Detecting bias in Newspapers: Implications for Teaching ESL

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To determine whether ESL speakers are able to read an English newspaper text as critically as native speakers (NS's), this study was designed first, in Part 1, to ascertain whether selected linguistic variables distinguish biased texts from unbiased ones, in the judgment of native speakers, and second, in Part 2, whether ESL speakers can discriminate between biased and unbiased texts with sensitivity to the same linguistic variables. A review of the literature suggested several linguistic variables to test with the following hypothesis in Part 1: "The frequency of each of 9 variables (such as Loaded Noun Phrases and Verb Phrases, Superlative/Comparative Adjectives, and Intensifiers) is significantly higher in biased texts than in unbiased texts." Fifteen native-speaking graduate students rated 45 newspaper articles on the 1984 presidential election campaign for bias, rating holistically 10 as biased and 10 as unbiased; they also underlined biased language in all texts. The researcher tested the 9 linguistic variables independently and found significant differences for 6 of them between the two text categories, which also corresponded to the NS raters' underlined language. In part 2, a group of 16 intermediate ESL students judged three texts from the corpus of 20 in Part 1, holistically, and by underlining biased language. The result was that their holistic judgements of bias matched the NS judgments, and their underlining of biased language also corresponded to the NS's. This demonstrates that teaching critical reading can be founded on using linguistic as well as holistic awareness in non-native speakers.

Non-native ESL students reap a double benefit in being able to read newspapers critically. Their knowledge of English-language culture can be developed *explicitly* through reference to its background knowedge, and *implicitly* through the value placed on analytical and critical thinking in western democratic tradition, which may differ from their own. Recent events in Eastern Europe, China and other places throughout the world show that people from countries where a premium is placed on the uncritical acceptance of authority can still be highly sceptical about officially-controlled information. For every society that embraces democracy, the older as well as the newer emergent ones, it is essential for its citizens to develop skills of detecting subtle forms of information manipulation and ideological bias which inevitably slip into the media. Detecting bias is not only a sociolinguistic skill in reading English, but a cultural attitude that can transfer back to native-language reading.

Cultural reasons for reading the newspaper critically are inextricably linked to pedagogical reasons. First, the newspaper can be profitably used as a text for advanced (and even intermediate) non-native students because it satisfies a need, in a communicatively-based curriculum, for authentic materials that are both the pedagogical means for learning English and the ends in themselves. Second, by

reading purposefully and critically, students might be encouraged to read more globally at a deeper level of comprehension. A number of empirical studies indicate that deeper processing of reading is related to the reader's "higher level" intentions, which seem to improve factual comprehension as well (see in Alderson and Urquhart 1984, e.g., Royer, *et al.;* Fransson; Hosenfeld; and Harri-Augstein and Thomas). These studies suggest that reading on all "levels" may be more integrated in the actual process of reading than we realize and that answering questions of literal comprehension or of critical evaluation may be demonstrating the *products* of reading, not the process (Alderson and Urquhart, Introduction). The key to that process may be purposeful reading, as in reading for bias.

Since purposeful reading focuses on content rather than form, there is increasing recognition of the part that content plays in the interpretation of text. The reader's knowledge of the world is stored in the mind as conceptual formats, which are referred to as schemata. It is this culturally-formatted content-machinery that is involved in the processing of a reading task (see for example, Brown and Yule 1983, and Carrell and Eisterhold 1983). Schematic knowledge can be utilized as an expectancy strategy in the interpretation of text, a kind of "top-down" process applied to reading. When the purpose is detecting bias, a top-down approach would use background knowledge to anticipate bias, while a "bottom-up" approach would deduce bias by putting various linguistic clues together. Therefore, we need to know what such linguistic clues and their pragmatic implications are in order to read critically and to teach others to do so.

The question arises, however, as to whether there are, indeed, consistent linguistic factors linked to biased writing. If there were, they might be teachable as a bottom-up complement to top-down reading strategies. Several authors of ESL reading texts, notably, Grellet (1981) and Fredrickson and Wedel (1984), teach the explicit detection of bias in newspapers with some attention to linguistic clues. For example, Grellet, who uses tables to be filled in by students as a pedagogical device, includes in her section on bias a table-heading for "Clues" (that are unspecified), which students fill in from articles they are analyzing (244-245); Fredrickson and Wedel, who italicize and discuss lexical items in sample articles, alert students to specific words, like the implications of the word *claim* on the truth value of reported statements (72). Educators are clearly aware of the need to pay attention to the linguistic clues of bias, but seem to teach them on an *ad hoc* basis, ranging from no definition of what such clues might consist of, to specific lexical items. Thus, consistent *categories* of linguistic items linked to bias might provide helpful guidelines.

Studies of linguistic indicators of bias in newspapers are found in such diverse fields as mass-communication (e.g., Tannenbaum 1955) and discourse analysis (e.g.,

Trew 1979). These studies suggest that emotionally-loaded language is a key factor, confirming what many linguists, such as Bolinger (1980), and experts in the mass media, such as Packard (1957), claim about "trigger" words. Osgood, *et al.* (1957) demonstrate that subjective judgements of specific terms can be measured by rating scales that establish statistically the degree of emotional intensity, i.e., loadedness, of the terms. Of course, their findings are valid only for a given sample of a population at a given point in time. The main contribution of Osgood, *et al.* is the *principle* that connotative values such as loadedness can be objectively measured by an instrument and validated as far as resources will allow within a given sample for a given population. Whereas Osgood measures the loadedness of individual terms, Sandell (1977) measures relative frequency of terms in his studies of newspaper texts, and shows that "persuasive style" is marked by significantly higher frequencies of certain categories of terms. Although Sandell's methods are primarily quantitative, he does recognize the qualitative factor of semantic loadedness in some of his categories. For example, modifiers and verbs of known intensity (like *extremely, slightly, must/may*) occur with significant frequency in biased (advertising) texts.

Pursuant to the literature cited above, the first objective of the present study (Part 1) was to determine by quantitative means whether there exist identifiable linguistic correlates of biased writing based on the judgments of native speakers. Categories of terms mentioned in the literature were defined as variables and tested to determine whether their relative frequency was significantly higher in biased texts than in unbiased ones. A second objective (Part 2) was to determine the extent to which the judgments of bias made by non-native speakers would agree with those of native speakers.

IDENTIFICATION OF VARIABLES AND PROCEDURES FOR PART 1

In identifying variables for our study, we were aware that linguistic categories might be either too narrowly or too broadly defined. A unit of analysis on the clausal level seemed promising. From the work of Trew (1979), we decided to analyze the text on the level of causal "participants" (noun phrases) and "processes" (verb phrases). Since every source in the literature mentioned loaded language, we felt that Loaded Noun Phrases (like *moral decay* and *our rights*) and Loaded Verb Phrases (like *breathes fire* and *cares*) would be our main variables.

Trew's method of analysis showed the particular importance of how *human* participants are referred to. We therefore designated Loaded Participant References (like *expert manipulator* and *"Fighting Fritz"*) to be a subset of Loaded Noun Phrases. The variable of Loaded Participant References was supported by other sources, particularly by Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978), which also gave us the rationale for including personal pronouns in Loaded

Participant References *when used as markers of solidarity or distance.* In addition to Loaded Noun Phrases (including the subset of Loaded Participant References) and Loaded Verb Phrases, a summary category of Loaded Terms was defined as the sum of Loaded Noun Phrases and Loaded Verb Phrases.

Since Sandell found that adjectives mark persuasive (advertising) texts significantly by their frequency, we included Total Adjectives (including Adverbs) as a separate variable in order to verify whether their sheer frequency as a word class would characterize biased newspaper texts that were *not* advertising copy. Then there were two kinds of adjectives we wanted to test separately. One was the kind of adjective to which Bolinger referred as the Implicitly-passive type, i.e., implying a value judgment by a hidden agent (like *desirable*). The other adjective type was the combined category of Superlative/Comparative Adjectives (Sandell). There were two other kinds of modifiers mentioned by various authors which we chose to test. One was Allness Terms, that is, all-inclusives such as *every* and *always,* and all-exclusives such as *never* and *solely.* Another was intensifiers, such as *very* and *slightly.* All these modifiers were tested to determine whether their relative frequency as word classes would correlate significantly with biased texts *without regard for whether they were in loaded phrases or not.*

Biased and unbiased texts were selected as follows: Photocopies of 45 newspaper articles on the 1984 presidential election campaign were assembled and presented to 15 native-speaking graduate students of ESL as a bias-rating task. All by-lines and wire-service identification were deleted in order to eliminate clues as to whether they were editorials or straight news. Subjects were instructed to underline biased language as they read, but were not directed to isolate particular types of lexical items like adjectives or noun phrases. This was done in order to allow them to define for themselves what "biased language" meant. Thus, they marked single words, phrases, clauses, whole sentences and even paragraphs in some cases. Then subjects rated each article *holistically* as Strongly Biased, Moderately Biased or Unbiased with respect to each candidate, Reagan and Mondale, separately. Rating each candidate holistically and separately was a precaution so that subjects would be less likely to link their local judgments of biased language with their overall judgement of bias in an article.*. Two indirect precautions were taken to counteract the subjects' own biases: first, the study took place several months after the election was over, when strong partisan interests on the part of subjects had presumably subsided; second, an aspect of the design which may have counteracted subjects'

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* Indeed, the results showed that subjects, non-native as well as native, could judge an article as unbiased even when they underlined a great deal of biased language in it, because they perceived an overall balance in the presentation of both sides. Since such balanced articles would lessen the correlation of holistic bias with "biased language," it follows that a positive correlation implies that the influence of the balanced articles had been more than offset by the strength of the relationship between biased language and holistic bias.

tendency to interpret "biased" as anything *opposed to* their favourite candidate and "unbiased" anything *in favour of* their candidate was the provision for rating an article as being *biased in favour of* their candidate, which provision was intended to shift their interpretation of "unbiased" toward more neutral ground.

The subjects had a week to complete the task independently. It was found that ten of the articles were rated as clearly biased for or against either candidate and ten others as clearly unbiased. These 20 articles constituted the text-analysis corpus.

In all 20 texts, every Noun Phrase, Participant Reference, and Verb Phrase was rated independently by the researcher on a scale of 1 to 5 for its degree of loadedness *in context*. Those rated high on the loadedness scale (4 or 5) were listed, tallied (counting repetitions) and summed for each of the two text categories, Biased Texts and Unbiased Texts. The researcher's judgments not only of phrase loadedness, but of phrase boundaries, were, of course, subjective decisions. However, if any phrase judged by the researcher to be loaded was included either wholly or in part within a subject's underlined portion of the text, that phrase was considered to be validated by that subject for its loadedness. Next, occurrences of all the word-class variables were tallied and summed. Differences in the relative frequencies of each variable between Biased and Unbiased Texts were subjected to the Chi Square test of significant differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF PART 1

The relative frequencies for all variables were higher in the Biased Texts than in the Unbiased Texts, with six significantly higher. In order of their level of significance, they were: Loaded Participant References, Loaded Noun Phrases and Loaded Terms at $p < .001$; Superlative/Comparative Adjectives at $p < .01$; and Allness Terms and intensifiers at $p < .05$. The remaining three variables (Loaded Verb Phrases, Total Adjectives and Implicitly-passive Adjectives) were not significant at the .05 level. Table 1, which is typical, shows the data for Loaded Terms.

Table 1: Frequencies of Terms (Noun Phrases plus Verb Phrases)
Rated Loaded by the Researcher, Counting Repetitions

Text Category	Total Words	Frequency	Adjusted * Frequency	Corrected ** Frequency
Biased	2625	371	265	264.5
Unbiased	1875	177	----	177.5

*   Frequency adjusted to a one-way test resulted in Chi-Square $= 17.52$, significant at $p < .001$.

**   Frequency further corrected to reduce differences as a precautionary measure resulted in Chi-Square $= 17.12$, significant at $p < .001$.

The subjects underlined approximately 80% of the Loaded Terms, which is an indirect validation of the researcher's semantic ratings. These results confirm that there exist identifiable linguistic correlates of biased writing.

DESCRIPTION, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF PART 2

Part 1 provided a native speaker (NS) basis of comparison for non-native speaker (NNS) judgments of bias, both holistically and linguistically. Part 2 comprises such a comparison, using a sample of three newspaper articles, two Biased and one Unbiased, from Part 1. Each article was accompanied by a bias-detection questionnaire asking NNS subjects whether the article was biased for or against each candidate, or unbiased toward each, and eliciting their reasons as a comprehension check. In addition, the subjects were asked to underline portions of the texts which they felt were biased. The subjects were a class of 16 ESL students in the English Language Institute at the University of Hawaii, 12 of whom were speakers of Mandarin or Cantonese, while the rest were speakers of Korean, Japanese or Indonesian. Their exposure to ESL study ranged from 6 months to 12 years. Only four had not been in the United States during the presidential campaign of 1984. The class instructor had prepared the subjects for the present rating task with a lesson in which they distinguished favourable from unfavourable book reviews. The researcher administered the 50-minute Bias-Detection Task, the first ten minutes of which were devoted to schema-building about the presidential election and the terms *biased* and *unbiased*. Subjects were reassured that their responses would be anonymous and that they need not comprehend everything in order to make a judgment.

Each student's response to each article was scored as to whether it corresponded to the NS holistic judgment for that article. In addition, all underlined language was matched term for term to the list of those Loaded Terms which the researcher and NS rater had agreed upon in Part 1.

Out of 46 judgments (16 subjects x 3 articles), 79% matched the NS holistic judgments and 89% of NS Loaded Terms were underlined by NNS subjects. This demonstrates that the non-native speakers were sensitive to a very large percentage of terms to which the native speakers were also sensitive, in addition to demonstrating their holistic awareness of bias.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ESL

This study lends support for teachers of ESL to venture into authentic materials like the newspaper with assurance that students can successfully comprehend enough to make critical judgments. It confirms the pedagogical idea that NNS students can extract just enough meaning for a particular purpose from reading an authentic source that may be otherwise beyond their comprehension, since these

NNS students fulfilled the single purpose set to them. One value of using this pedagogical approach is that even students of low proficiency can be encouraged by their success in a limited task that stimulates a more integrated, global response, in which they are stretched to capacity.

However, we should be careful that such a reading purpose does not deteriorate into the kind of mechanical detail-hunting expedition that students are often driven to by literal comprehension questions. Questions about the writer's bias and other critical questions can become just another way of supplying "right" answers instead of reflecting the reader's need to understand the writer's bias as an independent-thinking citizen of the world and not as merely a subordinate student. In actual practice, ambiguous articles would provide a way to stimulate genuine discussion rather than "right" answers. Our "NS norm" served only a limited research purpose and should not be used for pedagogical purposes. Yet, teachers may introduce the concept of "loaded language," particularly in noun phrases, including sociolinguistic bias in personal references, without necessarily teaching specific lexical items in advance as "biased", since the strategy of using *context* to determine word meaning is particularly applicable to detecting loadedness. As for the word-classes of Superlative/Comparative Adjectives, Allness Terms and Intensifiers, students might become aware that their relatively high frequency in a text is a possible signal of bias, not only in what they read, but in what they write.

Part 2 demonstrates that even students of limited proficiency in English, who cannot literally comprehend all of the highly idiomatic and culture-specific content of American election campaign articles, and who come from educational backgrounds not noted for fostering critical thinking, are able to succeed in a task of "higher level" comprehension with a minimum of instruction. The ultimate test of teaching students to answer questions of critical thinking is whether they will internalize them and transfer that kind of thinking to their independent reading (and listening) beyond the classroom. In striving toward that goal, we should not underestimate them, but challenge them to stretch their linguistic competence into the realm of critical thinking as early as possible.

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