

RHETORICAL ASPECTS IN NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

У даній статті викладено загальні риторичні аспекти в газетних передовицях. Обговорення базується на наявних текстах редакційних статей і представлено як синтез різних критичних точок зору. Текст не ставить за мету забезпечити повну інструкцію для вивчення редакційних статей, але здійснюється спроба визначити риси, необхідні для критичного дослідження. Вперше підкреслюються основні ідеї редакційних статей, аналізуються основні риторичні особливості культурно-ідеологічних позицій.

Ключові слова: риторичні аспекти, газети, обговорення.

Introduction. An editorial is a common text, widely perceived to be very familiar but probably least read section in a newspaper or magazine. Regarding its placement, Ansary and Babbali (2009) identify it «as a text type or genre that we come across everyday and find usually at the same page and at the same location in daily newspapers» (p. 213). Hamlet (2009) defines editorials in general as «articles in a newspaper or magazine (or very rarely, stories over the air) that combine fact and opinion to interpret news and influence public opinion» («Editorials»). In view of a huge number of news media in the world today, both printed and online, which write editorials as official statements on current happenings, an editorial is taken as «one of the widest circulated opinion discourses of society» (Achugar, 2004: 294).

Since the editorial is a publication's official statement, there is hardly any debate its authorship and ownership. Unlike other opinion pieces accompanying it in the same page, it is «not signed even though...usually written by one person» (Rolnicki & Taylor, 2001). This «typical anonymity» (Locke, 2004) also marks its rhetorical stance being an official voice of the publication itself. However, the author generally identifies herself with a «first person plural pronoun, the *we* voice» (Rolnicki & Taylor, 2001) in a way making the text a collective statement of the publication team as a whole.

Critical insights. An editorial deals with a familiar issue such as a recent occurrence or news story. It analyses a particular incident, and sometimes gives suggestions about possible courses of actions for the resolutions of certain crises. But the editorial's evaluations of contemporary happenings do not always attract a large readership. According to Miller (1955), «...since readers have opinions of their own about what is happening, they are likely to ignore or scorn these suggestions.» This comes closer to saying that people are there to know what is happening around, not necessarily to read the newspapers' stance about that happening. The same sense of being familiar with the subjects may have made people think that editorials are «mundane and pervasive everyday texts» (Ansary and Babbali, 2009, p. 213). Besides, they are unlike opinion articles where the writer has a personal choice to assume a critical, ideological stance, and to speak in a language suitable to that stance. The editorial writer works within boundaries of the publisher's editorial policies which are largely guided by corporate and ideological inclinations.

There are diversity of critical insights about the nature, rhetorical aspects and structure of the editorials. These insights in a way have established a trend for the discourse and studies of editorials. A common study concerns the discussion on how editorials differ from news stories. One example would be what Rupar (2007) presents in the following lines:

The news story functions ... as a source of information, and the editorial becomes 'information' itself – a separate text that tells the reader the newspaper's position in relation to the topic discussed. ... The editorial's role is idiosyncratic: while news informs, editorials assess; where the news explains what has happened, the editorial tells us why and how it could affect our lives (p. 599).

Rupar reveals that the main function of an editorial is to build and sustain the publication's critical line about the every day events. As such, it aims to be as diverse in subject choice as possible in relation with the nature of events being reported every day. Though readers have their own opinions about the happenings, editorials help shape these opinions with broader research inputs on the cases in point. Besides, editorial writers attempt to maintain some degree of neutrality for their formal objective being «to commend as well as to criticize», wherein lies the actual expression of «the power of the press» which also is believed to reflect the need to act «responsibly for the good of the community the paper serves» (Rolnicki & Taylor, 2001). This indicates that editorials carry the publication's main rhetorical stance.

Rupar (2009) claims, «Editorials survived due to an existing need and space for argumentative discourse in the press» (p. 599). This implies the editorial's long-standing trend of serving as an important discursive section of a publication. In more general terms, the main rhetorical quality of an editorial involves its (professional) function as a formal opinion statement of the publication. This function agreeably lies in «voicing the opinion of the newspaper's owners» (Stein & Paterno, 2004), conveying «the newspaper's carefully weighed viewpoint on a topical issue» (Locke, 2004), or in general being the «voice of the newspaper at large» (Rolnicki & Taylor, 2001) and «[expressing] the publisher's or owner's point of view and usually [addressing] current events or public controversies» (Hamlet, 2009, «Editorials»). Similarly, a noteworthy function of the editorial is «to advocate change and persuade readers that the paper's view is worthwhile» (Rolnicki & Taylor, 2001). This is where the editorial takes the form of a performance, the judgement and assertion of the acceptable and unacceptable.

Editorials have two other rhetorical functions. The first concerns their political, ideological role in terms of who they aim to influence. Naturally, their intended audience include the educated and critical readers who (would) build their own perspectives on current events prior to reading the editorials' points of view. The editorial in a sense remains as one among many opinion leaders, others being the same critical readers and the rival publications. Moreover, the readership generally transcends the here and now of the issue analyzed. Editorials at times speak beyond local discourses «as they represent the point of view of professional observers of the international scene, especially in elite newspapers» (Le, 2003, p. 479). The point is that editorials intend to cater to a global audience.

Arguably, common readers of editorials may not be involved in both building and transmitting opinions to the extent of influencing the society at large. In this line, van Dijk (1992) postulates that editorials are «usually not only, and even not primarily, directed at the common reader,» but «tend to directly or indirectly address influential news actors, viz. by evaluating the actions of such actors or by recommending alternative courses of action» (p.244). This is however not to dismiss common readers' potential participation in the negotiation and dissemination of meanings. van Dijk states that readers rather attain the posture of «observers than addressees of this type of discourse,» the principal actors being «the press and the politicians.» This suggests that editorials function «politically as an implementation of power ...» as «persuasive formulation and reproduction of acceptable norms and values by which news events may be evaluated» (p. 244). In this regard, the study of editorials is «of special significance,» according to Izadi and Saghyae Biria (2007), «when analyzing the ideological role of news media» (p.140), in that editorials are «conversations among a society's economic and power elites...» (p. 141).

Editorials are not uninfluenced by the cultural, ideological consciousness of their writers. Ansary and Babbali (2009) note, «one would expect them to strongly retain and reflect the author's cultural influences» (p. 213). A detailed contextual rhetorical study of the editorials may reveal the nature and level of such influences. Furthermore, van Dijk (1996) contends that «the rhetorical patterns of one's native culturo-linguistic system are likely to be more pronounced in texts such as editorials than in research articles and theses» («Opinions and ideologies»). This may be because of the writer's proximity with the incidences, the familiarity with the related cases, and the convenience with which she can dramatize the reality in connection with more relevant social, political actors, their actions and locales. But given the need to represent the interest of the owners and to work in the boundaries of formal guidelines, the writer's individuality may be suppressed largely.

The structure. Critics agree on a common three-part structure of an editorial. In van Dijk's categorization, an editorial comprises three components. The first includes the definition of situation which typically answers «what happened?» or «subjectively summarizes the recent events.» The second part «provides evaluation of the news events.» Here the editorial takes the role of a critic and observer. The third part, the conclusion, «features expectations about future developments, or normative opinions, viz. recommendations about what specific news actors should do, or not do» much in the role of an advocate for change (1992, p. 244).

Bolivar (1994) perceives similar triadic structure, the function of which is to «negotiate the transmission of information and evaluation in written text.» The triad's internal structure is represented in three «fundamental turns» called lead (L), follow (F) and valuate (V)» (p. 279). These «turns» work in much the same way as van Dijk's three parts. Lead, for instance, «introduces the aboutness and a posture,» meaning the narration of an event. The follow «responds» to the posture with reference to more relevant examples and stories. And the valuate «closes the cycle with an evaluation,» with restatement of the thesis and the publisher's specific recommendation (p. 293). Bolivar clarifies, «Both the lead and the valuate represent more definitive attitudes, but the follow acts like a mediator, a sort of 'cushion' or transition towards the final evaluation» (p.293). Locke discerns even more simplistic three-phase structure of an editorial. An editorial, he explains, «commences with an introduction to the topic (for example through a vignette), proceeds to a number of argued points (for or against one or more central propositions), and concludes with a judgement of call to attention.»

All these three categorizations explain a general performative rhetorical quality of an editorial. This aspect underlines the presence of conflicting viewpoints and actors, explications and evaluations. In this the writer alternates between being a critic and observer across general readers and special power groups, and puts the reader in the similar frame across reading and assuming a critic's posture.

Drama as a rhetorical aspect

Let us now relate the editorial's performative rhetorical to the idea of message as drama. Appel (2009) defines drama in texts as inherent «moral conflict to set right a situation gone wrong or to keep right a situation that would go wrong» (p. 266). This proposition gives us ample space to locate the dramatic implications in newspaper editorials so far as one of their objectives remains to influence and advocate changes, which is to right the existing wrong and prevent the recurrence of the wrongs in the future.

Let us further consider Appel's explanations of the concept of conflict and its innate performative/dramatic characteristics:

If it's conflict then there will be finger pointing, blame laying, or guilt tripping, followed by punishment of some kind.... A response won't be fully dramatic unless a person or persons intervene in some way, even if only to scold and suggest improvement. A verbal 'slap on the wrist' fits with a charge of mistakenness. (p. 267)

Editorials perform the «finger pointing, blame laying, or guilt tripping,» and maintain a dramatic bearing. They do so in such different ways as dropping the «disinterested attitude» and taking «a decided stand for or against a given

news development» (Miller, 1955), advocating change and persuading readers (Rolnicki & Taylor, 2001). They «make no pretense of being fair,» often take «a partisan perspective,» and allow writers to «champion or criticize causes and initiatives» (Stein & Paterno, 2004). They «interpret news and influence public opinion» or «sway the readers to agree with the point of view expressed» (Hamlet, 2009, «Editorials»). This all reflects their watchdog role which theoretically requires them to ‘slap on the wrist’ of social anomalies.

To conclude, newspapers editorials are significant rhetorical texts on current events. Their main rhetorical strength lies in their being the negotiators of public opinions, their discursive three-part structure, and the dramatic/performative attributes.

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This article outlines the common rhetorical aspects in newspaper editorials. The discussion is based on available writings on editorials, and is presented as a synthesis of different critical perspectives. The text does not aim to provide a comprehensive guideline for studying editorials, but manages to indicate the features required for a critical inquiry. I first underline the basic ideas on editorials, and move on to the analysis of the main rhetorical features, especially the cultural-ideological stances and structural discursiveness.

Key words: rhetorical aspects, newspaper, discussion.