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News Reporting in the Second Intifada: 
A Systemic-Functional Analysis

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The Second Palestinian Intifada (2000-2005) forms the context for this paper. The focus, however, is not on the events themselves, but on the treatment of those events in the media. Most specifically it examines and compares the treatment of two events in the conflict by two different news agencies: Reuters and the Associated Press. Systemic functional grammar (SFG) comprises the framework for the analysis, and some familiarity with the associated terminology is assumed. Much of this paper is concerned with a descriptive analysis of the language choices that comprise each article, but the paper also concludes with a brief appraisal of these choices. While the two articles are ostensibly very similar, the lens of SFG brings into focus some interesting and possibly revealing contrasts in the ways in which the two news agencies write, or have written, about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.


Introduction

In the midst of the Second Intifada in September 2004, at the foot of its splash-page, the pro-Israel media site honestreporting.com displayed the following quote, attributed to a legal adviser to the Palestinian Liberation Organisation: “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ‘a battle over language sometimes more than anything else.’” Agreement between the opposing sides in this conflict is rare, so the fact that it has occurred in this instance is revealing. The issue of media bias is a recurring backdrop to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with both sides claiming the role of victim.

What is being attempted here is not to argue for or against the validity of these claims, certainly not on the basis of two news reports. It is instead an analysis of the treatment of two incidents by two news agencies. Reuters and Associated Press (AP) are perhaps the best known examples of the ‘on the spot’ agencies which provide what is ostensibly objective ‘hard news’ to media organizations worldwide. They are therefore of interest in that how they report events forms the filter through which national media interpret events. In this sense, Reuters and AP constitute the reality which informs external reporting, which in turn informs our own perspectives. The language choices made by Reuters and AP reporters are therefore crucial to our understanding of events and merit close scrutiny. In a less sensitive context, the reports are also interesting in their own right as examples of the register of news reporting, and it is to this which we turn first.

Overview

Both texts (see appendix) are examples of the ‘news story’ genre, inasmuch as they conform broadly to a structure whereby the ‘nucleus’ is followed by a series of ‘satellites’, each of which elaborates on the nucleus in a different way (Butt, Fahy, Feez, Spinks & Yallop, 2000, p. 228). Having said that, these texts diverge from that genre in one important respect: each of them describes two distinct newsworthy events, and so has two ‘Leads’1. While there is no question that the second event (the

1 Because of this, neither ‘nucleus’ nor ‘Lead’ seems an appropriate term here. The latter is preferred only insofar as it is the less illogical of the two.
shooting of a Palestinian man) plays the subordinate role in both texts, it is distinct enough in terms of subject matter and even language choices, that it cannot be considered a satellite of the primary event (the ‘assassination’ of Khaled Abu Shamiyeh). In this sense the texts represent something of a sub-genre of the news story; perhaps a ‘news digest’, in which any salient events in a broader story (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) are dealt with.

Further structural similarities between the two texts can be found throughout. An interesting feature of both texts is that the ‘primary Lead’ (clauses 1-5 in both texts) is not limited to the ‘crisis point’ (Butt et al., 2000, p. 228). Both Reuters and AP foreground the response of Hamas to the killing, something which might be construed as identifying with Israeli concerns. What follows in satellites 1a, 1b and 1c is also very similar, not in language choices but in the function of the respective satellites. In fact, so similar are many aspects of the texts that it is tempting to attribute many of the language choices to a third, common source. However, given that this is impossible to establish, the texts must be treated as independent here.

The only genuine structural differences are to be found in the latter parts of the texts. Where Text A (Reuters) attaches reasonable significance to the ‘secondary lead’ (cl. 15-18), such that it has a distinct satellite element, the focus of Text B (AP) is much more on the general background to the primary Lead (cl. 17-25 and 28-31). This relative insignificance of the secondary Lead in Text B (cl. 19) is reflected in the unusual structural device in which the text shifts focus from event one, to event two and then back to event one (in cl. 28-32). Structurally then, Text A is linear while Text B follows a more circular pattern of action and reaction. In this sense Text B effectively, if inadvertently, conveys a sense of the ‘cycle of violence’ so characteristic of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

**Ideational Meanings**

The generic nature and purpose of the texts is reflected very strongly in the process choices which have been made. News stories focus on events and reactions to those events, which means a predominance of material and verbal process types (Iedema, Feez & White, 1994). Of the twenty-four ranked clauses in Text A we therefore find that seventeen use material process types and five verbal. The only other process type represented in the text is relational attributive, which is found only twice (cl. 6, 23). The ratio for Text B is very similar; of thirty-two ranked clause processes, twenty are material, eight verbal and just three relational attributive. It has a little more variation with the inclusion of a relational identifying process in clause eleven. This clause is used to indicate Abu Shamiyeh’s senior role within the Hamas organisation and so further establish the ‘newsworthiness’ of the event. Essentially, the process choices in both stories are highly conventional given the genre: action (material), followed by reaction (verbal and material).

The participant roles are equally predictable, if slightly more revealing. The overarching theme of both texts is one of Israeli ‘agency’ and Palestinian ‘subjection’ or ‘reception’ (this pattern is broken by the middle ‘backgrounding’ stage of each text in which Hamas is active). In both of the storylines, Palestinians are killed by Israelis. The reasons and effects of this are difficult to evaluate. To a pro-Israel reader, the stories will represent action in the face of a grave threat, to those with Palestinian sympathies it will be a case of victimisation. The fact is that the choice of story is probably a reflection of events ‘on the ground’. The British Broadcasting Corporation (2005) reported that as of February 2005, 3223 Palestinian civilians and 950 Israeli civilians had died in the intifada2. These figures, combined with the fact that the stories were released during a four-month lull in suicide attacks on Israeli targets, indicate that the ‘agency – subjection’ theme reflects a pattern at the time.

Whatever the reason, the Actors in the texts predominantly reflect Israeli agency in some way. The pattern continues with participants which perform the function of Goal. In Text A we find Palestinians (in some form) in this role on at least nine occasions (cl. 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 19, 21) and in Text B ten (cl. 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 17, 19, 26, 29, 31). Israelis (again, in one form or another) appear only once as Goal (Text B, cl. 23) and twice as a ‘negative recipient’, each time in a direct speech clause attributed to a Hamas spokesman. A particularly interesting aspect of Actors in both texts is what might be called the ‘depersonalisation of violence’. Shamiyeh is described has having been killed ‘by an Israeli missile’ (Text A: cl. 1, 7; Text B cl. 1, 9) fired by ‘an Israeli helicopter’ (Text A: cl. 4; Text B; cl. 4). Through this technique it is technology and equipment which become the killers rather than people. It is tempting to point to this as undermining the ‘objectivity’ of the texts, but similar devices...

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2 Casualty figures are extremely controversial and always hotly disputed.
are used to refer to Hamas violence (Text A: cl. 17 “A rocket which had been fired from the Gaza Strip”; Text B: cl. 23 “two Israelis were killed in one attack”).

There is considerably more symmetry with the verbal processes, which is again to be expected given the action-reaction nature of the genre. While events may be one-sided at any given time, commentary generally is not. In Text A, Israelis (the army and an unnamed source) provide three Sayers and Hamas two. In text B there are three Israeli Sayers and three Hamas. What is worth noting, however, is that in both texts the Palestinian Sayers are limited to Hamas. Again Text B is more varied here, with the inclusion of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, and the only ‘non-partisan’ authority in either text, ‘hospital officials’ (cl. 8).

Circumstance types are also typical of the ‘news story’ genre. Because they deal primarily with events, the writers of both texts have been concerned with context. This is reflected in the fact that a substantial majority of circumstances are locative, either spatially or temporally, frequently both (eight of 24 clauses in Text A, and 10 of 31 in Text B). Again it is in Text B that variation is to be found, and again it tends to occur during the extensive middle section which provides a background to the primary event (c. c: E-M). Here there are circumstances of manner, means and extent.

Nominal groups are characterised by relative simplicity in both texts, probably because epithets tend to be value laden, and as such detract from the perceived objectivity of a text3. The tendency instead is to employ embedded postmodification, presumably because it is more amenable to statements of fact and because it is a useful technique for meeting word limits imposed by editors. The writer of Text B also uses numeratives frequently (eight times, as opposed to twice in Text A), reflecting a concern with the ‘facts and figures’ aspect of news reporting.

Interpersonal Meanings

Given that the raison d’être of the news story is to inform, it is no surprise that the mood choices of the two texts are almost universally declarative, the only exception being the non-finite clauses. Even these are intended primarily to impart information and so perform much the same function as declarative clauses. It is likely that non-finite clauses are common in news stories because they enable a significant reduction in lexical density, making a text more readable4 and, again, keeping it within imposed word limits.

Despite the large variation in subject choices within each text (eleven in Text A and fourteen in B), there is a surprising level of quantitative agreement between the texts regarding the shared subjects. This is indicative of the common focus of the articles and is suggestive of a mutual source.

The similarities continue through other interpersonal meanings. There is effectively no modality in either text, which is again a generic requirement. Modality introduces authorial voice, which in turn detracts from perceived objectivity5. Both texts are entirely in the third person for the same reason. Polarity is similarly uniform, with 46 of the 47 finite clauses being positive. Again this to a large extent is concerned with showing objectivity. A reporter who writes at length about what didn’t happen is projecting his or her own interests onto what did happen. There is an element of this in all journalism, inasmuch as reporters decide what qualifies as news, but extensive use of negative polarity makes this more obvious – it is more than ‘just the facts’.

Textual meanings

In broad terms, the thematic choices of the respective texts are very similar. Each is characterised by fairly equal thematic prominence for both protagonists – the Israeli authorities and their agents, and Hamas and its agents. One difference here however is in the very significant first clause, which constitutes the headline. Here, while the ideational meanings are the same; Reuters has used the passive voice to give ‘A Hamas leader’ thematic prominence, while AP has used the slightly less marked active voice to position ‘Israeli missile’ as theme. Both texts foreground Hamas in clause two, or the first clause of the story proper, probably because they consider the likely reaction of Hamas to be of concern to the projected audience. The significance of this choice is highlighted by the fact that neither text returns to Hamas as theme until clause 15.

To be fair, this is not only a case of both writers manipulating events to make the story more newsworthy but is also an inherent feature of the ‘news story’ genre. As Butt et. al. note, ‘news stories’ are characterised by what we might call

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3 We can see this in the one example of extensive premodification, Text B cl. 21. See Appraisal, below.
4 Unlike nominalisation, the alternative means of concentrating the flow of information with a minimum of finite clauses.
5 Although ‘would’ (Text B: cl. 31) is analysed as a modal, it is in effect a future finite – the modal form is a requirement of reported speech.
‘thematic leaps’ rather than ‘thematic drift’; “The staccato texture of a news story emerges because the cohesive ties in the satellites often link directly back to the nucleus without weaving through previous satellites” (2000, p. 228). We find, therefore, that the main elements of the lead in each story (Khaled abu Shamiyeh, Hamas, the Israeli authorities) are dealt with discretely in later satellites⁶.

It is perhaps to ameliorate the lack of cohesion this ‘staccato’ structure creates that marked themes are used. Although rare in both texts, their function is generally to position events in time and/or place. The reader is made explicitly aware, through the use of marked themes (e.g.: ‘Later’ in Text A, cl. 17, ‘In a separate incident’ in Text B, cl. 26), of satellite transitions.

Both writers have also chosen to place the verbal group ‘said’ in the position of marked theme to project the statement of the Hamas spokesman (cl. 16 in both texts). This is interesting inasmuch as it helps the writers dissociate themselves from the Hamas statement: by giving the verbal process prominence over the sayer, the clause’s ‘arguability’ is increased.

Logical Meanings

Text A, in particular, is characterised by complex clause complexes. In fact, with the exception of the headline clause, only clause complex I is simplex. It is no coincidence that this is also the secondary lead (cl. 19), and so has a headline-like function. Text B, on the other hand, has slightly more variety; six of fifteen complexes are simplex. This is likely a reflection of the more sophisticated structure of the text. Where the structure is challenging there is a tendency for a lower level of grammatical density and therefore more simplex clause complexes. What both texts share is comparatively long opening clause complexes (if the headline clause is discounted, so c. c. B). In large part this is probably a product of the journalistic imperative to draw the audience into the text as quickly as possible, and so both Reuters and AP have included any salient information in the ‘lead’. The similarity between clause complex B in each text is remarkable. It can only be a product of a journalistic formula used to write leads, or again, of a common source.

Turning to clausal relationships within clause complexes, Reuters has shown a slight preference for hypotaxis while in Text B, hypotactic and paratactic connections are evenly split. This balance is indicative of the AP writer’s greater interest in the background to the event. It introduces an element of chronology, which will necessarily be manifested in equal, sequential clauses (i.e.: parataxis) as much as dependent clause relationships. Beyond this, the relationships are quite balanced between projection, enhancement, extension and elaboration, although both texts have a slightly higher level of projection. Again this is typical of ‘news stories’, which are based in large part on statements from various authorities. A fairly high number of verbal processes will in turn mean a high level of projection.

Cohesion

Cohesion in both texts is affected by the ‘staccato’ nucleus – satellite structure. Not only does this necessitate somewhat abrupt changes in what might be called ‘micro-context’ (single events as opposed to the broad context of violence in the occupied territories), which in itself has an effect on cohesiveness, but it limits the use of certain other cohesive devices. The discrete nature of the satellite elements, in that they are independent of each other, precludes the consistent use of lexical chains throughout each text. A related issue is the limits the structure of the genre places on pronominal reference. Because the thematic choices are so erratic, the device is largely limited to reference within the clause complex. This is not to say that these techniques are entirely absent from the texts, but they tend to be restricted. The closest either text comes to a ‘full’ lexical chain is Khaled abu Shamiyeh, mentioned five times in Text A and six in Text B.

The role of marked themes in compensating for this disjointedness has already been mentioned. Ellipsis is also used extensively by both writers to assist readability. These aside, the main cohesive strength of the ‘news story’ genre, and hence these texts, is the same thing which undermines it: the nucleus-satellite model. The ‘nucleus’ (clauses 1-5 in both texts) plays such a prominent role that the readers are essentially made aware of any salient points before they encounter the ‘satellites’. In other words, because the reader already has the ‘gist’ of the story, a relative lack of cohesion in the details does not detract appreciably from the clarity; the information is essentially ‘recycled’ (Iedema, Feez & White, 2004).

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⁶ This is also the main reason why a secondary lead is attributed to each story here; the shooting of the unarmed Palestinian is not referred to in either primary lead.
Appraisal

As news stories, both the Reuters and AP texts written in what Iedema et. al. call a ‘reporter voice’ (1994). This is to say that they are without the trappings of what is conventionally associated with subjectivity in a text: modality, explicit judgement and the like. This is not to say they are objective. As has already been implied, the fact that both reports foreground Hamas’ reaction shows a concern with what is newsworthy, and selection of material based on that concern. Subjectivity can enter a text in a number of subtle ways.

The first of these that is relevant to this context is the use of what has been called ‘non-core vocabulary’ (Iedema et. al. 2004); words which are not typically used in a given context, and so are necessarily value laden. Of the two texts, non-core vocabulary plays a greater role in the AP story (Text B). Perhaps the most striking example comes in clause 25: ‘Houses and cars have also been damaged in rocket barrages.’ The use of the word ‘barrages’, rather than a less marked equivalent such as ‘attacks’, has connotations of indiscriminate and unremitting shelling, and as such positions the reader quite explicitly, especially if compared to clause 17: ‘Israel has killed dozens of militants and scores of bystanders in targeted attacks…’ Israeli strikes are contrasted sharply with those of Hamas as being clinical and efficient. In this case the expression is somewhat belied by the numeratives used in the clause: ‘dozens’ and ‘scores’, very imprecise but large numbers.

In fact, the use of numeratives in Text B as a whole is striking. In addition to clause 17, we read of Hamas firing ‘hundreds’ of rockets and carrying out ‘dozens’ of suicide bombings. While it is true that the rocket attacks may be so numerous as to be unrecorded, the same can surely not be said of suicide bombings. It can only be assumed that the AP chose to use a less precise but more emotive term. Because these imprecise numeratives are applied to the actions of both Israel and Hamas, the most likely motive is to make the events more newsworthy rather than trying to influence the reader to adopt a particular stance.

Intertextual appraisal, however, is less balanced. While both texts usually use neutral verbal processes to project spoken clauses (‘said’, for example), both Reuters and the AP report that:

‘Hamas (has) threatened ^TO TAKE revenge’. Both ‘threaten’ and ‘revenge’ are negative terms, and both have been inserted by the reporters (as the later quotation of what was actually said shows). In the case of the AP text this is even more striking when compared to an assimilated Israeli quote (cl. 28 – 29): ‘Prime Minister Ariel Sharon…pledged…to strike back’. While the essential ‘meaning’ is almost identical to the Hamas ‘threat’, the values could not be more different. ‘Pledge’ has almost noble implications, and ‘strike back’ is at worst neutral.

General patterns of ‘insertion’ and ‘assimilation’ (White, 2004 (2)) of spoken clauses are also revealing. While the above examples are both heavily assimilated, one negatively and the other positively, the more neutral verbal processes show an inclination toward inserting what is said by Hamas and assimilating Israeli authorities. The only other Hamas ‘Sayer’ projects a direct speech clause (cl. 15 in both texts) while all of the Israeli sources are assimilated to some degree (Text A: cl. 11-12, 20-21, 22-24, Text B: cl. 11-13, 26-27). While it might be argued that the Hamas statement is sufficiently bellicose to be able to stand alone as news, the general pattern seems to reflect a greater engagement with Israeli authorities in both texts, particularly Text B.

Finally, the issue of ‘tokens of judgement’ (White, 2004 (1)) needs to be touched on here. It is dangerous to generalise about the effects of language which has no real inherent value but will be interpreted in particular ways by readers with particular values. Nevertheless, it is possible to make some guarded assumptions based on the reporters’ awareness of the audience for whom they were broadly writing (i.e. Western).

The treatment of clause one in each text is a case in point. Because Reuters backgrounds the role of Israel in the killing, it is tempting, if simplistic, to see the report as sympathising with Israel to some degree. It separates Israel from what is a negative act: the killing of a human being. At the same time there is the fact that a western audience equates the word ‘Hamas’ with terrorism. This means that the killing of a Hamas leader may in fact be a heroic act, and so by linking Israel directly to the killing AP is favouring Israel. In the end, we are not in a position to adopt either view simply by reading the text. We in some sense choose our own response independent of the author’s intentions.

A less equivocal example is in the only case of extended premodification in either text (Text B: cl. 21): ‘Hamas and other militants have also fired hundreds of highly inaccurate low-explosive homemade rockets at Israeli towns…’. The significance of the numerative here has already been referred to, but the epithets are also

7 It is also interesting that Sharon is identified simply as ‘Prime Minister’, not the more usual ‘Israeli Prime Minister’. 
interesting in terms of tokens of judgement. While ‘highly inaccurate’ (arguably), ‘low-explosive’ and ‘homemade’ are in themselves descriptive rather than evaluative, the fact that the writer chose to use them is revealing. Their cumulative effect is to compound the impression given by ‘barrages’ in clause 25: that Hamas attacks are random and indiscriminate. To some readers, this will make them appear morally more reprehensible than the ‘targeted attacks’ of the Israeli army.

Conclusion

The contention in this analysis has been that both texts A and B are Clear examples of the ‘news story’ genre. Despite the use of more than one nucleus, the language choices are in general typical of the genre. In fact, so similar are some of the language choices that at times the texts are almost indistinguishable. In more general terms, both are written in reporter voice, which means that they essentially satisfy the criteria generally expected of ‘objective’ reporting. This is not to say that they are genuinely objective in the literal sense of the word. Even a cursory analysis of appraisal has shown a number of evaluative language choices, particularly in Text B.

Appendix: Clause Listing


C.C. Cl.

A 1 ^A Hamas leader ^HAS BEEN killed by ^AN Israeli missile
B 2 Hamas has threatened
   3 ^TO TAKE revenge
   4 after an Israeli helicopter blew up a car on a busy Gaza City street
   5 killing a senior field commander [of the Islamic group’s armed wing]
C 6 Khaled Abu Shamiyeh was alone in the car
   7 when the missile struck late on Sunday
   8 killing him instantly
D 9 Six bystanders were wounded
   10 two ^Bystanders were wounded
   11 seriously
E 11 The Israeli Army said in a statement
   12 that the commander was targeted
F 13 because he played a central role in the manufacture and development [of Qassam rockets]
   14 which Hamas militants have fired at the nearby Israeli city [of Sderot]
G 15 “Hamas will teach the enemy (Israel) a painful lesson”
   16 said a Hamas spokesman Mushir al-Masri
H 17 Later a rocket [[17.1 ^WHICH HAD BEEN fired from the Gaza Strip]] landed in Sderot
   18 but ^IT did not cause any casualties
I 19 Israeli soldiers also shot dead an unarmed Palestinian in the Gaza Strip soon after the attack
J 20 An Israel source said
   21 troops fired at a Palestinian [[21.1 ^WHO WAS spotted (21.2)crawling towards an army outpost on a road leading to a Jewish settlement in central Gaza late on Sunday]]
K 22 Soldiers later found
   23 that the man had no weapon
   24 the source said

C.C. Cl.

A 1 Israeli Missile Kills Senior Hamas Leader

B 2 Hamas threatened

3 ^TO TAKE revenge

4 after an Israeli helicopter blew up a car on a busy Gaza City street

5 killing a Hamas militant [[5.1 who was involved in making and firing rockets at Israeli towns]]

C 6 Six bystanders were wounded,

7 two [of them] ^WERE WOUNDED seriously

8 hospital officials said

D 9 The missile struck Khaled Abu Shamiyeh

10 as he was driving his car in Gaza City.

E 11 Abu Shamiyeh was the head [of Hamas in Gaza’s Sheik Radwan neighbourhood]

12 and ^HE was involved in building homemade Qassam rockets

13 the army said

F 14 Hamas militants [[14.1 ^WHO gathered at the hospital]] called for revenge against Israel

G 15 “Hamas will teach the enemy (Israel) a painful lesson”

16 said Hamas spokesman Mushir al-Masri

H 17 Israel has killed dozens of militants and scores of bystanders in targeted attacks in four years [of fighting]

I 18 On Sept. 7 helicopters fired missiles at a Hamas training area

19 killing 14 militants

J 20 Hamas has carried out dozens of suicide bombings in Israel

K 21 Hamas and other militant groups have also fired hundreds of highly inaccurate low-explosive homemade rockets at Israeli towns and Jewish settlements in Gaza

L 22 Many of the rockets land in empty fields

23 but two Israelis <24> were killed in one attack

24 <including a four-year-old boy>
REFERENCES


