and conditions (the reading happens via a screen of sorts, which imposes certain limitations to the surface format of the texts, namely the necessity for them to be divided into smaller chunks, shorter paragraphs and not too long and complex sentences, so that the reader be able to navigate efficiently and not get lost while scrolling down a page or clicking to the next link and losing the previous page from their view).

A very important advantage of online editions is the unlimited access to them, as they are practically free (except for the fee paid to the internet provider) and always only a click away – they provide easy entertainment everywhere and anywhere, numerous options for browsing and skimming through articles until you pick one which attracts your attention as interesting. This abundance of competing stories on competing websites which are all just a click away makes it important for editors to be able to attract and keep the attention of the browsing audience by various (linguistic) means. Articles in online women's magazines are colourful not only in the traditional sense of the word, they are also textually colourful and attractive, which transforms them into a unique text type specific to a particular context and situation of occurrence which has its own characteristic configuration of surface form and underlying textual world, requires the activation of particular knowledge patterns in order to be understood, is characterised by its own uniquely specific dynamics of the relationship between efficiency and effectiveness.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sanoma Bliask. Санома Бляскъ 2012. <http://sanoma.bg/bg/sites/cosmopolitanbg.html> (31 October 2012)

3.3. Socio-cultural context

The novelty of this discourse and the type of text it involves, along with its pervasiveness in the reality of the present day, determines the vivid interest on the part of sociologists, psychologists, economists and, last but not least, linguists in the workings of this new area. What is more, although this electronic discourse can be considered new and novel for the English-speaking world such as the United States, it is even more so for a country such as Bulgaria, where the language barrier is combined with a cultural one and, in a recent historical sense, a socio-political one, one of political and economic organization. It is still more interesting to observe how and to what extent the Bulgarian language has changed to accommodate the requirements of this new reality, this new discourse, the new medium in a world marked by globalization and international mass media. It is also interesting to observe in what ways and to what extent this international brand, the *Cosmopolitan* magazine, has managed to "localize"¹² its content while preserving its characteristic recognizable format.

In light of the several observations mentioned so far and with regard to the subject of research, the question emerges as to what and how makes the reading of online women's magazines an *effortless* activity? I see the term "effortless" as particularly appropriate here as its definition¹³ entails "requiring or apparently requiring no effort; ... not showing effort or strain" and is synonymous with adjectives like "easy, simple, flowing, smooth, graceful, painless, uncomplicated" as well as "natural, simple, spontaneous, instinctive, intuitive". Thus the notion of "effortlessness" seems to correspond very well to the *Cosmopolitan* magazine objective of providing readers with "unique and interesting articles, (...) useful and valuable information"¹⁴ – effortless browsing is seen as a positive, desirable activity, entailing reading as something easy yet satisfying (and not boring or dull) which involves the pleasure of a kind of fluent, gracious elegance and is representative of a process of uninterrupted enjoyment.

3.4. Strategies for ensuring efficiency

One type of strategies for ensuring (or rather gradually building up and establishing) a high level of effortless browsing of the respective websites of the three editions of *Cosmopolitan* forms around the content in terms of choice and treatment of topics while another set of strategies concerns the surface formats in which the selected content appears:

¹² On localization see David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen, *Global Media Discourse*, p. 126.

¹³ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/effortless> (31 October 2012)

¹⁴ Sanoma Bliasad. Санома Блясък 2012. <http://sanoma.bg/bg/sites/cosmopolitanbg.html> (31 October 2012)

3.4.1. Content-based strategies

One such strategy involves featuring a limited selection of topics all of which are considered to be of general (especially) female interest such as love and relationships, health and beauty (including fashion), celebrity news, financial and career advice. Within each general topic, forming a separate section, there are several (also limited in number) sub-topics. In the health sections, for example, there are a limited number of strategically pre-selected health issues or problems which receive attention. Those are, regardless of the edition, mainly issues related to weight loss, fitness and dieting, sexual health (including pregnancy articles in the Bulgarian and the American issues), psychological health (mainly stress and depression related), breast cancer prevention (especially the British edition). It is an interesting fact that the American edition does not have a separate section dedicated to health but has located health articles within a subsection of the "Secrets and Advice" section under the title "Health and Fitness Tips". The British edition, as well, assigns articles on health a place in a subsection entitled "Health" within the section "Body". The Bulgarian counterpart to those two editions, however, not only has a separate section dealing with issues of health (entitled "Д-р Cosmo", "Dr. Cosmo" in English) but also provides a wide range of subsections such as "Всичко за диетите" ("All about Dieting"), "Здравни новини" ("Health news"), "Въпроси и отговори" (Questions and answers), "Сексуално здраве" ("Sexual health"), "Твоето тяло" ("Your body"), "Попитай д-р Cosmo" ("Ask Dr. Cosmo"). The number of articles available on issues of health is also significant and illustrative of the tendencies and traditions in the different cultures and languages pertaining to discussions of health. Thus the American edition features the humble 109 articles as compared to the 139 articles in the British edition. Those two numbers are severely overshadowed by the astonishing 700 articles in the Bulgarian edition (the sum total of the articles in the subsections on dieting, health news, sexual health and body excluding the Q&A subsections). Therefore it seems that the general topic of health in Bulgaria is of much greater concern for the readers than it is (at least appropriate to acknowledge) for those in America and Britain.

Another strategy serving efficiency relies on the employment of simplification and popularization – the use of specialized terminology is kept to a minimum and generally appears in health articles in order to emulate the style of the expert¹⁵ and thus grant reliability to the advice. Once introduced, every term is then explained, paraphrased and re-formulated in layman's terms in order to avoid lack of understanding and to bridge any potential gaps between the background knowledge of the

¹⁵ David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen, *Global Media Discourse*, p. 138.

reader and that necessary for understanding. This way specialized information undergoes a process of intentional simplification and becomes accessible to a wider public. The American edition for example introduces the medical term "melasma" and simultaneously offers a definition and simple explanation for it within the same sentence – "a condition...which causes the skin on your face to change color due to the overproduction of melanin"¹⁶. The British edition uses "melanoma" and in two consecutive sentences describes it as "a deadly skin cancer" which "is caused by sunburn and sunbeds and starts as a mole or freckle"¹⁷. Both editions employ simple language which directly addresses the reader by using the second person singular pronoun to present the medical conditions in question in a manner more easy to understand. The Bulgarian edition also features explanations of the medical terms used, such as for example the definition given to the condition "обсесивно-компулсивно разстройство" (obsessive compulsive disorder) which reads as follows: "ОКР е разстройство свързано с тревожността, характеризира се с недоброволни натрапчиви мисли, които създават тревожност, основана на страха, че нещо лошо ще се случи" ("OCD is a disorder connected with anxiety, it is characterized by involuntary persistent thoughts which create anxiety based on the fear that something bad is going to happen")¹⁸. What is very interesting here is the contrast between the two English explanations and their overall simplicity and the highly complicated style of the Bulgarian text, which resembles that of a medical journal or textbook.

Yet another means of ensuring efficiency is the use of recurrent topics/themes – a typical strategy is the treatment of one and the same topic in a variety of articles, each one of which examines a slightly different aspect of the topic by repeating a set of basic propositions with the inclusion of some variations and additions. This way a group of texts forms around a particular topics as a web. This ensures that the processing of every consecutive article requires less effort on the part of the readers, as their sense of familiarity with the topic itself, as well as with the treatment it receives (according to their previous experience within as well as outside of this "web"), helps them to have better and more correct expectations and to be able to better predict what the text they are currently dealing with is about. This way readers do not have to create a new representation for each new text but only to make the necessary corrections and additions to the already existing representational entry in their memory. In other words, they simply need to update their data base on the particular subject. Thus all three editions of the magazine feature numerous articles

¹⁶ <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/advice/health/weird-pregnancy-symptoms> (31 October 2012)

¹⁷ <http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/diet-fitness/health/time-to-ban-sunbeds> (31 October 2012)

¹⁸ <http://www.cosmopolitan.bg/tvoeto-tyalo/trevojni-diagnozi.html> (31 October 2012)

concerning healthy foods and dieting for example, each of which is intertextually and discursively related to the rest of the article on the same topic. Some titles are as follows:

In the US edition¹⁹: "Foods that keep you sexy"; "5 foods you should avoid"; "Diet tricks (that don't involve dieting)";

In the UK edition²⁰: "There's WHAT in my salad? Health professionals warn of hidden sugars in our food"; "Healthy office lunches"; "Healthy office lunches";

In the Bulgarian edition²¹: "5 храни, които да изключиш от менюто си" ("5 foods to exclude from your menu"); "Защо трябва да пиеш прясно мляко" ("Why you should drink milk"); "Цветна диета" ("A colourful diet").

3.4.2. Form-based strategies

A characteristic strategy for amplifying efficiency through form is the use of schematic, repetitive, stable structuring and layout – articles are formatted in an easy to navigate and browse through way. An article is typically introduced by its title plus an introductory sentence – these two elements are all one sees (except the illustrative, non-linguistic material) before clicking on the link and following it to the full text of the article. Thus the title serves as a "teaser" which aims to attract the reader's attention often by creating knowledge deficiencies which the reader would be motivated to fill in. The introductory sentence (or sometimes two short sentences) introduce the main idea(s) of the article. These serve as a short introduction which enhances browsing efficiency – the article being too short to provide enough information on what exactly the article is going to be about and its role being to grasp attention and direct it towards a "trailer" of sorts (the short summary of the main points in the article). This way potential readers do not have to actually follow an article link only based on the title and potentially be disappointed, if it did not turn out to be what they expected – which would be (in the long run) frustrating rather than attractive to the readers. Instead, readers are presented with a short "trailer" (to employ again this term borrowed from films) which informs them of what to expect from the article in a very concise and informal way.

The main body which follows, as a rule, begins with the results from some recent research or study made by specialists, which is further in the article explained and elaborated in the typical for Cosmopolitan knowledgeable but simplified style, at-

¹⁹ <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/advice/health/>, (31 October 2012)

²⁰ <http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/archive/diet-fitness/health/24/8/>, (31 October 2012)

²¹ <http://www.cosmopolitan.bg/dr-cosmo/category-tvoeto-tyalo/p1.html>, (31 October 2012)

tempting to inform and advise the readers about problems which are considered serious and important. This way a specific identity is created as a representation of the author or authors of the article – "they" (i.e. the "we" which appears in every article to refer to whoever was involved in the creation of the text, the "Cosmo team") perform various tasks aimed at helping their fellow "fun, fearless female" sisters. Thus "they" transform into "taskmasters", "missionaries", who seemingly spend countless hours consulting "top specialists" from various professions; "they" read the latest research and ask the difficult questions the reader may be too busy having "fun" to ask or perhaps not being too "fearless" to confront by visiting a specialist herself. In most cases the solution takes the neat shape of a limited number of steps to be taken towards overcoming the problem, and the advice is reformulated into a list of "tips" – short and simple but seemingly useful and practical in their offering of an "effortless" way of dealing with some persistent problem of everyday life.

4. Conclusion

The present study has offered some observations on several important specificities of the discourse of online women`s magazines regarding the issue of efficiency and utilization ease on a comparative basis. The treatment these topics receive here can by no means be considered exhaustive or conclusive. Instead, it should be viewed more as an attempt at posing questions which are more adequate to a subject of research situated at the intersection of several disciplines such as linguistics, media studies, discourse studies, sociology etc., rather than attempting to offer immediate solutions and thorough analysis. Despite the obvious disadvantages of such a sketchy approach it seems logical that its application for the purposes of the study might yield some fresh information and practical insights from a different perspective into a discourse typically utilized exactly by means of browsing. An attempt has been made to propose a shift of focus from the study and analysis of efficiency as a feature of texts as products of communication, to a notion of efficiency as pertaining to the text as an actualization of discourse and a process – such a shift of paradigm is expected to yield results which would in the end be of more consequence to the study of the actual communication taking place within the discourse of online magazines than a mere preoccupation with detailed linguistic analysis of however lengthy linguistic corpora, undertaken in isolation from their context and situation of occurrence.

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