Formulations and preformulations in press releases

Geert Jacobs
University of Antwerp

1. Introduction

Of the countless attempts that have been made at defining the news, perhaps one of the simplest and yet most revealing is to say that 'it makes people talk'. Surely, the would-be news promoted by public relations practitioners will never make it into real news if people do not talk about it, in particular if journalists do not use it in their own reporting. As Ivy Lee noted, after one of the first P.R. campaigns in history had won substantial newspaper space for a gift from the entrepreneur John D. Rockefeller to Johns Hopkins University:

1) In view of the fact that this was not really news, and that the newspapers gave so much attention to it, it would seem that this was wholly due to the manner in which the material was 'dressed up' for newspaper consumption. It seems to suggest very considerable possibilities along this line (quoted in Schudson 1978: 138).

That today's press releases are meant to be 'told' as accurately as possible - preferably even verbatim - in the media is clear from the following, rather embarrassing, extract from a covering letter:

1) (ASQ, Houthalen; 23 February 1904)

Wij zijn er van overtuigd, geschreven hier, dat deze tekst de basis vormt voor een krachtig artikel, zodat wij bieden en de vreugden van mogen plukken.
Voor bijkomende inlichtingen staan wij steeds ter uwe beschikking.
Hopen spoedig een kopie artikel van U over ons te mogen lezen (...).

[We are convinced, dear sir, that this text will provide the basis of a strong news article so that we can both profit from it.
We are at your disposal for further information.
We hope to soon read a nice article from you about us (...) ]

I have previously analysed the special audience-directedness of press releases into its underlying components and I have shown that they can be characterized as 'projected discourse' (Jacobs 1998). In this paper I set out to describe how the genre's peculiar reception format is mirrored in specific linguistic choices at the production end. More specifically, I shall look at formulations in press releases and suggest that they serve as preformulations, i.e. they are part of the writers' effort to furnish the media with stories that 'anticipate' the appropriate news.
230 Formulations and preformulations in press releases

style. Drawing on Bakhtin and Volosinov's dialogic views of language I shall then go on to analyze embedded formulations in press releases as double-voiced, serving a face-saving role that is by no means restricted to press releases, but plays a distinct role in a lot of 'cultured' discourse. By doing so, I come close to a somewhat different definition of the news, viz. that it 'is not what has happened, but what someone says has happened.'

2. (Pre)formulations in press releases

Garfinkel & Sacks (1970) use the term 'formulation' to refer to those parts of a text that writers use to describe it, to explain it, or explicate, or translate, or summarize, or furnish the gist of it, or take note of its accordance with rules, or remark on its departure from rules (35).

Heritage & Watson (1979) draw attention to the use of formulations in delivering and receiving news. In particular, they show that instances of 'saying-in-so-many-words-what-we-are-doing' are frequently used by news receivers to demonstrate understanding of what news deliverers are saying and to have that understanding confirmed. Significantly, most are strategic reformulations, with only some of the original information preserved and the rest - often consciously - deleted or even transformed, as in this extract from a radio interview with the 'Simmer of the Year':

(S. Simmer of the Year: J. journalist)
S: You have a shell that for so long protects you but sometimes things creep through the shell and then you become really aware of how awfully you feel. I never felt my age or looked my age. I was older always older - people took me for older. And when I was at college I thought I looked a marvellously fifty. And I was completely alone one weekend and I got to this stage where I almost jumped in the river. I just felt life wasn't worth it any more - I hadn't anything to offer and if this was living I had had enough.
J: You really were prepared to commit suicide because you were a big latty.
S: Yes, because (...).
(quoted in Heritage & Watson 1979: 132)

Formulations may play a similar reformulating role in news deliveries. In news interviews and press conferences, for example, they help the interviewer to steer an awkward question into a more desirable direction (Chayman 1993a), as with the following inquiry into candidate for the U.S. presidency Gary Hart's affair with Donna Rice:

(GH: Gary Hart; J: journalist)
J: I told you some days ago when we spoke, and I told our audience this evening that I would ask both questions. I will ask you the first now just before we take a break because I think I know what your answer's gonna be. Did you have an affair with Miss Rice?
GH: Mister Koppl, if the question is, in the twenty years of my marriage, including two public separations have I been absolutely and totally faithful to my wife I
(reported in Chayman 1993a: 168)

As indicated above, in this paper I shall look at how formulations are used by news deliverers in press releases. To start with, a quick glance at the corpus shows that they usually serve to furnish the gist of what the press release is about. Not surprisingly, they frequently occur in the headline,

(2) (GB, Brussels; 13 April 1995)
GB START SAMENWERKING MET ONDERTAKEN: POSTORDERVERKOOP
[GB STARTS CO-OPERATION WITH QUELLE: MAIL ORDER SALE]

in the first sentence,

(3) (Beekbergen, 26 January 1995)
DELAWARE COMPUTE ANTWEREN N.V. (D.C.), een 100 % informaticadochter van N.V. BEKAERT S.A., met hoofdkantoor in België, heeft een overeenkomst gesigneerd met MARBEN BENELUX (Maren) om een nieuwe
gemeenschappelijke vennootschap op te richten OCKHAM TECHNOLOGY N.V.
[DELAWARE COMPUTING ANTWERP N.V. (D.C.), a 100 % informatics subsidiary of N.V. BEKAERT S.A., with headquarters in Belgium, made and signed a joint venture with MARBEN BENELUX (Maren) to found a new joint venture OCKHAM TECHNOLOGY N.V.]

or in both:

(4) (AEG, Brussels; 19 April 1995)
AEG TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS NEEMT DE ACTIVITEITEN VAN VON ROLL-MONORAIL-SYSTEMS OVER
AEG Transportation Systems, Inc., uit Pittsburgh (USA) heeft de monorailactiviteiten van Von Roll AG uit Geletingen (Zwitserland) overgenomen.
[OCKHAM TECHNOLOGY TAKES OVER THE ACTIVITIES OF VON
ROLL-MONORAIL-SYSTEMS
AEG Transportation Systems, Inc., from Pittsburgh (USA) took over the monorail activities of Von Roll AG from Geletingen (Switzerland).]
(5) (Nestor, Tielen; 18 April 1994)
   [F.A. NESTOR KOOPT VOORRAADEN CONCORDIA MAIL.
    De firma NESTOR, gevestigd in Tielen, heeft vandaag de voorraden van Concordia Mail gekocht.
    [F.A. NESTOR BUYS CONCORDIA MAIL STOCKS
    NESTOR Co., based in Tielen, today bought the stocks of Concordia Mail.]

Thanks to their strategic positioning, such formulations, of course, help journalists instantly decide on the newsworthiness of the press release. After all, as Vermeul & Chomsky (1988) point out, "the rule of least effort usually guides journalistic behaviour" (12).

There is another way in which formulations in press releases render a service to journalists, though. In news-scraper reporting, for example, the headline and first sentence - or lead - usually express the major topic of the text (cf. van Dijk 1988: 51). Press releases that start with formulations therefore require the minimum of reworking or the part of journalists: at the same time, they stand a much better chance of being selected for publication (Bell 1991: 55-59). As a result, through such devices of mediation (eg Hartley 1982), the language of press releases reflects - what looks like - the writers' co-operative effort to 'make things easy' for journalists.

Mediation is a much more complex phenomenon, though. It is not just aimed at meeting the requirements of the target medium; it also helps fix "the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place" (Herman & Chomsky 1988: 2). More particularly, in line with the analyses of old interaction referred to above, I would like to suggest that formulations in press releases allow the news-deliverers to provide a powerful 'candidate meaning' of their own words, highlighting those aspects that are especially repeatable and controlling subsequent reformulation in the media. The fact that formulations may be used to set the journalist's agenda is particularly clear from the following headline:

(6) (Exxon Corporation, Houston, Texas; 27 March 1989)
   LIGHTERED, OIL SPILL CLEANUP EFFORTS CONTINUE IN ALASKA

In the body of the press release, Exxon Corporation announces that one of its marine-tankers, the Exxon Valdez, has had an accident in South Alaska and that 280,000 barrels of crude oil have been spilled into the sea. Significantly, the formulation in the title treats the spill - and even the start of the clean-up operations - as old news and directs the media's attention to the organization's continued efforts to deal with the contingency. In other words, the formulation in the title is not a summary of the bad news that the press release is meant to report. Instead, through backgrounding the catastrophe itself, it carefully diverts attention to the positive aspects of the story.
Crucially, if such 'dialogism' seems to anticipate the sequential analysis of conversation, it is by no means restricted to direct oral interaction between two interlocutors. Just like 'real' dialogues (i.e., conversations), written discourse may "[reach] intensely to someone else's word, answering it and anticipating it" (1984: 197). Bakhtin's own research on Dostoevsky's novels shows that they are calculated for active perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organized, printed reaction in the various forms devised by the particular sphere of verbal communication in question (book reviews, critical surveys, defining influence on subsequent works, and so on). Moreover, a verbal performance of this kind also inevitably orients itself with respect to previous performances in the same sphere, both those by the same author and those by other authors. It inevitably takes its point of departure from some particular state of affairs involving a scientific problem or a literary style. Thus the printed verbal performance (....) responds to something, objects to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on. (Ibid. 95)

One illustration of the dialogic principle in writing is provided by metaphorical discourse; in Bakhtin and Voloshinov's theory, the relationship between the reported speech and the reporting context is said to be analogous to that between different statements and rejoinders in conversation (1986: 12; cf. also Stenbrock 1992b: 102). In particular, just as inums at talking show the current speaker's strategic accommodation to what was said before and what will be said afterwards, reported speech provides objective documentation of how the quoted words were actually received by the writer and of how the writer thinks (or hopes) his or her own words will be received (Voloshinov 1973: 117).

Not all reported speech points are such dialogic interaction, though. As far as the relationship between one's own discourse and that of someone else is concerned, Bakhtin (1984) distinguishes three discourse types:

a. direct, immediate discourse
b. objectified discourse
c. double-voiced discourse

The first two types represent so-called 'single-voiced' discourse: they do not point at dialogue. In scientific articles, for example, previous research on the topic is traditionally quoted either for refutation or confirmation. Bakhtin says that in academic papers there is no interaction between
Returning to our central object of analysis, I would like to suggest that most cases of metapragmatic discourse in press releases can be double-voiced. For one thing, I have demonstrated elsewhere that a lot of quotations in press releases represent a form of incorporation (cf. Jacobs 1994). Unlike the newspaper example above, the merger is frequently not just manifested in vocabulary changes. Generally, the quoted words were almost certainly never verbalized by the named source, but written by a press officer and (possibly) approved by the source (cf. Bell 1991). Rather than simply replacing a couple of words in the quotation, P.R. officers who write press releases tend to construct complete new statements. In (12), for example, the repeated suggestion of simultaneous delivery indicates that the quoted words cannot be a literal rendering:

(12) (Bulo, Mechelen; 29 March 1994)

"De uiteindelijk korte voor Nike heeft heel veel te maken met bedrijfsklimaat. Die is voor Nike even belangrijk als kwaliteit en design. De creatie van een aangename en moderniseerde werkomgeving stond bij Nike voorop," zeggen Dirk en Luk Busschop, gedetineerden bestuurders van Bulo.

"Ook de uiterwaardelijke flexibiliteit van onze wandsysteem en het nieuwe concept Bulorodo (.), plus de ergonomische en logistieke voorzieningen die wij konden bieden, speelden zeker een rol bij de toekenning van het contract," aldus beide broers. (29 March 1994)

["The final choice for Nike has a lot to do with corporate culture. That is as important for Nike as quality and design. The creation of a pleasant and stimulating working environment was a priority for Nike", say Dirk and Luk Busschop, Bulo’s managing directors.

"Our wall units’ exceptional flexibility and the new Bulorodo concept, combined with the ergonomic and logistical advantages we offered also played a clear role in the allocation of the order", according to the two brothers.]

Equally unlikely attributions are to be found in embedded formulations in headlines, like


VALDEZ OIL SPILL IS NOT THE REASON FOR GASOLINE PRICE HIKES, SAYS EXXON

and in

(14) (Ericsson, Brussels; 16 May 1994)

In vergelijking tot andere mobiele telefoons doet de Ericsson GH 337 het op praktisch alle punten aanmerkelijk beter, aldus het bedrijf.

[In comparison to other mobile telephones the Ericsson GH 337 performs much better in practically all areas, according to the company.]

Here the writer of the press release and the quoted source represent one and the same institution, and the metapragmatic discourse is therefore of a self-referential nature. It is double-
voiced discourse, since one voice makes use of - what sounds like another for its own purposes.

The following is an example of dissemination from the corpus, confirming the double-
voicedness of metapragmatic discourse in press releases. (15) presents the beginning:

(15) (BASF Belgium, Brussels, 17 March 1994) BASF GEEN VOORJAARSMOEHEID DE ONDERNEMING ZET HAAR STRUCTURELE AANPASSINGEN ONVERMINDERD VOORT

Ter gelegenheid van de persconferentie waar Dr. Jurgen Strube, Voorzitter van de Raad van Bestuur, enkele toelichtingen gaf bij de balans van de BASF Groep, gaf hij eveneens zijn kijk op de actuele situatie in het volgende beeld weer. "Wij hebben een goede start gezet en een uitstekende tijd gehad over de eerste maanden van de wedstrijd. Maar wij zijn er ons eveneens heel goed van bewust dat wij niet alleen een sprint lopen. Wij moeten een benoep doen op al onze krachten om de hele weg, die niet voor ons ligt, al te leggen. Wij beschikken met name over de nodige reserves om de eindstreep te halen."

(BASF: NO SPRING FATIGUE THE COMPANY CONTINUES ITS STRUCTURAL ADAPTATIONS WITHOUT ABATEMENT)

At a press conference, where Dr. Jurgen Strube, chairman of the Board, provided some comments on the BASF Group balance, he also offered his views on the current situation by means of the following image. "We have taken a good start and run an excellent time over the first meters of the race. But we are also very much aware that we are not only running a sprint. We have to use all our resources to complete the whole way in front of us. Nevertheless, we have the necessary reserves to make it to the finish line."

The press release starts with a doouble headline, followed by a more or less plausible quotation. What is interesting, though, is that direct speech soon starts giving way to indirect speech and, further on, to even more narrative positions with Dr. Strube’s views getting increasingly filtered by the writer of the press release. In (16), for example, the responsibility for the propositional content still lies with the quoted source, while the deictic centre (who is ‘I’, where is ‘here’, when is ‘now’?) has moved to the writer of the press release:

(16) Volgens Dr. Jurgen Strube is de samenwerking met de Russische partner Gazprom veelbelovend en exemplarisch te noemen.

[According to Dr. Jurgen Strube the co-operation with the Russian partner Gazprom can be called significant and exemplary]

Further on, in (17), not even the propositional content is left with Dr. Strube:

(17) Dr. Jurgen Strube spoke over een lijnige heropleving tijdens de eerste twee maanden van 1994.

[Dr. Jurgen Strube talked about a slight rise during the first two months of 1994.]

The remarkable thing about this smooth transition towards increasingly less direct modes of speech presentation - and indeed the reason why I decided to have a closer look at this press release - is that, towards the end, notional narrative and quoted statement are merged, almost imperceptibly, in:

(18) In het algemeen kunnen we de gang van zaken in 1993 als gunstigchaling beschouwen.

[In general we can call events in 1993 disappointing.]

Here, what looks like an extract from Dr. Strube’s speech is rendered directly, without quotation marks. It is what Fairclough (1988) calls the UNSGrafted mode: what should have been represented in direct speech and attributed to the quoted source, is adopted by the writer as his or her own language. As Bakhtin puts it, the original writer’s “enthusiasm” for the quoted source’s words “destroys the distance and weakens the deliberative sense of a reproduced style as someone else’s style” (1984:190); the embedded statement takes over and the views originally expressed between quotation marks ‘percolate’ to the rest of the text (cf. Sayers & Jaspers 1990).

The above examples illustrate how thin the line between reported speech and reporting context in press releases really is. Thanks to double-voiced discourse, the writer can easily penetrate inside the quoted source’s words (dissemination) or step out of his own (incorporation).

4. Objectivity in press releases

I have shown that metapragmatic discourse in press releases - including embedded formulations - can often be considered double-voiced discourse. In general, however, the line between reported speech and reporting context in press releases does not hold thin at all. For most cases of incorporation in my corpus of press releases, for example, no conclusive textual evidence could be found to show that they were not a literal rendering; alternatively, the BASF press release presents what is only a very rare case of dissemination. In other words, most double-voiced instances of metapragmatic discourse are effectively parodied as verbalism, single-voiced
reporting to the extent that what really is - in Bakhtin's terminology - part of the pictorial style looks very much like the linear one. In Thompson & Yiyan's (1991) terminology, we are looking at writer and different sets of statements - the part of who wrote the press release - carefully disguised as author act (statements attributed to a quoted source).

At this stage, it still needs to be explained why news delvers resort to such carefully disguised, double-voiced discourse, i.e. why they go to such lengths to quote themselves, rather than just say what they have to say. As Fludernik (1993) argues:

[representation inherently includes fictionalization, and fictionalization, like all rhetoric, has its own interests, its strategies, its tendencies. One traditional way of saying this has been to consider all discourse representation as either mediated or framed, but mediation and framing are formal concepts and they need to be complemented with more specific stylistic, rhetorical and historical analyses of the precise functions of quotation, of the different purposes of typically or pretended reproductiveness in represented speech and thought. (22)]

What are, then, the 'precise functions' of double-voiced discourse in press releases?

It has been well documented that journalists invariably prefer self-generated information and that press releases - and public relations activities in general - are thought to threaten the very idea of objective reporting. As Schudson (1978) puts it, news seems to have gradually become 'less the reporting of events in the world than the reprinting of those facts in the universe of facts which (appeal) to special interests' (138).

As a result, the value of news subsidies like press releases has come to depend on the extent that the source can disguise the promotional, self-interested quality of the information' (Gandy 1982: 14). I would like to suggest that one of the techniques to do so can be found in the double-voiced use of metapragmatic discourse explained above: news delvers tend to refrain from expressing their opinions in an unmediated way, instead, they have to resort to projecting their own statements in terms of others words. By minimizing the face threatening act involved in delivering 'one's own news', metapragmatic expressions thus contribute to a 'cultured' type of discourse, which is "refracted through an authoritative and stabilized medium" (1984: 203). As Shuman (1990) comments on the use of personal experiences in political junk mailings:

"[Emporived speech can be an effective means for establishing, for counteracting, Who says? In appropriating personal narratives, the authors of (...) junk mail attempt to"

...close off discussion concerning interpretation and instead to give the appearance of raw facts (178).

Similarly, Clayman (1993b) sees footing shifts (including reference to elite sources) as a means of interactive caution in news interviews.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that double-voiced discourse allows writers of press releases to deflect a potentially troublesome communicative lead on to a third party. On closer scrutiny, however, the distancing is no more than a trompe l'oeil. After all, in each case, as I have shown, the reporting and reported events are ultimately indistinguishable. The two voices, viz. that of the writer of the press release and that of the quoted source, belong to one and the same institution. Still, double-voiced discourse makes us feel safer, not because we can blame somebody else, but, as Goffman says, because "we can put some distance between ourselves as animators and ourselves as figures to whom final responsibility for words and deeds is imparted" (1975: 546).

Hardt-Mauzer (1995) draws attention to a similar mechanism in newspaper reporting. Analysing the Sue's coverage of its own street poll about Britain's membership of the European Union, she points out that, through the use of photographs, personal details and direct speech, the interviewees are firmly established as "real" people and their comments are made to sound authentic. The boundary between the interviewee's reported speech and the paper's reporting context is further typographically enhanced. Still, Hardt-Mauzer goes on, the quoted words cannot be a literal rendering of what the interviewees said. The transformation from the original statement to published quotation traditionally involves a lot of editing. What's more, in this case we cannot doubt whether any proper interviewing ever took place at all, and if so, whether any serious attempt was made to faithfully reproduce the anterior discourse. (ibid: 197)

Hardt-Mauzer suggests such double-voiced discourse - like that in press releases - has a persuasive function: it allows the "editorial voice of the paper to step back behind the voice of the quoted persona"; that way, the paper can be positioned "as a public forum of discussion rather than as a disseminator of editorial views" (ibid: 197).

Finally, like many other features of institutional discourse (cf. Drew 1994), such embedding serves as a powerful communicative tool in a lot of more mundane interactional practices as
well. Goffman (1975), for example, refers to the frequent use of self-referential connectives like

In my opinion...
If you ask me...
I've always felt that...
In my experience...

and claims that what follows them

is to be placed in parentheses, a voice slightly different from the one the speaker had been using, one which presumably allows the speaker and his listeners to align themselves over and against the figures to whom the remarks are to be attributed. (Goffman 1975: 531)

In his view, "preformulation" is not just a feature of institutional discourse but of everyday talk (ibid: 509). Similarly, Lee (1992) suggests that speaker intention and reference to the process of perception have the effect of "modulating the associated statement. That is [they express] a lower degree of commitment on the part of the speaker to the truth of the associated proposition" (Lee 1992: 138). Double-voiced discourse, in particular, allows us to identify a particular position but at the same time establish the possibility of some distance from that perspective.

5. Conclusion

Leaving from Bakhtin and Voloshinov's analysis of metapragmatic discourse, I have shown that, just as in conversation "the other's words actively influence the author's speech, forcing it to alter itself accordingly under their influence and initiative" (Voloshinov 1973: 197), the language of press releases - including the marked distribution of embedded formulations - can be considered the result of interactional processes that are closely linked to the institutional setting. More specifically, double-voiced discourse in press releases - as in ordinary conversation - serves as, what Locher & Womahan (1994) call, an "evasive-handledness" for making the unavoidably non-objective language of press releases more acceptable for journalists.

Notes

1 This article is a revised version of a paper read at the 6th International Systemic-Functional Workshop held at the University of Antwerp (UFSA), 8-11 August 1994. I would like to thank Jan Blommaert for his useful comments.

2 Note that a particular interpretative game is going on here, with the language of press releases adopting some of the features of the genre of news reporting only to project some of the features of the genre of press releases on the language of news reporting.

3 M.M. Bakhtin, V.N. Voloshinov, P.M. Medvedev and others gathered in Leningrad in the 1920s. It has been argued that Bakhtin is the author of some of the texts attributed to the others. In this paper I shall draw especially from Bakhtin's "Discourse in the novel" (in The Dialogic Imagination, 1935/1981) "Discourse in Dostoevsky" (in Problems of Dostoevsky's Prose, 1929/1984) and "Speech Genres" (in Speech genres and other late essays, 1975/1986) and from Voloshinov's Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1929/1973). I do not enter into the dispute of the authorship of the text, though.

4 Linell (1995) argues that, while dialogical analysis is primarily applied to spoken interaction, it can also be extended, "partly by analogy", to monological texts (575).

5 Slavkevich (1992a) defines "boundary maintenance" as the extent to which, formally speaking, elements in the quoted segments which belong to the "reporting agency are marked off from those belonging to the anterior voice (237).

References


Formulations and preformulations in press releases


Formulations and preformulations in press releases


