

Research Project

Language of English Newspapers in India

Introduction

Newspapers inform and educate readers. They are expected to play their role as educators through language they use in their columns. Their readers may include a few scholars, but rest of them are commoners who may have studied only up to 12th. Those newspapers who realise this select news and features that would appeal to a large number of readers and not for the few scholars. They are expected to use language that can be easily grasped by these readers. This is particularly important because readers have no time to read the daily newspapers.

Do the newspapers, their reporters and other contributors write simple, precise, brief and without complicated sentences replete with avoidable clauses? Or, do the reporters write to impress the readers, rather than inform?

Reporters are expected to provide the readers information and facts about events without any personal bias. Readers should be free to draw their own conclusions from these facts. Journalists of the previous generations observed these guidelines faithfully.

The Principal Investigator of this research project was a reporter of United News of India for 17 years and later worked with *The Indian Post* and *The Observer of Business and Politics* (both defunct) for another 13 years. He taught News Reporting in media schools in Pune and other places.

Origin of the research problem:

The Principal Investigator of this Major Research Project was a news reporter for over three decades before he joined academics as Professor in 2001. He was a visiting teacher in *News Reporting* and *Writing for Media* for over 20 years even when he was a full time journalist.

He experienced that principles, guidelines, techniques and style of news writing had been changing gradually. The style now is different from what News Reporting teachers taught in journalism schools three decades ago. Veteran journalists in newspaper

organisations expected reporters to write simple, direct and without personal bias.

Some guiding principles were:

- ◇ Use simpler, smaller words.
- ◇ Sentences should be small. Clauses should be avoided as far as possible.
- ◇ Paragraphs should contain not more than three to four sentences.
- ◇ Prefer inverted pyramid for news writing.
- ◇ Avoid adjectives.
- ◇ Avoid 'flowery' language. Cut out verbose.
- ◇ Write to inform and not to impress.
- ◇ There is no space for 'kite flying' or speculation in news reports.

Reporters do not seem to be following these guidelines any more. Students who pass out from the schools of journalism and join newspaper organisations give feedback to the teachers that their seniors do not follow the guidelines of the past.

Research Questions:

The study addresses such research questions as:

- ◇ Is it because the preference of readers for newspaper's language has changed? Are they comfortable the way the language is used now?
- ◇ Do the readers easily understand the language of news reports?
- ◇ Do they prefer the *subjective* reports?
- ◇ Is there laxity in correcting the language of the reporters at the news desk?
- ◇ Is it because chief reporters and news editors/city editors do not have time and inclination to keep quality control in respect of reporters' language?

Review of Research:

International status: A large number of academicians, writers and enthusiasts have written books and papers on the need to write simple English for the benefit of common readers. There are excellent books like Chicago Manual of Style, which is considered to be the last word on style for editing books. A Google search for 'Plain English' yielded 72,100,000 results on August 16, 2007. These included entries for books, web sites, web pages and blogs etc. This only indicates that there is a great concern for writing simple and plain.

Oxford Guide to Plain English has pointed out that the need for writing simple and plain English was felt from year 1500 AD. The book has documented how US and UK governments made efforts to use such English in official documents so that ordinary people can understand the text without any problem.

Newspapers have a very important role to play in usage of simple English. Major newspapers and news agencies generally follow the norms and guidelines on usage of English outlined in their respective stylebooks. They ensure that their readers have no difficulty in understanding what their reporters and feature writers have written. These include *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Economist* and Associated Press.

Several other newspapers do not have stylebooks and do not seem to be very particular about the language.

Readability

There are excellent studies on Readability. Although this concerned any text (and not necessarily news reporting in daily newspapers), the tests offer tools to find out readability of the text. These included:

- Flesch Reading Ease formula (1948)

- Fog Index developed by Gunning (1952)

- SMOG Grading proposed by McLaughlin (1969)

- Cloze Procedure evolved by Taylor (1953)

- PMOSE/IKIRSH Readability formula proposed by Mosenthal and Kirsch (1998)

As Wimmer and Dominick say in *Mass Media Research*, these tests are not used extensively in print media research, though readability studies can provide valuable information. The authors have cited a study by

Porter and Stephens (1989) who found that reporters write front-page stories at an 8th grade level was a myth. They wrote hard news stories for an average 12th grade level in USA.

Bodle (1996) compared the readability levels of a sample of student newspapers with a sample of private-sector papers and found that the private-sector dailies had a higher score than the student newspapers.

University of Ulster's Centre for Media Research carried out a study that concluded that online news contents on scores of websites is dominated by Reuters and Associated Press. The study is on contents of news providers like MSN, Yahoo and AOL. It did not study writing styles of these two international news agencies. The study is important because the researchers provided a new tool for content analysis using software to detect piracy by websites. (quoted by <http://www.newswatch.in/news-analyses/newsworthiness/5728.html>, accessed on August 16, 2007)

In his research essay in Sociolinguistics, Steve Hoensch, 'Motivations for News Language Style: Audience Perception or Cultural Orientation,' has examined Allan Bell's studies on the 'Language of Radio' and 'The British Case and the American Connection in New Zealand Media English.' (<http://www.criticism.com/md/newslang.html>). Both Allan Bell and his critic Steve Hoensch have dealt with the problems with language of the audio and print media in the West. Bell has brought forth variations and omissions of rules set in by the stylebooks of such reputed newspapers as *The New York Time* and *The Washington Post*. Steve Hoensch has questioned the hypothesis, the research methods and findings of Bell's studies. Yet, Bell's study will be of immense help to the research proposed to be undertaken with respect to Indian newspapers while Steve's criticism will help the investigators to take into consideration the points raised by him.

Thus, not many studies seem to have been carried out with focus on writing style and readers' response to the contents written by reporters of newspapers. There are some studies carried out in USA and UK, but these do not measure with enormity and importance of the issue.

National Status: Several researchers in India, for their PhD or Master's dissertations, have carried important studies on Content Analysis or Comparative Analysis of newspapers, magazines, TV soap operas, news bulletins, web sites and so on. There are excellent studies on issues such Portrayal of Woman in films and advertisement. However,

there seems to be very few attempts on studying Language of English newspaper in India.

The Principal Investigator of this research project studied readership of online newspapers in India, but he too had not covered the issues being proposed now. His colleague, Dr. Ujjwala Barve, studied language used by Marathi TV and Radio news channels and found that though it is recommended that radio and TV news language should be extremely simple, news were not written in a simple language. Many times, the news writers did not even employ a writing style suitable to the audio/visual media, but wrote in a style that was more akin to the print media. The study also revealed that news writers do not pay enough attention to grammatical accuracy of language.

There are studies relating to 'Language of news reporting in Indian Languages: A case study of Malayalam News Reporting' (Geethakumary V), 'Grammar of Newspaper Headlines' (Sanjay Sanap) and 'Code Switching in Advertising' (Shraddha G Kulkarni). These studies focus on the areas suggested in their titles and will be useful, although to a limited extent, for the proposed study.

Significance of the study

Newspaper readers have no choice but to read the language written in whatever manner by journalists. Most readers normally do not complain about errors, grammatical or factual. Journalists thus do not have any way to find out if the readers understand the newspaper's language and if they have any objections about the style and bias. Publishers do not carry out regular readership surveys. Editors depend only on the few letters they may occasionally receive from readers about feedback on contents of the columns.

An independent study being proposed through this proposal will help journalists and publishers in understanding readability of their language. If the survey reveals grievances about the language and style of writing, the newspapers can take measures to improve on the contents. This will be useful to the society at large because the contents will be easier to understand for a larger number of readers. Those who learn English from newspapers will benefit because of better language used by the journalists.

The study will be useful not only to reporters and sub-editors, but also to teachers of courses on News Reporting, Subbing and Writing for Media taught at schools of journalism. Students of journalism will understand

what readers expect and how to write more effectively for better communication.

The study will be useful also to students and teachers of English in colleges and universities.

Objective of the study:

The project is

- a. To find out if Indian English newspapers take adequate care to write language the readers understand ***easily*** and ***quickly***. (***Easily*** and ***quickly*** are the key terms.)
- b. If they do not, the attempt will be to find out why.
- c. Similarly, effort will be to find out opinion of readers about the language of the newspapers. Do they understand the language, or, would they be happy if simpler and easy-to-understand language is used?
- d. If the readers expect simpler and easier language, an attempt will be made to develop a model stylebook for the newspapers.

Methodology

The study will attempt to find out if the journalists follow the guidelines in stylebooks and journalism books, stated earlier in this proposal under the sub-head 'Origin of the Research Problem.'

The project will be broadly divided in two parts as follows:

- a. Study of language used by newspapers in their news columns.
- b. Readership Research to find out if the readers understand the language ***quickly*** and ***easily***.

The investigators wish to employ qualitative and quantitative methods for the project as follows:

- a. Study of language of news published in select English newspapers from different parts of the country: The investigators will compile news stories from the publication and analyse their language with a set of parameters such simplicity, brevity, personal bias and the like. Heavy and difficult words, unwanted words and adjectives, longer sentences, verbosity, avoidable clauses, bias and the like will be documented for use in focus

group discussions and intensive interviews in the latter part of the project.

b. Readership Survey will be carried out using the following tools:

- Focussed Group discussion
- Questionnaire-based survey
- Survey through Internet

For this purpose, the following steps will be undertaken:

- i. Stories compiled for the proposed study will be edited as per the established guidelines in standard stylebooks.
- ii. Original and edited story will be placed in two columns of a page of a hard copy or Power Point Presentation or a web page in such a manner that a respondent will be able to read only one version of the story at a time.
- iii. Respondent will be asked to record which version is **easier** and **quicker** to understand. Responses of the respondents will be coded for analysis.
- iv. At the same time, the respondents may be asked to identify difficult words they could not understand after first and quick reading.
- v. In some cases, they may be asked to provide meanings of words including clichés journalists use often. In some other cases, they may be provided clues to meanings of difficult words.
- vi. The focus group study will be used to record opinions aired spontaneously by respondents, not covered by the investigators of this project.