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Social Stylistics

Syntactic Variation in British Newspapers

Andreas H. Jucker

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To Stefan and Fabian's grandparents

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Preface

In the twenty-five years or so of its existence, sociolinguistics has achieved quite remarkable results. Institutionally it has established itself as a legitimate and important branch of linguistics, which is reflected in the number of academic posts that are held by sociolinguists and by the still growing number of journals devoted to this field. Academically it has developed an important and fairly coherent methodological paradigm in a Kuhnian sense, in which a lot of important work on specific language situations all over the world is being carried out.

If there is a limit to this success story, it is the fact that the most successful applications of the sociolinguistic research paradigm are still largely restricted to the area of phonological – and possibly morphological – variation. This is perhaps not very surprising. It is after all a commonplace that we judge interlocutors according to their accents, that is to say according to the way in which their pronunciation may differ from our own. Many people – and not just linguists – have a remarkable ability to locate interlocutors regionally and socially simply on the basis of their pronunciation. Hence it seems natural that scientific investigations into language variation across regional or social spectra should take phonological differences as their starting point.

Moreover, phonological, and to some extent also morphological, variation is particularly suitable for this kind of approach because the pronunciation of a word, for instance, may vary considerably from one speaker to the next without changing the basic meaning of this particular word. And similarly different morphological realisations of a given construction may not affect its meaning even if the different realisations indicate the regional and/or social origin of the speaker.

Syntactic phenomena, on the other hand, do not easily lend themselves to this kind of analysis. In what follows, I shall argue that the main reason for the limited success of most of the extant studies in syntactic variation lies in the fact that they rely too much on the methodological tools that have been developed for phonological variation. They usually rely on variables that can be argued to stand in a paradigmatic relationship, as for instance the contrast between *who, that* and Ø as different realisations of the relative pronoun. Such an analysis tries to set out all the linguistic and nonlinguistic criteria that affect the choice of one variant rather than the other, in the same way that sociolinguistic studies of phonological variation try to correlate systematically different phonological realisations of the same word with their different contexts of use.

I shall argue that we should free ourselves from such a restricted view of syntactic variation and consider a broader range of possible variables. Traditional stylistics is an older branch of linguistics, which, like sociolinguistics, tries to correlate the realisations of linguistic elements with their contexts of use. But traditional stylistics has never been concerned with paradigmatic relationships between two or more variants of some linguistic variable. Its main methodological tool is the density of specific features, that is, the number of occurrences of a particular linguistic item, whether phonological, morphological, lexical or syntactic, within a given stretch of text. However, traditional stylistics, unlike sociolinguistics, has never had a coherent and generally accepted methodological framework. Most notably it has tended to be fairly indiscriminate in its categorisation of contexts, whereas sociolinguists have always been meticulous in differentiating the axes of social and regional variation for instance.

I shall use the structure and the complexity of the noun phrase as a particularly pertinent example. The noun phrase can vary from a simple personal pronoun to very complex constructions with several modifiers attached to the same head noun and with further modifiers embedded in these modifiers and thus can vary enormously in the informational load it is made to carry.

I have chosen the language of all eleven British national daily newspapers as a corpus because they provide data which is fairly coherent – the language is produced on a day-to-day basis and is addressed to a mass audience. Even the paper with the smallest circulation, the *Financial Times*, sells over a quarter of a million copies every day. At the same time there are clear internal stratifications in that the various papers target very different segments of the newspaper reading public.

This study, therefore, tries to achieve several things simultaneously. It provides an account of the structure and the variability of noun phrases in British English newspapers, it assesses the limitations of syntactic variability studies that are essentially based on the methodological tools developed for phonological variation, and it outlines a possible theoretical framework for studies in syntactic variation by combining research tools from sociolinguistics and traditional stylistics.

An earlier version of this book was accepted by the University of Zurich as my *Habilitationsschrift*. I would like to express my gratitude to all the people who have helped to make it possible. In particular, my thanks go to Udo Fries and Peter Matthews, who have given me much advice and encouragement and who have read several draft versions of it. Allan Bell, Silvia Kübler, Tom Lundskær-Nielsen, Terence Moore, Mats Rydén, and Susan Wright read various parts of earlier drafts and provided very useful comments. Andreas

Fischer and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg gave me detailed and helpful comments on the entire manuscript. They should of course not be held responsible for any remaining errors and infelicities.

I am also grateful to audiences at the Universities of Cambridge, London and Zurich, where I had the chance to present earlier versions of some of the material in this book. Their stimulating discussions have given rise to several improvements.

Much of this book was written with the financial help of the Swiss National Science Foundation, which allowed me to pursue my studies from October 1987 to September 1989 as a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge. I thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for their support, and Peter Matthews, the head of the Linguistics Department in Cambridge, for his hospitality, and all my friends in Cambridge for providing such a congenial atmosphere for my work.

And finally, my most deeply felt gratitude goes to my wife, Ursula Jucker-Kälin, without whose constant support, encouragement and love this book would not have been possible.

Zug, July 15th, 1991

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in references and tables for the eleven newspapers of the main corpus.

DMi	*Daily Mirror*
St	*The Star*
S	*The Sun*
DE	*Daily Express*
DMa	*Daily Mail*
To	*Today*
DT	*The Daily Telegraph*
FT	*Financial Times*
G	*The Guardian*
I	*The Independent*
T	*The Times*

In the text, the papers are referred to by their full titles. The definite article is included as part of the title, as in the above list, only if it forms an integral part of the masthead of a particular paper.

In tables and occasionally in references, the newspaper sections are abbreviated as follows:

ar	arts
bu	business and finance
fn	foreign news (overseas news, European news, American news, etc)
hn	home news (UK news)
sp	sports news

For attested examples, references are given. The absence of a reference can be taken as an indication that the example is a modified version of an attested example or an example invented for illustrative purposes.

1. Introduction

That's not style. But it's what gets into newspapers
Waterhouse 1981: 111

The concept of style has a wide – not to say confusing – currency in many seemingly disparate linguistic frameworks. It is one of those terms that has an even wider currency outside the confines of linguistics, as for instance in the history of art and in literary criticism, quite apart from the fact that it also exists as an everyday term with a rather imprecise meaning and many fuzzy edges.

In linguistics, in spite of the existing differences, it is generally agreed that style is a comparative concept in that it describes some relevant differences between a text or a discourse and some other texts or discourses; or, in some methodological frameworks, with some kind of explicit or implicit norm. It generally applies to instances of real language, language that has been produced by speakers with their beliefs, aims and goals in specific situations, and in particular physical, social and temporal environments. In other words, the concept of style applies to what de Saussure called *parole* and Chomsky (1965), with a slight shift of meaning, performance. More recently Chomsky (1986) has coined the term E-language (i.e. externalised language, as opposed to I-language for internalised language) for instances of actual language. He rejects the study of E-language as completely uninteresting. It "appears to have no significance" and it "has no status in linguistic theory" (1986: 31 and 151).

However, it is one thing to rely on native speaker intuition about language (and even the most die-hard empiricists depend to some extent on intuition, if only in choosing some data as normal and rejecting other data, such as pathological speech for instance, as less than normal); but it is quite another thing to rely exclusively on intuition as linguistic data without any recourse to actual instances of language, that is to say without checking whether the linguist's intuition about the native speaker's knowledge of his or her language (i.e. about Chomsky's I-language) bears any resemblance to its end product in the form of utterances in a spoken discourse or sentences in a written text. E-language, in spite of the seeming entropy, is highly organised, and there is system in the variation. A stylistic investigation is addressed first and foremost to the problem of uncovering some of the regularity underlying the variation and seeming unorderliness of E-language.

The concept of style is of course not a recent invention in linguistics, but in the last twenty years or so, it has gained a new prominence through its use in a new branch of linguistics, i.e. sociolinguistics. Sociolinguists have had some spectacular successes in the field of phonological variation, but their methodology has not carried over easily to other areas of the grammar. Syntactic variation in particular has repeatedly defied researchers trying to use the new sociolinguistic methodologies. Romaine (1982) gives a very full account of why these sociolinguistic tools are less than optimal outside the confines of phonological variation, for which they were initially developed. One of the main problems is the concept of free variation, which is fundamental to the inventory of sociolinguistic tools. It applies in a very plausible way to phonological variables, the variants of which can be said to differ only in social or indeed stylistic meaning but not in referential meaning, but it is much more difficult, if at all possible, to apply it to syntactic variables.

Traditional stylistics, on the other hand, has not been restricted by methodological tools that were developed for one area of the grammar only. Any formal feature which differs in its density from one text or discourse to the corpus of comparison may be used as a style marker irrespective of the meaning of this formal feature. Traditional stylistics, however, often fails to distinguish with sufficient methodological rigour between different types of varieties. Dialects, sociolects and registers, for instance, can all be called styles.

The present study arose from a feeling that the two branches of traditional stylistics and sociolinguistics should join forces in order to enhance our understanding of the regularity that exists in the seemingly bewildering variation of syntactic features across a range of different types of texts.

As a corpus for this investigation I have made use of extensive extracts from all the national daily newspapers of Great Britain. The limitation of my corpus to British national dailies is intended to ensure a maximum of coherence within the corpus, and it should guarantee comparability of different texts within the corpus. As all the newspapers have a national circulation and all of them are produced in London, no regional differences will have to be reckoned with. Moreover, in spite of the obvious differences between such newspapers as for instance *The Sun* and *The Guardian*, all newspapers share a large number of non-linguistic discourse features. The language is transmitted in printed form, and it is public in that it is intended for a very large audience. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suggest that all newspapers have fairly similar communicative intentions. They aim both to inform and to entertain their audience, even if the different papers assign widely differing priorities to these two intentions.

All the papers of my corpus have circulations higher than a quarter of a

million.[1] The printed media enjoy great popularity in Great Britain. Over 30 million adults regularly read one of the national morning newspapers, which have a total circulation of 14.8 million. Beside the national dailies there are some 200 dailies with a locally restricted circulation and some 1,300 weekly newspapers (including business, sporting and religious newspapers). Thus the daily output of language in the print media is enormous and would deserve close linguistic attention for this reason alone. Furthermore, as Wallace (1977: 49) points out:

> The restricted language of newspapers, *journalese*, is an excellent subject for empirical research into register variation, because it forms a large convenient corpus, contains several registers, all associated by certain shared features, and is recognized as such by those who use it. Thus we can examine not only the variation in features, but also how the users of this language view what is appropriate to it.

It cannot be expected that the language even of one single newspaper is without internal variation. On the contrary, it has often been pointed out that newspapers employ a variety of text types or genres (e.g. Burger 1984: 132; Kniffka 1980: 29–39; Lüger 1983: 18–22; Schmitz 1987: 822). For my corpus I use articles from the following five sections: "home news", "foreign news", "business and finance", "sports" and "arts", which are the most common newspaper sections that appear, at least in the broadsheet papers, on a daily basis. Not all the papers use exactly these names, but the correspondence is always clear. Most papers also carry more specialised sections, such as "science and technology", "media", "motoring", "holiday and travel", etc. However, I have decided to restrict my analysis to the sections that are common to as many papers as possible, in order to ensure the greatest possible comparability.

The restriction to these sections furthermore increases the coherence of the analysed language. Lüger (1983: 18), investigating German newspapers, suggests that newspapers have three main intentions, which are best served by articles in different sections. Newspapers want to inform through hard news, features, reports and interviews, they want to express an opinion by means of leaders and commentaries, and they want to entertain with reviews and stories. There is, of course, no hard and fast separation between these intentions, and one single article may serve all three of them, but the sections I have chosen for my analysis, with the exception of the arts section, can be assumed to have a more informative intention than for instance a leader or a gossip column.

Moreover these sections, again with the possible exception of the arts section, are more likely to have been written by staff journalists rather than by occasional or regular guest writers who may be granted more linguistic freedom by the subeditors in the feature pages of the various newspapers. Whenever it

was obvious that one particular article had been written by an outside contributor, it was ignored for my analysis.

Table 1.1 gives a summary of all papers and sections that were analysed. For each cell 1000 NPs were collected and analysed.

Table 1.1. 43 cells analysed across five sections of eleven British national daily newspapers

British national newspapers	arts	business	foreign news	home news	sports
Up-market papers					
The Daily Telegraph	x	x	x	x	x
Financial Times	x	x	x	x	
The Guardian	x	x	x	x	x
The Independent	x	x	x	x	x
The Times	x	x	x	x	x
Mid-market papers;					
Daily Express		x	x	x	x
Daily Mail		x	x	x	x
Today		x	x	x	x
Down-market papers;					
Daily Mirror				x	x
The Star				x	x
The Sun		x		x	x

The down-market papers do not carry regular news on arts, foreign affairs, or business and finance, the only exception being *The Sun*, which carries a regular "Sun Money" page. The mid-market papers include foreign news as well as business and finance, but do not have a regular arts page. *Today* usually has only a very small foreign news section, called "WORLD Today", which made it necessary to use all the articles in this section of several issues in order to get a one thousand noun phrase sample. The up-market papers carry the most comprehensive range of sections, with the only exception of the *Financial Times*, which does not have a sports section.

In all instances, I accepted the categorisations made by the papers, even if they are doubtful in several cases. Many of the articles in the *Financial Times*' home news section, which is called "UK News: General", for instance, deal more or less exclusively with financial matters and would, in all probability, appear in the business and finance section of the other up-market papers.

Every paper is represented by between two and five issues bought more or less at random between October 1987 and February 1988. The articles to be

analysed within each paper were chosen with the help of a table of random digits (to select issue, page and article). The one thousand noun phrase samples from each section should therefore be truly random samples.

There is no simple solution to the question of how big a corpus has to be in order to be representative. There is, of course, a point after which an increase in corpus size does not significantly affect the results anymore, but this freezing point is difficult to ascertain, and there can be no generally valid guidelines (cf. Varantola 1984: 57–60, Raumolin-Brunberg 1991: 52–60).

Oostdijk (1988: 20) believes to be able to put an exact figure on the size of corpus that is required for syntactic problems in English:

> Experience with a small subset of English have led us to believe that samples of 20,000 words each are sufficiently large in order to yield reliable information about the frequency of occurrence of most syntactic structures.

Such a claim is very difficult to assess, particularly since Oostdijk fails to exemplify the syntactic structures whose frequency could be reliably established by a set of the stipulated size. But again, this depends on the delicacy of analysis.

Varantola (1984) investigates the structure of noun phrases in a corpus of engineering English drawn from texts from relevant professional journals. Her corpus is about 20,000 words in size and contains some 2,000 noun phrases.

The size of the corpus will, above all, be determined by the frequency of the element under investigation. The inventory of phonological variables, in spite of the possible complexities, is far smaller than the inventory of syntactic constructions. Therefore a syntactic analysis will require a far larger corpus.

The ratio between full noun phrases, pronouns and names can confidently be established on the basis of a small corpus, but this is not necessarily true for low frequency constructions, as for instance special types of noun phrase name appositions. Initially I assumed that samples of 1000 noun phrases per cell would be sufficient to account for the frequency of all important types of noun modification. It turned out, however, that one of the most stratifying constructions, noun phrase name appositions, which will be dealt with in detail in chapter 9, do not occur in sufficient numbers within 1000 noun phrases. There are only about 10 to 20 instances in every 1000 noun phrases. This is clearly not enough if several subtypes are to be distinguished, whose relative frequency is the crucial stratifying feature.

In this instance more data had to be gathered. As it was not feasible to increase the entire corpus to such an extent that enough noun phrase name appositions would result, between 120 and 150 instances were collected for each

cell. This does not give any information about the frequency of noun phrase name appositions as such, and even less does it say anything about all those instances that could have occurred but did not. It does, however, provide fairly reliable data on the frequency of the possible subtypes.

In all the papers some patterns of noun phrase name appositions were overwhelmingly favoured over some others. This ensures that the general pattern can confidently be established by the number of instances that were collected. However, if relationships between only some of the patterns were considered, it happened that for individual papers too few of these subpatterns were recorded within the collection of individual instances.

Newspaper language has often been the subject of linguistic investigations, either using just one newspaper (e.g. Verschueren 1985, Carter 1988, Ghadessy 1988) or comparing two different newspapers usually a broadsheet paper and a tabloid (e.g. Crystal and Davy 1969; Wallace 1977; Mårdh 1980). Some studies, however, have tried to adopt a more comprehensive view. Kniffka (1980), for instance, uses a wide range of American newspapers, and Floreano (1986) compares several British newspapers with several British radio stations. The present study, too, adopts a more comprehensive view. It is not restricted to one or two newspapers but covers the entire range of papers within the given geographical limits, and thus it is not restricted to pointing out a range of more or less obvious differences. The differences are correlated in a systematic way with the socio-economic profile of the readership of the individual papers and with the newspaper section in which specific articles appear. Thus it will be possible to distinguish the idiosyncratic differences from the really relevant ones. It is hoped that this approach will also help to bridge the often noted gap between studies dealing with the social function of media products and studies dealing with their linguistic structure (cf. Schmitz 1987: 822).

One of the most obvious differences between different types of newspapers is the choice of lexical items used. Examples (1) and (2), on the one hand, and (3) and (4), on the other, are extremely unlikely to appear in the same newspaper.

(1) Home Secretary Douglas Hurd was jeered by the Tory hang 'em and flog 'em brigade yesterday as he turned down their plea for a referendum on bringing back the rope. (Sun, 8.10.87, 2.2)

(2) Just 24 hours after firmly refusing to cough-up any more cash, she sent Health Minister, Tony Newton, to the Commons with an extra £ 100 million hand-out. (Star, 17.12.87, 2.6)

(3) It also excluded from debt some A $ 690 m of high yielding preference shares issued during the acquisition of the Fox television stations in the US in 1986. (FT, 22.01.88, 18.3)

(4) In a £ 600 million anti-pollution programme, the CEGB will also install flue-gas desulphurization (FGD) equipment at the 2,000 megawatt Fiddler's Ferry power station in Cheshire. (T, 8.10.87, 2.4)

These examples appear to be fairly normal and unmarked in the context of the particular newspaper from which they were taken. The enormous difference in tone is to a large extent created by lexical items. The first two examples are very informal in tone, mainly because of the modifier *hang 'em and flog 'em* and the noun phrase *the rope* meaning "capital punishment" in (1), as well as the verb phrase *to cough-up any more cash* and the noun *hand-out* in (2). The noun phrases *high yielding preference shares* in (3) and *flue-gas desulphurization equipment* in (4) indicate a higher level of formality. The vocabulary in the first two examples is colloquial and informal while it is specialised and technical in the second two examples.

However, the present study will not attempt to deal in any systematic way with such lexical differences. The focus of attention will be on variation in the syntactic structure of noun phrases. Noun phrases are very powerful devices. They can be extremely simple, as for instance the subject of (2) above, which consists of the single pronoun *she*, or they can be extremely complex. One fairly complex example is given in (3). The noun phrase *some A $ 690m of high yielding preference shares issued during the acquisition of the Fox television stations in the US in 1986* shows multiple modifications as well as a modifier embedding. But it is by no means an extreme example.

To summarise, then, there are three main objectives which this study aims to achieve. First, I want to reassess the analytical tools of sociolinguistics and of traditional stylistics in particular as to their applicability to syntactic variation. On the basis of this reassessment I will point out how the two fields can be made to benefit each other.

Secondly, the noun phrase has been recognised as a style marker by several scholars (e.g. Aarts 1971; Varantola 1984; Raumolin-Brunberg 1991). In this study I want to further substantiate this claim by showing to what extent the noun phrase structure varies even within a very narrow range of styles. In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to give a fairly detailed description of the syntax of noun phrases in general.

Thirdly, I want to add to our knowledge of the language of newspapers by describing its use of noun phrases as one small area of its syntax. This will show on the one hand that there is not just the much commented on two way distinction between broadsheet papers and tabloids, even though this is the main dividing line, but there are also two quite distinct categories of tabloid papers. It will also show that in many respects the language of the tabloids and the broadsheets does not differ as much as is commonly believed.

This introduction was inevitably brief and programmatic. The following chapters will develop, expand and justify the claims sketched above. Chapter 2 develops the methodological framework. As a starting point it contrasts correlational sociolinguistics with traditional stylistics and with the ethnography of speaking. The notion of style is discussed in some detail, because it is used differently in sociolinguistics and in stylistics. In sociolinguistics it is usually taken to be a correlate of the amount of attention paid by a speaker to his or her production of speech. It is suggested that it should rather be seen as a correlate of the addressee(s). Thus stylistic differences are caused not so much by different amounts of attention, but by adapting to different audiences. This is contrasted to the notion of style in traditional stylistics, where it is seen as the frequency of occurrence of some linguistic feature in two or more contrasting text samples. Both traditional stylistics and correlational sociolinguistics relate linguistic variables to the extralinguistic context variables.

In chapter 3, I shall explore the extralinguistic variables of my corpus by showing how the British daily newspapers can be categorised into three groups according to their targeted audiences. The broadsheet papers, which are traditionally called the "quality papers", are read by a readership of a high socio-economic status (up-market papers). The tabloid papers, which are traditionally called the "popular papers", split up into those that target a mass audience from a fairly low socio-economic level (down-market papers) and those that target an audience between these two extremes (mid-market papers). The differences in the socio-economic profiles of the respective readerships are reflected by numerous other differences, such as the main sources of revenue (advertising for the up-markets, copy sales for the down-markets), the number of sections, or the size of headlines.

Chapter 4 outlines the syntactic structure of noun phrases. In this chapter the main constituents of noun phrases are distinguished, i.e. determiners, premodifiers, the head and postmodifiers with their subtypes, and the various subtypes of nouns are contrasted.

Chapter 5 reviews the literature on syntactic variation in general and on variation in the syntax of noun phrases in particular. Some of these studies rely heavily on a Labovian framework, which was developed for phonological variables and assumes that there is no discernible semantic difference between alternating realisations of some particular variable (free variation hypothesis), whereas others reject the free variation hypothesis for syntactic variation. Arguments are given why the latter approach is preferable. On the basis of this and the previous chapter, a list of specific hypotheses will be set up that will provide a starting point for the second part of this book, the empirical tests.

Chapter 6 shows how the complexity of noun phrases can be used as an indicator of style. Down-market papers use a distinctly higher percentage of names and pronouns and the noun modifications that are used tend to be simpler. There is a fairly strong tendency for unmodified nouns to occur in subject position whereas modified nouns occur in non-subject position. This tendency is weaker in the up-market papers. These results are used as a basis for a cluster analysis that groups together samples that are fairly similar within each cluster but sufficiently different across the clusters.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal in more detail with various types of premodifier and postmodifier and show how they are used in the different categories of newspapers.

Chapter 9 analyses constructions of the type *Labour Leader Neil Kinnock* versus *the Labour Leader, Mr Neil Kinnock* or *Mr Neil Kinnock, Labour Leader*. Noun phrase name appositions are one of the most clearly stratifying features distinguishing the various types of newspapers. The down-market papers and to a slightly lesser degree the mid-market papers strongly prefer a descriptive appositive with zero article to precede the name appositive, whereas the up-market papers generally do not use the zero article in this context and prefer the descriptive appositive to follow the name appositive.

Chapter 10, finally, summarises the findings, ties together the different strands of argument, tries to evaluate the success of the theoretical framework, and generally assesses the methodological contribution made by this study to the fields of sociolinguistics and stylistics.