# *SPACE AND TIME IN EDITORIAL DISCOURSE*[1]

***Abstract**: Discourse can be approached from various angles and each approach fits different issues and questions; moreover, each type of discourse has its own distinctive features. It is beyond doubt that media language is a complex form of communication, the editorial discourse being the most sophisticated form of it. As any other type of discourse, the editorial discourse is deeply rooted into the social context; thus, it is social practice with spatial and temporal coordinates. This paper aims at exploring the space and time in editorial discourse.*

***Keywords**: editorial, space, time.*

## Introduction

Newspapers still matter. People of all professions still read them on a regular basis. There is indeed a great variety of news sources nowadays: newspapers and magazines in print and online press, radio, television and Internet in electronic media; but neither the advent of television, nor the Internet led to the "death" of the newspaper. A clear distinction is drawn in journalism between news writing (reporting) and opinion writing. While the first category has to mirror the reality, "just the facts", the editorials are restricted to expressing opinion, either of the editorial writer's or of the newspaper's editorial board as the governing body of the newspaper.

Any journalistic text, irrespective of the type, has some components which have special meaning (e.g. topics, time, space, actors and last but not least the relationship between them). Spatial and temporal dimensions have been of interest for media sociologists. Changes in the understanding of time and space are reflected in the construction of the mass-media products, in the mass-mediated public message.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the newspaper editorial as a distinct type of discourse as well as to consider the temporal-spatial dimensions of the social reality as mirrored in the Romanian press. The corpus consists of editorials published in two of the most representative broadsheets, namely Adevarul and Romania libera, in May 2011. I considered the two newspapers relevant for the type of discourse and content of public messages, also for the temporal and spatial dimensions of the editorial discourse due to their long tradition, quality of the writing and recognition of their editorial writers.

## The Editorial: Definition

Broadly speaking, an editorial is a newspaper or magazine article which presents the publication's opinion on an issue, reflecting the majority vote of the editorial board (the editorial board is the governing body of the newspaper or magazine, usually made up of editors and business managers, or/and owners). Rivers et al. (1988: 13) see the editorial as "the thought of an institution testifying before the bar of public opinion", a presentation of opinion more than of fact, "opinion that interprets significant news and influences public thoughts."

Editorials enjoy universal prevalence in publications of all types: broadsheets or tabloids, dailies or weeklies, for general public or specialised in a particular field of study (business newspapers, health and lifestyle publications etc.). It may be clearly

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marked as "editorial" (see the *Guardian* online edition, *Adevarul, Romania libera*), but it may also be referred to as a "leading article" (generally in UK, see *The Independent*), or simply "leader", published on the "Opinion and comment page" (American press) inside the newspaper or in the "Opinion section" of the on-line editions (*The Independent*, *Adevarul*, *Romania libera*). The British broadsheets generally do not mark it in any specific way in published editions, apart from headlining it according to the topic. On the contrary, the editorial is clearly marked in Romanian newspapers. Specialists make a distinction between personal editorials which are by-lined with the writer's name, and institutional editorials which are unsigned.

The editorial page has a complement "op-ed page" (abbreviated from "opposite the editorial page"), which consists of article or articles, usually written by journalists who are not affiliated with the newspaper's editorial board and sign their articles. The first modern op-ed page is attributed to the American journalists of the 1920s, who realized that the page opposite the editorial page was full of potential and was not entirely exploited. As readers regarded opinion as more interesting than news, the journalists provided them with what they wanted. In the context of the rise of other forms of mass media (radio and television) which somehow threatened the print media, more and more newspapers began including subjective and opinionated journalism, improving even growing their op-ed pages. They have served to expand or to complement the editorial page of a newspaper.

It is beyond doubt that editorials have a singular, privileged position among newspaper articles. Danuta Reah (2002: 45) argues that they exist in order to "allow the newspaper (usually in the person of its editor) to comment, give news and draw conclusions from the day's event." As opinion articles and as official views of the newspaper, we can state that editorials represent the "backbone" of the respective newspaper, defining its direction. Paradoxically, the editorial writer's medium is ephemeral as it is written for the public of the same hour. Moreover, the language of an editorial published in a broadsheet is generally regarded as "a model of press language", as Fowler (1991: 40) underlines.

**Views on Discourse**

The term "discourse" is widely used nowadays in a variety of contexts, not only by specialists but by common people as well. It comes from the Latin "discursus" referring to "written or spoken communication or debate" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse). The term has been much used within Sociolinguistics and Discourse Analysis, not always with clear differences across various branches of the disciplines. Fairclough (1992: 3) admits that discourse is a difficult concept as "there are so many conflicting and overlapping definitions formulated from various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints". He also points out that in linguistics, the term is used to refer to extended samples of dialogue in contrast with written texts, while in discourse analysis it emphasizes interaction between sender and receiver and therefore the process of production and interpretation as well as the situational context of language use. Even though Discourse Analysis is basically the study of language, there are slight differences between Discourse Analysis (abbreviated DA) and other approaches to language study.

Fairclough (1989: 16), as a representative of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), defines the term discourse from a different perspective: discourse is "language as a form of social practice". This view of discourse implies firstly that "language is part of society" and not external to it, secondly, that "language is a social process" and



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thirdly, that "language is a socially conditioned process, conditioned that is by other (non-linguistic) parts of society" (1989: 18-19). This is the general meaning given to the term and used throughout his entire work.

Mills (1997: 148) considers Fairclough's view on discourse as an integration of "Michel Foucault's definition of discourse with a systemic framework of analysis". Starting from an analysis of Foucault's work, Mills argues that "a discourse is something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation" (Mills, 1997: 17).

We have seen so far that discourse is practical as it implies interaction between language users, but also social because language is contextual. Van Dijk (2000) underlines another aspect of discourse which he considers to be fundamental but has not received so much attention: its cultural dimension. When engaging into a communicative act, language users "accomplish social acts and participate in social interaction [...] embedded in various social and cultural contexts" (van Dijk, 2000: 2); whenever people talk, they express their beliefs, knowledge and experiences of the world and may even shape the world around. Therefore, discourse is invested not only with social, but also with cultural beliefs, becoming an expression of both language and culture.

All in all, discourse is vast and complex, as it is a combination of many other factors besides spoken or written language in use: it implies interaction, a process (of production and interpretation), it is personal, social and cultural practice. But discourse is more than language in use; it is a communicative act which always involves a sender and a receiver and which is performed in a particular context, with a certain social purpose. It is beyond doubt that media language is a complex form of communication, the editorial discourse in particular representing the most refined, sophisticated expression of it. The editorial, as the "king article" of a newspaper, attempts not necessarily to inform, but to persuade readers of a particular viewpoint concerning a matter of wide concern. We also consider newspaper editorial discourse as representing a means of public communication: it uses language to transmit information from a sender (the editorial writer as the voice of a particular institution) to a receiver (the readers) within a social context or public environment.

**News Judgement in Journalism**

Every day, journalists have to make difficult choices about what readers want or need to know. This skill, called "news judgement" is indispensable in journalism in general, especially in the case of news reporters and editorial writers. Reporters need it in order to find appealing stories and choose those aspects of the story which are of interest for the public. Editorial writers need it to identify those topics of wide concern for their audience and approach them in detail in their editorials.

When it comes to deciding on a certain topic to write about, the editorial writer may have difficulties of selection, not on discovery. In comparison to the old-fashioned editorial page which was almost entirely political, today editorials are mostly suggested by the news of the day, and when they do not approach current events, they can be related to any subject already existent in the public consciousness. Flint (1920) considers that the editorial writer can go to any field for his subjects, unlike the news writers who are constrained by the world of events. This does not mean that one category has an easier task than the others. Even though the editorial writer skips the hard labour of gathering events, usually done by reporters, he/she still needs to verify



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information, to decide which details are relevant and of interest and, moreover, be accurate in every single detail.

Newsworthiness is related to many aspects but the ones we are preoccupied with in this paper are "time" and "space". Readers are mainly interested in problems that affect them to a certain extent, either directly or indirectly. That is why proximity is a key aspect as shown in editorials published in newspapers with regional or national coverage. As people are more sensitive to people, places and problems they know, the so-called regional editorials approach regional aspects to debate. National newspapers in their turn, rarely appeal to international topics in their editorials for instance because readers need to find out more about what is closer and more related to them.

We are living in a fast-moving world and therefore the news keeps changing. The news in general is impatient because nobody wants the yesterday's news as it is not news at all. And journalists know that, hence the fierce competition between then. Most news published in the daily newspapers happened either yesterday or earlier that day. There are events approached for more days but each time they have to be presented from a different angle

The editorial, unlike the news report, must take a stand regarding a matter of public concern, already signalled in the press and known to the readers. This means that, without any exception, the editorial comments on a piece of information already familiar to the audience, piece of information which is only the starting point of the text or simply, the pretext. The editorial writer attempts to re-interpret it, to offer a new perspective on the approached topic, to reveal the hidden threats, and even to warn. Newspaper readers do not have to read the editorial if they want to find out the news of the day; they are presented in detail in the news column. Unlike a news article writer, an editorial writer has to choose the most relevant aspect from the block of events, slow down the information flow with detailed and relevant explanation, and relate these events to the readers; it is more than just presenting the information in depth, it is step-by-step analysis, it is, as Rystrom (1983) says, "digging into a subject, and figuring out something meaningful, often controversial to say about the subject". The way writers evaluate events depends on their preferences and abilities.

**Time and Space Coordinates in Editorials**

There are certain constant components in any journalistic product: topic, time, space, actors and last, but not least, the relationship between them. We are mainly interested in the way time and space coordinates are reflected in editorials as highly opinionated representative articles which basically follow the same pattern (irrespective of the editorial writer or the newspaper that publishes it): there is always a generating piece of information regarding a matter of public concern already familiar to the reader from the news column and a large explanatory material which represents most of the editorial. Given their function as well as their ephemeral nature we expect the editorials to rely on "here and now" coordinates. Preda (2006) considers that comparison with something similar that happened in the past can make a good editorials; a skilful editorial writer can always find another similar situation to connect the present one with and thus to offer a different perspective.

When approaching the category of "time", I have considered the connection between the main topic of the editorial and aspects of time referred to: past (distant or near), present and future (near or distant). The present is taken as referent as the view to the past or future regularly involves comparison to the present. It is a basic dimension of



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any journalistic text as time is not to be found only in one single sentence, but different sections of the editorial may refer to different aspects of it, overtly or covertly.

The majority of Romanian editorials follow a certain pattern as all aspects of time are usually referred to. As a rule, the editorial debates a problem already signalled in the press (in the news reports), therefore familiar to the reader. It is a matter of interest for the majority of the people mainly related to politics, economic and social problems. The starting 'matter', to call it so, is situated most of the time in a near past, but the explanatory material that follows consists either of a comparison with another similar past situation, or a reference to the consequences that can be visible in the present or in the future.

Moreover, we could notice different evaluations given to time by the editorial writers, evaluations which can be considered as positive and negative approaches to "time". There is a tendency to attach a positive meaning to the past situations with which the present problem is compared to, and a negative meaning to everything that seems to be related to the future. The Romanian editorial writer appears to be pessimistic by nature when referring to the following period of time.

Wether the temporal dimension is often present in all its aspects (past-present-future) though in different proportions, the space coordinate is slightly more restrictive to "closeness". As mentioned above, editorials frequently approach "national" topics to analyse and debate. Proximity is a key concept in journalism in general, and in editorial writing in particular, as people wish to find out details about a problem which affected, affects or may affect them personally.

That is the reason why editorials rarely approach international topics, unless they are somehow related to national aspects. The most relevant in this respect is the editorial published in the period under study in Adevarul (5 May 2011), entitled "Barcelona and football's voluptuousness" ("Barcelona şi voluptatea fotbalului"). The generating piece of information is related to the recent victory of Barcelona football team in front of its eternal Spanish rival, Real Madrid. The explanatory material, the most extended part of the editorial, consists of a short history of confrontations between the two football teams as well as an approach of Barcelona's steps to success. Apparently, this is an editorial dedicated to an international matter; but the last paragraph brings the "surprise element" and reveals the editorial writer's strategy by offering it a "national touch" in the form of a rhetorical question: "Are those managing our national football going to learn nothing from what others smarter than us do?". The function of the final paragraph is to invite to reflection on the poor situation of the Romanian football as compared to the Western one.

**Conclusions**

Irrespective of the type of newspaper, they all host a journalistic genre called "editorial" having a similar basic communicative purpose. Editorials have become an essential part of the conception of any newspaper with a privileged position among other articles. Their main function is not necessarily to inform, but to persuade readers of a particular view regarding a matter of wide interest. Therefore, editorials display a particular type of discourse, which influences and is influenced by the social context.

The Romanian editorial discourse fully exploits the past-present-future relation; it is a natural tendency because on the one hand, the editorials offer an analysis of a contemporary matter or one belonging to a near past; on the other hand, the solutions are to be found in the future, thus the future dimension cannot be ignored. Considering the space dimension, the editorial by nature approaches topics of national



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interest and even when the space is extended to 'international area' there is always a connection made with the national scenery.

All in all, "space" and "time" are constant coordinates in any journalistic product and there is always a close relationship between them and the topic approached.

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