

A Systemic Functional Analysis of Philippine English Newspaper Editorials

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Abstract

This paper provides a description of the inherent generic structure potential of Philippine editorials written in English. Ansary and Babaii's (2005) systemic functional framework is used to identify the generic structure potential of these texts through the analysis of their potential macro-structures. The findings indicate that 1) Philippine English editorials have a macro-structure 2) these editorials have obligatory (Run-on Headline, Addressing an Issue, Argumentation, and Articulation of a Position) and optional (Providing Background Information and Closure of Argumentation) elements in them. The study also presents implications with regard to the use of editorials in composition pedagogy.

Keywords: Contrastive rhetoric, Philippine English. Systemic Functional language theory, editorials

Introduction

The potential of Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) studies to document the writing conventions in a monocultural or multicultural linguistic ecology remains to be an unexploited field for linguistics in general and writing pedagogy in particular. From Kaplan's (1966, in Connor, 1996) study of students' writings, CR has diversified with the inclusion of different genres of other forms of writings.

Journalistic writing represented primarily by newspapers has been the subject of CR research for a couple of years now. Hinds (1983) utilized data from the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* to compare and contrast the Japanese expository pattern with that of the Anglo-American structure.

Scollon (2000) studied the Chinese and English editions of the *People's Daily* and *China Daily* and stated that there is generic differentiation among the three editions of the newspapers. This implicates the use of caution when contrasting discourse structures among newspapers.

Ansary and Babaii (2005) applied the Systemic Functional (SF) language theory in analyzing the distinctive rhetorical features of English newspaper editorials. They identified the four obligatory (Run-on Headline, Addressing an Issue, Argumentation, and Articulating a Position) and optional elements that are included in the editorials published online in *The Washington Post*.

In the Philippines, the vast field of newspaper editorials has been considered as a legitimate field of pragmatic and discourse analyses. The findings of these studies have revealed insights as regards Philippine English (PE) compared with Filipino and with the other varieties of English as well. Dayag (1997) used Searle's Speech Act Theory to identify the pragmatic functions utilized in Philippine editorials. The findings of the study revealed that there are similarities with regard to the use of assertives in PE and

American English (AE).

Using Hoey's (1983) Problem-Solution Pattern, Dayag (2000) compared Filipino and PE editorials coming from the newspapers in the country. The study revealed that both kinds of editorials provide substantial amounts of background information in this argumentative type of written discourse.

Dayag (2004a) utilized Toulmin's Claim-Data-Warrant framework in identifying the discourse features inherent in Philippine newspaper editorials and proved that these texts suggest the presence of their interactive nature.

Using 180 editorials from PE and Filipino newspapers, Dayag (2004b) made manifest the origin of information indicated in the editorials and the techniques present in them to structure the evidentials and discourse framework of the said texts.

The aforementioned studies have shown that editorials are legitimate sources of pragmatic and discourse research since the texts were written with the writer's communicative intention of presenting to the readers a certain perspective that may have been shaped cognitively by the cultural and ethnolinguistic background of the writer. Various frameworks have been utilized except for the SF theory.

The study aims to accomplish the following: 1) identify the distinctive rhetorical features of Philippine editorials written in English; 2) label the generic structure potential of these editorials; and 3) present certain implications as regards CR and composition pedagogy.

Framework of the Study

The SF framework that was used in categorizing the functional aspects of the paragraphs in this exploratory study and was developed by Ansary and Babaii (2005). This framework was based on the concept of obligatory and optional elements of structure that was developed by Halliday and Hassan (1989). Initially, Ansary and Babaii (2005) pilot-tested the classification of global elements on five editorials. They separated the editorials into smaller rhetorical units by making use of the explicit divisions present in the texts like paragraph divisions, italics, and other typographical devices. Boundary indicators such as discourse markers, new lexical references, and meta-textual signals were used for boundary marking and function identification. They then identified the obligatory elements in the rhetorical structure of editorials: Run-on Headline, Addressing an Issue, Argumentation, and Articulating a Position. These functional aspects are present in all the editorials that they analyzed. The optional elements that were present in some of the samples were providing Background Information, Initiation of Argumentation, and Closure of Argumentation. They applied the analysis on a larger sampling composed of thirty editorials coming from the website of *The Washington Post* to present a broader perspective on the functional features of these compositions. The obligatory and the optional elements mentioned above were used as the coding system to point out the SF and GSP that are inherent in Philippine editorials

Methods

Data

Thirty editorials containing the different rhetorical structures were collected from the online versions of *The Philippine Star* and the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the two leading broadsheets written in English. Both websites contained the electronic

versions of the news items that are in their respective print versions. The webpages are also updated with breaking news and headlines. Readers are given a chance to air their reactions to the sociopolitical issues in the articles by posting their messages in the inbox provided under each article in the case of the *Star* or in a separate link in the case of the *Inquirer*.

Procedure

Two sets of editorials, each set composed of fifteen editorials, were downloaded from <http://www.philstar.com> and <http://www.inquirer.net>. The websites have archives containing electronic copies of articles including editorials. The copies of the articles were then printed and subjected to the analysis of the rhetorical structures using the categories mentioned above. The paragraphs from the Philippine editorials were carefully compared with the samples provided in the Ansary and Babaii's (2005) study to make sure that the composition unit has been given its proper functional aspect.

Findings

Run-on Headline (RH) (f = 30, 100%)

The first element in the editorials identified is categorized as a run-on headline that conveys to the reader the topic that the text will be discussing or will be focusing on. The first example is about the situation of the country after the pardon granted by President Arroyo to Estrada who was convicted of plunder; the second is about the officials who joined the President on her visit to Europe.

Run-on Headline (RH) *Example A*

Divided Nation

(*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 28 October 2007)

Run-on Headline (RH) *Example B*

Junketeers

(*The Philippine Star*, 31 October 2007)

Providing Background Information (BI) (f = 25, 83.33%)

The second element that is inherent in editorials provides necessary information that would initiate the development of the topic. The texts made use of narration, description, and comparison and contrast to introduce the topic to the readers. References were made to events, situations, people, organizations, and places. The first example provides information about the testimony of de Venecia III in the Senate about the controversial broadband deal; the second is about democracy in the Philippines and in the ASEAN as well.

Providing Background Information (BI) *Example A*

When telecommunications businessman Jose de Venecia III first testified before the Senate about what he knew of the ZTE contract for the government's national broadband network project, he studiously referred to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo as "my president." It was an obvious attempt on his part to make a crucial distinction between the series of corrupt acts that he said tainted the ZTE deal beyond redemption and a head of government he said did not know anything about it.

(Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2 November 2007)

Providing Background Information (BI) *Example B*

Compared with the rest of Southeast Asia, the Philippines is truly the most democratic country, so President Arroyo wasn't entirely off the mark when she made this declaration before the United Nations General Assembly last week in New York. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was started by four authoritarian states plus one democracy - the Philippines - that was on its way to a dictatorship. Other countries that later joined the grouping carried on the tradition of authoritarianism, which is partly why ASEAN is finding it so difficult to prod its member Myanmar to implement democratic reforms.

(The Philippine Star, 1 October 2007)

Addressing an Issue (AI) (f = 30, 100%)

This part of the editorial provides the reason why the text was written. It discussed current events related to social and political problems that need to be addressed or solved. The first example addresses the issue of the difficulties of driving in the country; the second discusses the credibility of those who file impeachment complaints against the President.

Addressing an Issue (AI) *Example A*

A near-total absence of road courtesy has long been the bane of motorists, commuters and pedestrians alike. And the public has constantly bewailed the low quality of driver education. Likewise, the opportunistic—instead of fair and consistent—application of driving laws, invoked for the financial benefit of local governments and individual policemen and traffic aides, has been a cause of constant frustration and the continuing erosion of respect for law enforcers.

(Philippine Daily Inquirer, 11 November 2007)

Addressing an Issue (AI) *Example B*

The public has long suspected that defective impeachment complaints are being filed at the House of Representatives against public officials to inoculate them for a year from genuine complaints that are likely to prosper. Now, for the first time, there could be a chance to prove such suspicions.

(*The Philippine Star*, 12 October 2007)

Argumentation (A) (f = 30, 100%)

In this part of the editorial, the writer argues for his views and expects the reader to view the issue being discussed from his perspective. The primary purpose of the writer in this part is to seek the agreement of the reader after taking in the propositions that were presented by the writer. Claims, counterarguments, and refutations may be utilized by the writer to present his opinion.

Argumentation (A) *Example A*

Initiation of Argumentation

The people should realize that the original contents of a work of art have been violated.

Argument 1

The changes made the original meaning of the painting different.

Argument 2

The changes done made by the artists seem to have affected the apolitical stance of the organization.

Closure of Argumentation

The press should maintain its independence and not succumb to pressure exerted on by certain personalities.

Should the rest of the country care? A discredited organization which has long ceased to represent the country's mass of working journalists; a new painting on an old theme, worth less than a million pesos; a debate on an almost philosophical level: preserving the integrity of art versus meeting a certain standard of neutrality. This is, at first glance, far from a gut issue.

In the first place, the changes to the mural effectively undermine the work itself. The original painting was a meditation on press freedom today—that is to say, the present time of unexplained disappearances and international

condemnation. It is precisely this context that was taken out from the mural, like inconvenient details airbrushed out of old communist portraits.

Secondly, the changes to the mural gloss over the largely political provenance of press freedom in the Philippines. NPC president Roy Mabasa told the *Inquirer*: “We don’t want to be politicized; they [the artists] went overboard. We don’t want to be associated with the Left or Right. The club is apolitical; it can stand on its own.” This is insipid thinking, at best; insidious rhetoric, at worst.

We recognize that the integrity of a work of art must be respected; we believe that the press cannot be neutral in the face of politically motivated threats to its very existence. But above all, we affirm that the members of the press have a responsibility to act independently—not throw in the muralist’s trowel when the guest of honor comes a-calling.

(Philippine Daily Inquirer, 5 November 2007)

Argumentation (A) *Example B*

Initiation of Argumentation

The elderly should be given importance.

Argument 1

Senior citizens should be given consideration in order for them to serve the nation and themselves.

Argument 2

The aged could be given programs for them to become self-sufficient and productive.

Closure of Argumentation

Senior citizens may be given assistance by various sectors.

There are in fact millions of people classified as senior citizens who deserve to be honored for outstanding achievements in life. A number of these senior citizens continue to serve the nation with dedication and efficiency, with the wisdom of their years a bonus that benefits those whose lives they touch.

As the growing army of the elderly awaits this policy shift, governments should develop programs that will allow the elderly to continue contributing to national productivity and remain self-sufficient.

Employment opportunities, entrepreneurial programs and livelihood projects can be designed specifically for senior citizens. If there are job programs for inexperienced youth, surely there can be special programs

for the experienced elderly.

Developing countries have limited resources to promote the welfare of the elderly, especially those who have been abandoned by their relatives, but various sectors can do their part to help. The private sector can support employment and other livelihood programs for senior citizens. Neighborhood support and volunteer work among impoverished and ailing senior citizens can go a long way in easing the pain of the elderly.

(The Philippine Star, 7 October 2007)

Articulating a Position (AP) (f = 30, 100%)

This element presents the writer's stance as regards the topic that was discussed in the other paragraphs of the editorial. It often presents the issue at a particular point of view that the public is perceived to infer. Usually serving as a concluding remark, this part makes manifest the opinion that needs to be considered. The writer strongly advocates democracy in the first example while the writer of the second notes the necessity of exposing the truth.

Articulating a Position (AP) *Example A*

US leaders may be disposed to continue waltzing with dictators, as it had done with Ferdinand Marcos. But that dangerous dance had long-term ill effects on the Wilsonian spirit that drives much of America's diplomacy. In a world made "safe for democracy," democracy is always the better alternative.

(Philippine Daily Inquirer, 8 November 2007)

Articulating a Position (AP) *Example B*

The ambush became the basis for a major military offensive that has displaced thousands of residents of Basilan. Surely the public deserves to know the reason for this military action. Those left behind by the 14 Marines also deserve to know what happened. There is no excuse for suppressing the truth in this massacre.

(The Philippine Star, 15 October 2007)

A Detailed Sample Analysis

The rhetorical structure of 30 editorials was subjected to analysis. As to the markings that were used to identify certain paragraph units, an example of their classifications is provided here. The focus of the analysis was the macro-structure of these Philippine editorials.

The sample here was taken from the website of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Found on the opinion section of the website, the text that was originally published on

29 October 2007 was accessed on 3 December 2007.

Run-on Headline:

Political suicide

Providing Background Information: The Presidential pardon given to Estrada has been discussed in the preceding articles.

In the last three days, the Inquirer has sought to put last week's pardon of convicted plunderer Joseph Estrada in perspective, to explain why—even though we, like many others, saw it coming—it still came as an enormous outrage, a terrible disservice to the country and a travesty of justice.

On Friday, we criticized his lawyers' appeal to President Macapagal-Arroyo, taking them to task for the intellectual dishonesty and rank condescension of their letter. On Saturday, we struggled with each of the three reasons the President gave for granting her predecessor executive clemency, and found them sorely wanting, trivial even. And yesterday we picked up a theme raised earlier and condemned this obscene pairing of political bedfellows; now, to repeat a phrase making the rounds, it is the People of the Philippines vs Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Addressing an Issue: The effectiveness of the pardon given by President Arroyo to save her from continuous political debacle is questionable.

One more thing needs to be said, one more attempt at perspective-setting needs to be made: On the strictly tactical level, will the President's craven bid to ensure her continuing political survival work?

Initiation of Argumentation: The pardon put the Arroyo administration at an even greater risk.

On the strictly tactical level, the pardon doesn't exactly make sense. At best, it is an unnecessary risk-taking, with make-or-break consequences; at worst, it dooms the political rehabilitation, not of a disgraced former president, but an unpopular incumbent.

Argument 1: There is no chance for Estrada to run again as president.

The notion (proposed last week by a veteran political analyst, and seconded by a few others) that Estrada could run again, and that his pardon was in exchange for protecting Ms Arroyo should he win again, is not only an absurd fantasy; it is also a legal impossibility. The Constitution bars him from running for Malacañang, the seat of government he abandoned on Jan. 20, 2001, ever again; if he files, he will be disqualified by the Commission on Elections, whoever the new

commissioners will be. If he is not disqualified, a suit before the Supreme Court will settle the matter with alacrity. On this point the Constitution is unambiguous; even politicians will understand it.

Argument 2: It is almost impossible for Estrada to honor his commitment of not seeking political office again.

To be sure, this notion conflicts with the third reason the President gave for granting Estrada executive clemency, but the conflict is of no moment. Estrada can legally run for political office other than the presidency; the only thing holding him back would be that promise not to run again and, as he told an adoring crowd gathered in the City of San Juan, engage in “dirty politics.” But Ms Arroyo herself infamously made a similar commitment, and on Rizal Day yet. What makes her think Estrada will honor his own promise?

Argument 3: Though the pardon has been granted, divisions between the supporters of Estrada and Arroyo are still very much present.

The idea that the pardon will usher in a new era of reconciliation, and that Estrada’s supporters will eventually warm to Ms Arroyo, underestimates the depth of the political divide. The same adoring crowd in San Juan and the third of the electorate that conventional wisdom thinks they represent may have applauded her for releasing Estrada, but it is a stretch to imagine that they will forget, not only the former actor’s six years in jail, but the election fraud she allegedly perpetrated against another actor-politician and populist icon, the late Fernando Poe Jr.

Argument 4: The presidential pardon Arroyo granted to Estrada will not stop the calls for her resignation.

Not least, the argument that the deep dismay of the Edsa II forces caused by the pardon could be easily contained, its effect on protest campaigns or election turnout safely managed, is fatally flawed. The real power of the middle forces lies, not in the ability to elect a president, but in its capacity to unseat one. Turbulent as the President’s first six years in office have been, the Estrada pardon will only make her last three years even more tumultuous. She may ride it out to the end of her term, but she will find that her act of executive clemency has limited rather than widened her options for choosing the terms of her exit.

Articulating a Position: President Arroyo’s personal motives for granting pardon will not see fulfillment.

Like many others in society interested in making the country’s democratic project succeed, we have never ruled out the possibility of pardon per se. Like many others, we have always believed that support for any grant of clemency was conditional: It was a question of the

timing being right, and nonnegotiable conditions (such as admission and repentance) being met. President Arroyo, however, granted Estrada pardon to meet personal and political ends. That she won't meet them is ironic; that she politicized the administration of justice is, alas for all of us, tragic.

Discussion

The 30 editorials that were analyzed suggested that editorials printed in Philippine broadsheets contain parts having certain functions like those identified by Ansary and Babaii (2005). Analysis of each editorial's macro-structure revealed that Philippine English editorials do have obligatory elements: Run-on Headline, Addressing an Issue, Argumentation, and Articulation of a Position. Providing Background Information is optional among the writers. The excerpts presented here contain at least two arguments, and two of these excerpts contain a Closure of Argumentation part.

The Run-on Headlines are usually composed of single words or phrases that give an initial idea of what the topic of the editorial will be. All sample texts included in the study contained this element.

Addressing an Issue is done by stating how the topic discussed in the editorial affects the general public as indicated in the excerpts given above. Again this rhetorical structure is present in all the editorials that were analyzed.

The Argumentation parts of the editorials may be composed of two to three arguments as shown by the excerpts in this study. This part is present in the editorials coming from both the *Star* and the *Inquirer*.

Usually at the last part of the editorials, the Articulating a Position part contains the stand that the writer takes as regards the issue discussed. Appearing to be an either/or proposition, this rhetorical structure makes a definite stance on the topic expounded on in the other parts of the editorial.

It may be inferred from the preceding paragraphs that Philippine editorials written in English share the obligatory elements that are also found in the online editions of the editorials in *The Washington Post*.

Editorials are argumentative in nature. Since they have rhetorical features that may be distinguished and categorized, these compositions may then be used as samples in the teaching of argumentative writing. The students may be given copies of editorials, and they are guided by the teachers in analyzing these texts in order for them to be familiar with the conventions of writing an editorial. The teacher may continue to guide them when they synthesize their ideas by writing their own editorials. It may be possible that these developing writers become more proficient in argumentative writing, a rhetorical pattern required in the academe.

These editorials may also be used as topics for discussion since it appears that the argumentative nature of these texts begs for the reaction of their readers. Students may agree or disagree with the notions stipulated in the texts and they could be given the chance to defend their stance by giving valid and logical reasons that would support their own arguments.

Another probable application of using these editorials is for them to be used as materials for paraphrasing and summarizing. Since these texts have distinctive features that may indicate the location of certain ideas, the teacher may use them as springboard for the writing activities stated and consequently gauge and evaluate the amount of

information processed by the students.

Research on how effective the practice of using these editorials as samples of argumentative writing should be given consideration. Whether this will be helpful or not remains to be proven by empirical evidence.

Research on the GSP of editorials written in Filipino should also be given importance. As of this time, it appears that no study on Filipino editorials using the SF approach and identifying their GSP has been conducted so far. These texts then represent another vast field for linguistic endeavor.

The GSP of editorials written in Filipino may also be compared with those written in PE. The undocumented similarities and differences between these two types of texts remain to be in need of academic exploration.

Comparison of editorials written in different World Englishes should also be the subject of linguistic research. Editorials written in PE may be compared with those written in Singaporean English, New Zealand English, South African English, etc. Whether or not editorials written in other Englishes share common GSP remains to be proven through studies.

Finally, it seems appropriate that the GSP of various forms of written and spoken discourses be categorized. Letters, emails, advertisements, etc. may be the subject for this kind of research that will be using the SF approach. Perhaps this will give a broader perspective as regards the effects of culture and ethnolinguistic background on an individual's writing and his speaking as well. Perhaps the differences between languages and cultures may be the homogenizing feature of this Age of Multiculturalism.

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