Weasels & Chameleons: the new normal

LYONS, Toby <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3573-5448>

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Hello – I’m Toby Lyons and I teach Graphic Design at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK.

I thought I would start with a little explanation of the title of my presentation:

I have used WEASELS to refer to words used by the writer – often intentionally – to suggest meanings that stretch further than a simple surface reading; WEASEL words tend to be misleading.

I use the word CHAMELEONS to refer to words whose meaning changes depending on the reader – allowing them to choose the meanings they find most relevant. Once again, CHAMELEON words can be misleading.

‘THE NEW NORMAL’ is a term that gained currency following the 2008 global financial crisis and referred to the effects of economic recession; it has since been used in the context of lifestyles, freedom and security. In the context of this presentation it underlines the shifting values of language in the printed news media (the weasels and chameleons) but as a term is also, ironically, a ‘chameleon term’ itself – that is to say, it allows you, the reader, to imagine your own interpretation.

The conference themes of authenticity/inauthenticity suggest an exploration of what we deem to be TRUTHFUL (or in some way FALSE), but when we discuss this in the context of human relations we also think of TRUST and RELIABILITY.
05 WHAT?
So this (slide) is what I mean when I say 'news bill'.
This is the first strand of the study – a collection of 201 newspaper 'bills' from the Stockport area; the second strand is a collection of texts taken from photographs of the streets, signs and advertising.
Each of these newspaper bills contains the 'masthead' of the newspaper and a headline of between 3-9 words, usually a significant story from the week's news. The bills are displayed outside newsagents' shops, and advertise both the shop, and the newspaper.

06 WHO?
A personal introduction (inauthentic!)
I am a graphic design lecturer at Sheffield Hallam university – so I'm NOT an authentic linguist! I've long been interested in the content, appearance and mechanism of these newspaper bills, filling our heads with stories and ideas about the place we're living in. I find it interesting how these stories can be compressed into so few words, but that these few words can summon such powerful meanings and images.
So my main interest is cultural, in the way meanings are communicated via the content of these words, but as a visual communicator I'm also looking at them typographically – the choice of typeface, the font style and the visual arrangement.
As a historical note, it's worth noting that these bills are dying out as a device for selling newspapers – in my area they ceased using these bills earlier in 2016.

07 WHERE?
Location of the corpus & the 2 'strands'
From 2010-15 I collected these news bills from my local newsagent – this is the first strand of this study.
These are examples of the range of designs (?) used in this type of news bill: varying sizes of font, the use of UPPER & lower case letters and even hand-lettering. All the examples in this corpus use UPPER case only, and a single font size.

WHY?

This is the headline that got me interested in collecting, back in 2010... which I found surreal and ludicrous at the same time. It all centred on the word PRACTISE – I didn’t know it at the time, but I had spotted my first CHAMELEON.

So, I started collecting, but I didn’t know where it would lead; all I knew was that it was evidence of something, pointing to a fresh reading of ‘the news’, and about the way that stories are told by news media.

The questions I asked myself were:

1. what is the relationship of these printed headlines to the events they describe?
2. do we believe them, and if so, what do we believe?
3. how should we feel about them?

CAVEATS

Some observations and caveats on the corpus itself, and how it was processed:

1. Not strictly chronological – although some bills are continuations of an earlier story;
2. Not a comprehensive corpus – the bills were collected intermittently between 2010-15;
3. The corpus has been filtered to remove most, but not all, instances of proper people/place names.

The complete corpus (‘Strand 1’) – 201 news bills.
12. It is not a perfect sequence, but it is numbered for reference purposes.

13. Closer still, this is to show the different masthead styles, and to give a flavour of typical stories.

14. Up-front and personal – the power of short headlines: arguably almost any sequential pair of words from this headline would be attention-grabbing enough, but the use of all four in the same headline makes for great impact.

15. **ANALYSIS:**

After using a web-based text analysis site to count and rank word frequency, a word cloud generator was used to visualise the results.

The word count analysis excluded numbers and short common words (eg IN, TO, OF) and focused on the most frequently used **uncommon** words.
POLICE / DEATH / HOSPITAL / HORROR / ATTACK / WIN / DAD / DRUG / DEAD / MAN emerge as the most numerous.

Over 65% of all the words are between 3-6 characters in length and 89% contain only 1 or 2 syllables. A word such as HOSPITAL is therefore unusually long – 8 letters – and complex – 3 syllables – in this context.

The incidence of two-word pairs, or collocates, shows that the combinations

FOUND DEAD
WIN A and
JAILED FOR

occurred the most in the corpus. The commonest three-word combinations were

FOUND DEAD IN
and

CHANCE TO WIN

The Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA, is a live online index of the 10,000 most regularly used words on the English-speaking web. It was used to cross-reference the most commonly occurring words in the news bills, and it emerges that in the COCA index the most commonly occurring words from the news bills are ranked much lower down in common usage. For example –

POLICE (the #1 most numerous word in the bills) – is ranked 306 on COCA;
DEATH (the #2 most numerous word) – is ranked 454 on COCA;
DAD – 1406 on COCA;
and HORROR – 4105 on COCA.

* (By the way – although COCA has the word ‘American’ in its title, a check on alternative American spellings of words such as CENTRE/CENTER and THEATRE/THEATER gave higher usage ratings to the English variants)

So, even though COCA includes commonly occurring short words (eg IN, TO, OF), the rankings show that the most commonly occurring words in the news bills (POLICE, DEATH etc) are nowhere near as common in general language use.
All terms referring to People in the corpus were collected in a set of lists under the headings of ‘Neutral, Positive, Negative or Affected’ – these include single word terms and noun-phrases. The category in which each term was placed was my own subjective judgement, but the idea was that each term, if read in isolation, would be most suited to that category. People in the ‘Negative’ list are included there mainly for unlawful or antisocial denotations; those in the Affected list are there because they have connotations of a negative effect or outcome associated with them.

In the corpus 48% of people terms were found to be ‘Neutral’, a further 48% consisted of the ‘Negative’ and ‘Affected’ terms, and only 4% were judged to be ‘Positive’.

This slide shows only a sample of the terms from the lists, but the proportion is representative of the overall corpus.

‘Actions’ (verbs) from the bills were categorised under four headings in the same way.

However at this point the specific focus of the study starts to address the high occurrence of Negative and Negative Affected terms: this slide shows only these: in the corpus a combined 63% of Action terms were deemed ‘Negative’ or ‘Affected’, 24% were judged ‘Neutral’, and only 13% ‘Positive’.

‘Event/Scenario’ is used to summarise episodes or situations in the bills. Some are simply descriptive of something that happened (eg MASS BAR BRAWL), but others have harder to define meanings, being complex, issue-based or emotive. For example SEXIST STORM, which is not an event, is more about societal values and behaviours.
| 24 | Bringing together the results from the previous analysis of People, Actions and Event/Scenarios allows a review of all of the headlines contained in the bills. Again, this part of the study confines itself to the coincidence of linguistic elements categorised as either directly negative, indirectly negative or in some other way affected by negative circumstances. The most notable of these are those where negative aspects of all three elements are present in the same headline – examples at A: |
| 25 | In these examples the term RAPIST is categorised as an actively negative Person, whereas the term HOMELESS is seen as representing people to whom something negative has occurred. |
| 26 | The Action terms / verbs JAILED and FORCED are both categorised as actively negative. |
| 27 | The Event/Scenario term BRUTAL ATTACK is categorised as actively negative here, and the expression LIVE IN CAVES is interpreted as a situation where something negative has occurred. |
The examples at B show combinations of two negative elements, and some of these are passively negative.

Here, the only negative term for a Person is INNOCENT WOMAN, and this is deemed to be passively negative.

The Action term DIE is categorised as passive, and the term RAID is deemed to be actively negative.

Here the only negative Event /Scenario is DOUBLE PITCH TRAGEDY, which is interpreted as passive.
32  The examples at C show only one negative element, either active or passive.

33  Here, the only negatively-termed Person is TRAGIC BOY, 5, which is seen as passively negative;

34  Neither of these examples contains a negative Action, however SCHOOL GATE BRAWL is categorised as an actively negative Event/Scenario.

SO... now we can start to look at the visual aspects of all this...

35  Typefaces are the clothes... Tobias Frere Jones

'Typefaces are the clothes that words wear.'

Tobias Frere-Jones:
"We see type as the clothes that words wear. You have more than one outfit in your closet, because you don’t wear the same thing to the office that you wear to the beach."
36 Graphic designer Alan Fletcher asks us to “Imagine strolling down a country lane and coming across this hand painted sign – it says far more than the information contained in just the words: it also says ‘I’m a farmer, my chickens run around freely, and the eggs were probably laid today ...’”

37 “... but if you were to walk further down the road and come across THIS sign, made in the same visual style, it might be a good idea to doubt the offer.”

38 Similarly Umberto Eco, in his book ‘The Open Work’, sees information as a different thing to meaning or message – he suggests that the information contained in a message is affected by another equally important factor – our confidence in the source of the message.

39 There are 4 main fonts used in the bills, and these are subtly varied:

1. **ANGER**: by far the most common font used in this corpus – a casual italic script-face, close to a sign writer’s style, and with soft corners. The italic style leans to the right, giving a sense of speed and urgency;

2. **ATTACK**: another casual script-face, but this time upright and with sharper corners – this still looks dynamic but somehow less ‘quick’;

3. **ATTEMPT**: an upright, semi-mechanical font less like a sign writer’s style and indicating more formality;

4. **GRANDAD**: a font with entirely mechanical heritage, that does not emulate a sign writer’s style – this is formal, business-like, official in tone.
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| 40   | 'Strand 2' — Stockport 'urban rhetoric' —  
The second strand focuses on the shop signs and advertising hoardings in the area. |
| 41   | Together with the first strand of the news bills, this 'urban rhetoric' provides a powerful verbal and visual diet of messages and ideas for us to consume on our daily journeys. |
| 42   | Four billboard images – typical of Stockport and also of the urban environment elsewhere in the UK. |
| 43   | A simple way to show the text content extracted, with the exception of brand names and proper nouns; this method was used for all the Google Streetview images collected, of which a sample follows. |
In total, 776 words were extracted from 45 Google Streetview images.

FRIED CHICKEN!

The same analytical tools were used with this second strand of texts: a filtered word count to rank word occurrence, and the word cloud generator to visualise the results. Again, the word count excludes simple numbers and the most common words, focusing on the most frequently-occurring uncommon words.

So we can see that CAR / REPAIRS / FREE / MONEY / CASH / FRIED / CHICKEN / YOU / PRICES / BUY / ACCESSORIES emerge as the most numerous.

Over 67% of all the words are between 3-6 characters in length and 75% contain only 1 or 2 syllables. A longer word such as ACCESSORIES is therefore unusual – 11 letters long – and complex – 4 syllables.
While the methods of this study are by no means scientific, it is revealing to consider the essence of the two strands side by side.

In the ‘world’ of the news bills, the People element is most commonly either POLICE/DAD/MAN with an Action such as ATTACK/WIN and an Event/Scenario such as DEATH/HORROR/HOSPITAL.

In the ‘world’ of the urban texts there is no significant person or persons ranking highly, but the most common Action term is BUY and the typical Event/Scenarios are almost all to do with money and consumerism.

When it boils right down, the two strands tend towards a linguistic environment in which the reader should on the one hand be fearful of what may happen, but on the other should (perhaps as a comfort and a diversion) continue to enjoy buying and consuming. And of course the two strands are constantly intermingled in the urban environment – they are hardly ever separate; we might therefore conclude that they are in some ways complementary, that they chase and feed one another.
This reduces further still – down to these two essential emotional states:

There is some support for these ideas in the writings of Jean Baudrillard, who talks of the media being *“nothing else than a marvelous instrument for destabilising the real and the true”* and adds somewhat chillingly that *“the addiction we have for the media … is not a result of a desire for culture, communication, and information, but of this perversion of truth and falsehood”*. Powerful words to end this presentation. I can only hope that your lunch break is filled more with COMFORT than FEAR.

Thankyou.