

The impact of cultural dimensions on language use in quality newspapers

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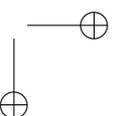
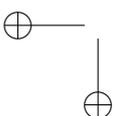
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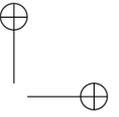
LANGUAGE is the key to the heart of a culture. So related are language and culture that language holds the power to maintain national or cultural identity. Language is important in ethnic and nationalist sentiment because of its powerful and visible symbolism; it becomes a core symbol or rallying point. (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 139)

Language is a very important consideration to take into account when examining the messages we receive from the news media, and how we might decode them. Put simply, language is “a set of symbols shared by a community to communicate meaning and experience” (Jandt, 2004: 147). It cannot be separated from culture and it is through language that we construct and deconstruct our culture, learning who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are (Lull, 2000: 139). While it is one thing to learn another language, it is something different altogether to be able to apply that language within its cultural surrounding. As Stevenson (1994: 59-60) has pointed out, dictionaries can tell us the literal translations of words, but they cannot tell us what those words mean within their cultural surroundings. For all words have at least two meanings, their denotative meaning, which is the word itself, as well as their connotative meaning, or cultural meaning (Hall, 1997).

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) argued that language operated through signs, which consisted of a signifier (the physical form) and a signified (the concept evoked by the signifier). Thus, the word “ox” is a sign composed of the signifier (its appearance, ie. the physical letters) and the mental concept (oxness) which one has of the type of animal. The mental concept depends on one’s cultural surroundings. An Indian farmer, for example, would likely have a very different mental concept of an ox than an English person would (Fiske, 1990).

Thus cultural meaning cannot be simply translated, as its meaning is specific to the culture it operates within (Stevenson, 1994: 60). It could be ar-



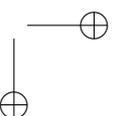
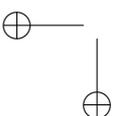


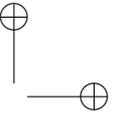
gued that, for an outsider, it is impossible to understand a culture without first knowing the language, but the appropriate use of the language will also depend on the level of cultural knowledge. Haarmann (1999: 64) has noted that language is “a major marker for many local groups around the world, and there have been historical periods when language was assigned an ideological role as the marker par excellence of ethnic identity”. As an example, Haarmann cites the 18th and 19th Century idea of a national language being the bond which unites individuals.

If language is a marker of culture, it should be possible for us to trace certain uses of language back to cultural conditions. In this sense, this article will examine how newspapers employ language in their reporting, with special attention given to how this language use might be traced back to cultural dimensions. In order to provide a comparative dimension across cultures, the article explores two quality newspapers each from Australia and Germany. Specifically, I will examine the coverage of death in the selected newspapers. The visual representation of death in the news media has already received some attention from scholars (see, for example, Taylor, 1998; Sontag, 2003; Campbell, 2004), but very little analysis has been undertaken as to how newspapers actually “talk” about the dead, that is, the specific words that are being used to describe fatal events.

Cultural dimensions in international news

Past studies on international news reporting have used a variety of approaches to examine how other countries are represented and what the underlying reasons for these representations might be. Straubhaar (2003) has argued that, to truly understand the process of global interaction through the media, research needs to move beyond the traditional dependence and inter-dependence relations or narrow definitions such as core, semi-peripheral and peripheral countries. He argued there were several levels of interaction between the cultures of the world: political-economic, technological, cultural production, content and content flows and the reception of culture. Straubhaar conceded that most critical and cultural studies’ writers deemed political-economic analysis necessary, and while the political and economic factors should be used as a foundation for analysis, they did not necessarily determine other factors. Thus





The impact of cultural dimensions on language use in quality newspapers 53

(2000: 72) also identified a trend away from the structural analyses of international communication's role in political and economic power relationships towards the cultural dimensions of communication and media.

Similarly, Lie (2003: 72-3) argued that the cultural state of the world was intrinsically linked to the flow of information and knowledge, which in itself was a cultural flow. While it is important to recognise the predominant economic, political and power analyses of the cultural flow in past studies, Lie argued there was also a need for a cultural analysis of this flow.

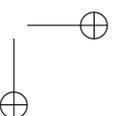
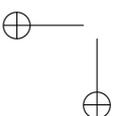
Christensen (2002: 27) provides an insight into the interplay of factors that influence international news coverage when he argued that

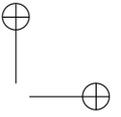
the proposed tendency towards coverage of culturally "proximate" regions (a result of geo-cultural pressures) is related to organisation and political economic factors: stories on proximate regions are more likely to be within the professional and cultural "universe" of the journalists and/or editor (organisational pressures), and are also likely to be cheaper to cover and more attractive to domestic audiences (political economic pressures) (Christensen, 2002: 27).

In an analysis of death in international news coverage, I adopted a holistic model that accounted for the various factors that impinge on news flow (Hanusch, 2006). Based on Servaes (1999, 2002), I used a framework of four dimensions: world view, value systems, systems of social organisation and systems of symbolic representation. These could account for a combination of factors such as political, economic, cultural, social, historical and linguistic, therefore providing a more inclusive approach to the study of international news flows. Particularly relevant to this study of language use is the value systems dimension, and specifically Hofstede's (1980, 1997, 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) work on international differences in work-related values.

In a number of studies that surveyed thousands of employees of multinational corporations across more than 50 countries, Hofstede found five independent dimensions along which dominant value systems could be ordered. These value dimensions include: power distance; individualism; masculinity; uncertainty avoidance; and long-term orientation.

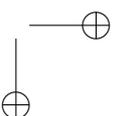
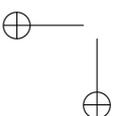
Power distance, according to Hofstede, is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations, such as the family, accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Hofstede's second value dimension, individualism, refers to the importance of the individual in a

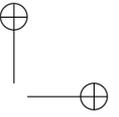




society. There are individualist societies in which there are only loose ties between individuals, and collectivist societies where individuals are part of very strong and cohesive groups. Masculinity, according to Hofstede, refers to the degree to which masculine or feminine traits are dominant in a society. Uncertainty avoidance is concerned with the degree to which a society can deal with uncertainty, ie. whether a member of a culture is comfortable or uncomfortable in a new and unknown situation. Uncertainty avoiding cultures live by strict laws, rules, security and safety measures and rituals to minimise the possibility of unstructured situations. Long-term orientation is a dimension that cross-cultural psychologist Michael Bond, together with a group of Chinese scholars, added to Hofstede's list of originally only four dimensions (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Hofstede and Bond, 1988). The Chinese Culture Connection had been concerned that Hofstede's four dimensions had been constructed and analysed only by Western scholars. Bond and his Chinese colleagues used their own questionnaires developed by Chinese scholars. Their survey confirmed three of Hofstede's four dimensions, with the exception being uncertainty avoidance, a value they argued was not relevant to Eastern cultures. Instead of the search for "truth", Eastern cultures were more concerned with "virtues". As I will argue in this paper, value systems help determine journalistic routines and can therefore account for differences in approaches to news reporting.

Germany and Australia, the two countries under examination in this paper, are somewhat similar on some dimensions, but quite different on others. According to Hofstede's data, Australia proves to be a more individualist country than Germany, while Germans score more highly on uncertainty avoidance, suggesting Germans are less comfortable with uncertain situations than are Australians. Australia is, according to Hofstede, a slightly less masculine society, although the differences do not appear to be great. Both countries score similarly on power distance and long-term orientation. One would expect that these differences in values may have an effect on journalistic practices in these two countries. For example, considering that Germany has higher uncertainty avoidance, one would expect stricter rules for journalists, for example in terms of ethical guidelines. In fact, the German ethics code (Pressekodex) is much more detailed than Australian ethical codes such as the journalist union's code of ethics or the Australian Press Council's Statement of Principles. As I will show, these impact on journalistic language use.



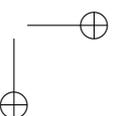
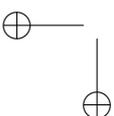


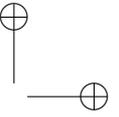
Hofstede's work has not been without criticism, with much of it directed at the methodology he employed. McSweeney (2002) argued that Hofstede had generalised about national cultures on the basis of a few questionnaires from IBM subsidiaries in some countries. McSweeney further argued that IBM employees in one country could hardly be representative of a whole culture, in addition to the fact that in some countries less than 100 questionnaires were completed. Another point of criticism was that the initial surveys did not include Arab countries and only one African country, South Africa, which, at the time of Apartheid, would unlikely have included much of the values of the country's black population (Samovar and Porter, 2001). However, Hofstede's work has also been replicated in a number of studies, giving it added credibility. For example, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005: 26) cite six major replications of Hofstede's original research. As regards journalism studies, studies of culture such as Hofstede's work have also been acknowledged as being potentially useful when examining journalistic practice (Hanitzsch, 2006).

Death in public discourse

Before embarking on the analysis, it is necessary to briefly review some issues concerning the representation of death in the news media. The presence or absence of death in public discourse has become quite popular in recent years as a topic of academic debate, with a large increase in research particularly in the area of sociology (Howarth, 2007). Until recently, the prevailing view had been that death had, in contrast to traditional societies, been removed from the public to the private realm and become something unmentionable (Aries, 1973; Giddens, 1991; Mellor and Shilling, 1993). The view was that advances in science had made death something that was avoidable and could be prevented (Simpson, 1972). However, more recently, sociologists such as Tony Walter (1991) have come to refute this claim of the public absence of death, noting that death was in fact omnipresent in today's media. While he did concede that it was unusual deaths and death of high-profile people only that were commonplace in the media, Walter nevertheless argued that death was much more present than previously thought.

At first glance, today's news media is certainly full of accounts of wars, disasters and the like. Death is a highly negative event, and negativity is a very

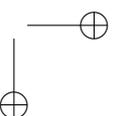
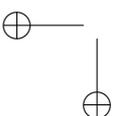


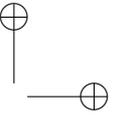


strong news factor. But despite the argument that death is highly present in public discourse, there is debate as to how present it really is. While deaths may be reported frequently in the news media, it is much less clear to what extent and in what detail these deaths are reported. For example, Taylor (1998) argues that the news media are in fact short-changing their audience in terms of the visual representation of death by consciously self-censoring the display of graphic imagery. Taylor (1998: 11) believes that “the absence of horror in the representation of real events indicates not propriety so much as a potentially dangerous poverty of knowledge among news readers”. Campbell (2004) argues in much the same vein, disputing the assertion made by, amongst others, Sontag (2003), that graphic imagery will quickly lead to compassion fatigue.

But while graphic imagery has attracted a good deal of attention, language use by newspapers has received hardly any interest in research. Yet, arguably, how the news media describe the dead would to some extent influence how audience members might think about them. While there exists a reasonably large body of research into news media accounts of death, particularly in foreign news reporting, most of it has focused on statistical issues, such as how many deaths have to occur in a certain place for the event to become news (Adams, 1986; Burdach, 1988; Moeller, 1999). These studies have indeed found that deaths in politically, economically and culturally distant countries are less likely to be covered than deaths which occur in a more proximate place, much in line with the predominant theories of news factors (Galtung and Ruge, 1970; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). There is an old saying among US journalists, for example: “one dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans” (in Moeller, 1999: 22).

As to the language that is used, it is also generally accepted that accounts of deaths from distant places contain much less detailed accounts, little personalisation and “emotional invigilation”, as argued by Walter, Littlewood and Pickering (1995). In general terms, Walter (2006) argues that the media now play an important role in keeping the social fabric together, much to the extent that religion had done in traditional societies. “Like churches that preach hell-fire and damnation, the media first scare us to death and then offer salvation and comfort. This formula has traditionally been the terrain of religion, and just as its use can reinforce the power of religion so it is effective in selling newspapers” (Walter, 2006: 277). Other studies have also noted the impor-

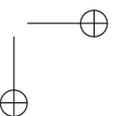
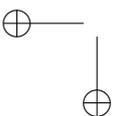




tance of news media accounts of death in reaffirming national myths (Watson, 1997; Pearse, 2006). Yet these studies have often examined only the meta-level of more general discourses, without examining individual accounts on a more micro-analytical level. Further, research has tended to focus on the media product, neglecting to examine media producers' attitudes to and experiences of reporting on death. Therefore, this article examines more closely some of the headlines used in Australian and German newspapers' reporting of death, and combines it with interviews conducted with journalists at these newspapers.

Method

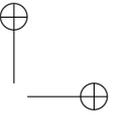
This study examined journalists' use of language when reporting death and was conducted as part of a wider study of newspaper coverage of death (see Hanusch, 2007; 2008). Firstly, the coverage of death in the foreign news sections of four newspapers was analysed during the months of September and October 2004. Two quality newspapers each from Germany and Australia were chosen: From Germany, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and from Australia, *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. All four newspapers are regarded as being among the top quality newspapers in their respective countries. In addition, extensive interviews with eight journalists from each newspaper were conducted in December 2004 and April 2005. All journalists interviewed were involved in the production of foreign news. Interviews included general questions as to the language they employed when reporting on death, as well as a number of sample headlines in order to provide a cross-cultural analysis dimension as to what kind of language is acceptable in each country. I am fluent in both German and English and possess professional qualifications as a translator in these languages. I was therefore able to conduct interviews in the journalists' native languages, which was important in the context of the study. Messages could therefore be decoded within their culture-specific contexts.



Results

In order to establish a more general framework of how journalists report death, interviewees were asked whether they had any policies regarding the language used when reporting about death. All journalists said there were no written guidelines, or at least they were not aware of any. The main observation here, however, was that German journalists were quite particular about the use of certain language, while Australian journalists did not appear too concerned with the finer linguistic details. Journalists at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* displayed particularly strong restraint when it came to how stories about death were written, but all journalists said they tried to keep stories about death as dry and as distanced as possible, to accord decency to the victims. Thus, people were generally “killed” and not “torn to pieces”. Descriptions such as “children’s legs were lying on the windowsills” were avoided. “*Of course it looks like that after an explosion, but you shouldn’t have to read that in the newspaper,*” an FAZ journalist said. Wire copy was constantly adjusted to suit the newspaper’s style, another journalist from the same newspaper pointed out, particularly when wire stories were direct translations from the English original. “*So in English it might have been “he exploded himself”, which in German becomes “er sprengte sich in die Luft”. And we would not express it like that.*” Another FAZ journalist said he was extremely particular about linguistic details, deleting words such as corpses (*Leiche*) and instead referring to them as bodies (*Leichname*), or simply the dead (*Tote*). Rather than “people” (*Menschen*), the journalist preferred using the more distanced “persons” (*Personen*). However, such fine distinctions were not made necessarily by every journalist and it appears that individual journalists have a certain amount of personal influence in this regard, which demonstrates the high autonomy found in German journalists’ role descriptions and the associated openness to individual bias as compared to the Anglo-Saxon system (Esser, 1998).

Journalists at the *Süddeutsche* were not quite as detailed about the use of language, but also acknowledged that wire copy was rewritten frequently to suit the house-style of neutral formulations. The fact that German journalists considered linguistic details supports Köcher’s (1986) argument that German journalists saw themselves as intellectuals. And seeing that four of the journalists interviewed at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* held a PhD, one would expect



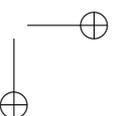
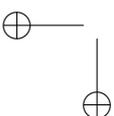
that journalists there generally might think of themselves as intellectuals even more so than their counterparts at the *Süddeutsche*. Journalists at the Australian newspapers, on the other hand, were not so concerned about the use of language. Many journalists at these papers could not provide much of an answer, saying there were no real policies or conventions governing the use of language apart from the basic stylistic expressions of newspaper language, such as using “died” or “were killed” instead of “passed away”, which was reserved for people who died after a long illness.

One explanation for this rather general difference in language use may be found in Hofstede’s work on value dimensions. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005: 175) note that strong uncertainty avoiding countries have tighter rules regarding language in order to deal with a number of different and unexpected situations. Hence, German journalists may be more selective in their language use when reporting death.

Language in headlines

In order to provide more insight into the analysis, it was decided to present journalists with five headlines, which were chosen from all headlines published in the four newspapers during the content analysis period. Journalists were asked what they thought of each headline and whether they would publish it. They were also requested to comment in terms of taste, ethics or appropriateness of the headline. Headlines that were published in German newspapers were translated into English for Australian journalists, while those published in Australia were translated into German for journalists at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Süddeutsche*.

It should be noted that translations posed a slight problem, in that the literal translations did not always suit the other language’s newspaper style. It was already pointed out that literal translations do not necessarily convey the same cultural connotations in the other language. For example, the word *slaughter* in English, translated literally as *schlachten* in German, can have different connotations in each language. In essence, the word slaughter works as a metaphor here. Fiske (1990) noted that metaphors explained the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar and the purpose of the word’s use in the case of a headline such as “20 people slaughtered in attack” is of course to raise an image



of defenceless people being killed in a gruesome, cold-blooded way. Yet metaphors, as language, are culturally determined, and in German the word is much harsher, reflecting *only* a butcher's activity, while the use is more relaxed in English, with the word taking on different meanings. For example, it is quite common to talk about "getting slaughtered" in sporting terms, such as "our team got slaughtered at the weekend". This becomes a metaphor for being comprehensively beaten. It implies the team had no chance against the other. Thus, the word, used in the context of someone being killed, is still quite a strong statement, but less so than in German due to its other connotations.

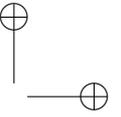
Literal translations were used for the headlines, but, as this exercise was about which kinds of words were permissible, journalists were asked whether other words would be appropriate if they disapproved of a certain word.

Example a)

Araber trampeln sich bei IKEA-Eröffnung zu Tode (Arabs trample each other to death in IKEA-opening) published in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 2, 2004, Page 10

This headline refers to a story about the opening of an IKEA furniture store in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The company had promised special offers to the first 250 customers, leading many people to camp out in front of the store the night before. Three people were killed in a mass stampede, with 17 more injured. The advantage this headline has for this comparison is that IKEA operates both in Germany and in Australia, thus people in both cultures are familiar with the concept of an IKEA store.

A large majority of the German journalists interviewed for this study disapproved of this headline, with eight *Frankfurter Allgemeine* journalists saying they would not publish it, while five *Süddeutsche* journalists were against and three said they did not see anything wrong with it. The most frequent reason for rejecting this headline was that journalists thought it was disrespectful of the people who died. Particularly the phrase "trampling each other" and the word "Arabs" caused concern. "This is a discriminating headline, which causes the impression that these people are fools," said a *Süddeutsche* journalist. Similarly, another journalist from the same newspaper said it sounded like "those stupid Arabs are waiting to finally get an IKEA



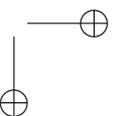
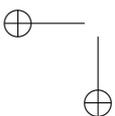
store and they're so interested that they run over each other". Further, the term "Arabs" was too much of a generalisation for most German journalists, who believed it did not tell the reader where the event happened, as "Arabs" could suggest a number of countries or areas. One *Süddeutsche* journalist thought the term also evoked a connotation with fanatical Muslims. However, three journalists at the *Süddeutsche* did not see much that was wrong with the term, if it accurately described who was killed. As the headline was published in the *Süddeutsche*, it becomes apparent that decisions on headlines can be quite arbitrary and it again shows that the *redakteur* who is writing them has considerable power in decision-making. This supports Esser's (1999) research about the individual's influence on the production process in German newspapers.

In line with German journalists, a majority of Australian journalists rejected the headline, with three journalists at *The Australian* and six at the *Herald* rejecting it, for similar reasons. Again, the terms "trample each other" and "Arabs" were cause for not publishing the headline. Said one journalist at *The Australian*: "*Trample each other to death*' is a bit like "*those silly Arabs are too dopey to avoid killing each other*"." The term "Arabs" was also criticised as inadequate, with most journalists preferring to state the actual nationality of the dead. Further, as another Australian journalist pointed out, "*who knows if they were all Arabs, maybe some of them were Persians. This headline is a cultural generalisation that we would try to avoid*". So it appears that, contrary to the previous findings about policies on language, Australian journalists also consider in some detail the language they use in headlines.

Example b)

Town's farewell to slaughtered innocents (Ort verabschiedet sich von den geschlachteten Unschuldigen) published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 7, 2004, Page 11

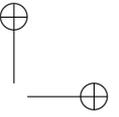
This headline refers to a story about the aftermath of the Beslan school siege, in which around 350 people died. Armed men had taken over the school on September 1, 2004, the first day of school in the southern Russian province of North Ossetia. Many children and women were held hostage for some days. The hostage situation ended with a large number of the hostages being killed.



The story behind this headline was about the grieving and burial processes in Beslan.

One obvious problem with this headline is the translation of the term “slaughtered”, as discussed previously. Thus, quite expectedly, all German journalists rejected this headline, mainly on the grounds of the harshness of the word “*geschlachtet*” and the use of the term “innocents”. “*Really only a butcher slaughters, so I would make it “the killed children”*,” an FAZ journalist said. In fact, the more neutral term “killed” (*getötet*) was accepted by all journalists. Another issue in this headline was the use of the term “innocents”, which represents children and women killed, who were, as was noted by Moeller (1999), the ideal victims. Journalists considered such language as too much of a value judgment, which needed to be avoided in news stories. “*This “innocents” – who is innocent? Let God decide that*,” one German journalist said. However, two *Süddeutsche* journalists did not consider the term a problem. One thought “innocents” was acceptable in so far as the victims had been innocently dragged in to the hostage situation. The other said “innocents” was okay to use when referring to children. Another problem with the headline was more of a technical nature, in that journalists said it did not tell them where the event happened. Thus, the generic term ‘town’ would have to become the explicit “Beslan”.

Australian journalists did not have much of a problem with the use of this headline. Only two journalists, one each from *The Australian* and the *Herald*, rejected the headline on the basis that it was too strong a judgment to use “slaughtered innocents” when referring to those who died in Beslan. A small number of the journalists noted that the use of terms such as “slaughtered” and “innocents” could be problematic, but in this case they believed their use was adequate. A journalist from *The Australian*, for example, said: “*Obviously the circumstances were that there were very clearly bad guys and innocent victims. So you would do that (use that phrase)*.” Most journalists reacted in a similar manner, with most considering the use of the phrase as adequate. “*I think with Beslan it’s spot on*,” a journalist at the *Herald* said. “*Innocents – they are school kids – that’s spot on. And there was a slaughter; there is no doubt about that.*”

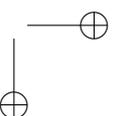
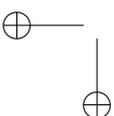


Example c)

Guard reveals bloody carnage at the gates of hell (Wächter berichtet von blutigem Massaker an den Toren der Hölle) published in *The Australian*, September 14, Page 9

This headline refers to a story about the aftermath of the bomb explosion in front of the Australian embassy in Jakarta, in which 11 Indonesians died. In this regard, the use of the term “gates of hell” appears to refer metaphorically to the gates of the embassy. Beneath the headline was a feature-type story about a security guard who stood at the embassy’s gates when the bomb exploded. In the story he recounted his experience. Some journalists asked whether “gates of hell” was a quote from the security guard. This was not the case.

The use of strong terms such as “bloody carnage” or apparent value judgments like ‘gates of hell’ again did not sit well with German journalists. Almost all journalists were opposed to the headline, saying carnage (translated as *Massaker*) was always bloody. There appears to be an issue in terms of the translation however, as the word carnage in English does not always refer to bloody events, but also destruction generally. Yet even the term bloody (*blutig*) was not acceptable to a number of journalists, who believed the term was well-worn and somewhat “tabloidy”. Said an *FAZ* journalist: “*The term “bloody” should never be used in a headline, because it is sensationalising and generally overused*”. Once again, the term *bloody* in English can have different connotations, such as its use in swearing (“bloody hell”), rendering the term perhaps not as stark as it is in German. But the statement by the journalist is also noteworthy, when considered against the background of the differences between German and Australian (also English) newspapers, as discerned by Esser (1999). As Australian newspapers contain more tabloid elements, the use of more sensationalist language is not surprising. After all, the headline is considered a major selling point (Bonney and Wilson, 1983), and the use of emotive terms of metaphors can be seen in this context. In German papers, headlines for news stories seem to be more concerned with neutral language and basic facts. Thus, the use of the phrase “gates of hell” was also rejected by all German journalists, although it would have been acceptable to most had it been a quote. In the eyes of German journalists it was too much of a value



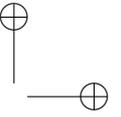
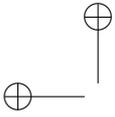
judgment to make, even for a feature story, which has slightly more freedom in its use of language, as will be shown shortly.

Australian journalists appeared to be more relaxed about the use of this headline than their German counterparts, although there were differences. Four journalists each from the *Herald* and *The Australian* said they would use the headline, while two journalists at *The Australian* and three at the *Herald* said they would not. Reasons for not using the headline were similar to the ones German journalists gave; those who rejected the headline said it was too sensationalist. The phrase “bloody carnage” did not seem to be a major issue, with almost all journalists saying it was fine to use. It appeared only one journalist considered it in more detail, saying that carnage was unlikely to be clean. “Gates of hell” posed more of a problem, with a number of journalists believing it was too much of a cliché to use.

Similarly, the same journalists regarded the use of “evil” as problematic. This question was raised as the *Herald* used the phrase “Evil at our gate” in its page straps throughout the coverage of the Jakarta embassy bombings. Some *Herald* journalists were uncomfortable with the use of “evil” in headlines. Whether these terms are used consciously to express religious connotations does not seem to be quite clear, with journalists divided on the issue. A *Herald* journalist noted he did not know whether there was any recognition of the subtleties and complexities in defining what evil represented, but suggested that the reasons these words were used might often be much more simple.

“Those strap headlines are some of the hardest things to come up with because they have to be words that are encompassing a whole range of stories within. It has to be something that is hopefully going to be fresh and not stereotyped in news many times. I don’t particularly like “Evil at our gate” but I probably wouldn’t have argued this as I would have struggled to come up with something snappier and better.”

Of course the use of “our” also warrants brief consideration, as *The Australian* used “Terror at our door” as the page strap for its Jakarta embassy bombing coverage. The purpose of using “our” is obviously to give it an Australian relevance. *“That is deliberate, because it’s the way the media localise a story that didn’t happen in Australia. So you say it happened at our doorstep, our gate,”* a journalist at *The Australian* said. So again we can see the interplay of the economic dimension with others, in that if events can be



‘localised’ for a culture, ie. related to a culture’s interests, the more the people that may be interested in a story and possibly buy the newspaper.

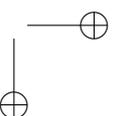
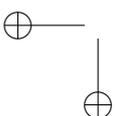
Comparatively, the German newspapers did not use such personal pronouns in their coverage, and it again demonstrates the stronger presence of tabloid elements in the Australian quality newspapers. Using “our” or “we” involves the audience much more than the neutral term “Australia”. The use of “we” is considered tabloid in the German context, which was well documented in national tabloid *BILD*’s headline when German Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope in April 2005. The paper’s headline read: “Wir sind Papst” (We are pope), in an obvious attempt to create a feeling of community. In another headline strap at the top of the page, *BILD* wrote: “Unser Joseph Ratzinger ist Benedikt XVI.” (Our Joseph Ratzinger is Benedict XVI.) (*BILD*, 2005).

Example d)

Hundreds of rotting bodies in Haiti city (Hunderte von verfaulenden Körpern in haitianischer Stadt) published in *The Australian* on September 24, Page 12

This headline refers to a story about the aftermath of tropical storm Jeanne hitting Haiti in late September 2004. At the time the story was published, more than 1070 people had died. The story was about the fact that numerous bodies had not been taken away for burial by the authorities.

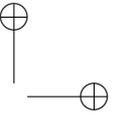
This headline was not acceptable to the majority of journalists at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*; however, half of *Süddeutsche* journalists accepted it while the other half rejected it. Those journalists who accepted the headline did not see anything wrong with it if that was what happened, ie. if there were dead people literally lying in the streets. In general, all journalists were not too opposed to the headline, most only being concerned about the use of the word “rotting” (*verfaulenden*). If this term were deleted, or possibly substituted with “decomposing” (*verwesenden*), some journalists would accept this headline. But generally, journalists thought it was a sensationalist headline. Whether this headline would make it into the paper also depended on whether it accompanied a feature or a news story. Again, it became evident that there was more freedom in German newspapers in the choice of words when writing headlines for feature stories, or *Reportagen*, as many journalists said they thought the headline was acceptable if it ran with a feature piece. For a news



story, however, journalists generally rejected it due to the use of the term “rotting”, which in their view was disrespectful.

Feature stories, of course, differ from hard news stories in that they allow for a more colourful description of events and for a more individual style of the reporter (Reumann, 2003). Keeble (1994: 244) has defined features as containing more “comment, analysis, colour, background and a greater diversity of sources than news stories” which also “explore a larger number of issues at greater depth”. Thus, there is more freedom here for linguistic expression, and the strict limits placed on hard news do not apply as much. A small difference between *Reportage* and feature should be pointed out here. Reumann (2003) has noted that *Reportage* and feature were very closely related and that some used them interchangeably. Sometimes, however, the feature was also described as the *Reportage*'s more “colourful brother”, which allowed for more subjectivity (Reumann, 2003: 141). Haller (1997, cited in Reumann, 2003: 141) further argued that the feature concentrated even more so than the *Reportage* on translating abstract situations into concrete everyday events.

Australian journalists generally accepted the headline even for a hard news story, with nine saying they would use it, while five said they would not. The most common reason for approving this headline was that, similar to the German experience, if the headline reflected accurately what happened, it was fine to use it. “*If we are breaking the news that the first people to get in after the hurricane have discovered death and disaster on this scale, I think that’s fair enough,*” a *Herald* journalist said. However, some journalists expressed displeasure with the word “rotting”, which they thought could be expressed in more sanitised form. For example, another *Herald* Journalist thought ‘rotting’ was a very harsh word, which didn’t conjure up a very pleasant image. Yet one journalist, for example, saw the value in using such dramatic headlines: “*The intention is obviously to shock people, and the problem is often, with places like Haiti, that so many people have compassion fatigue and the only way to interest them is by using this.*” So it appears that using drastic language can be seen as a tool to overcome news fatigue in that it might attract attention for its outrageous nature. Yet again we can see this difference between the acceptability of sensationalist language in Australian newspapers compared to German newspapers, which can be traced back to the differing economic realities, which in turn can be viewed against the background of the cultural framework, as discussed earlier. Ethical considerations also come into play,



The impact of cultural dimensions on language use in quality newspapers 67

and these are discussed in more detail soon, including how they need to be seen in the context of the cultural framework.

Example e)

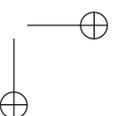
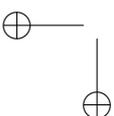
Derrida is deconstructed at 74 (Derrida mit 74 Jahren de-konstruiert) published in *The Australian* on October 11, 2004

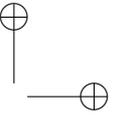
This headline refers to a story about the death of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who died at the age of 74. “Deconstructed” is obviously a play on words, as Derrida had developed the theory of deconstructivism.

Plays on words or puns in relation to the death of a person are clearly not acceptable in the *Süddeutsche* or *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. All German journalists rejected the headline on the basis that one did not joke about the dead. While a small number of journalists thought the pun was quite funny, they also said it could never be published in their newspaper. Just as many journalists did not think it was a great pun to begin with, however. “*I find it really annoying when supposedly intelligent journalists make these puns. Even the Feuilleton (arts section), which enjoys much more freedom here and is not bound by news language, would probably not use a pun in the case of a death,*” an *FAZ* journalist said. The problem with publishing such a headline was also attributed to the readers’ reaction. “*If something like that slips out just once, we would immediately get hundreds of letters from outraged people,*” said another.

In contrast to German journalists, Australian journalists found the use of puns in headlines completely acceptable, as long as the person who died did so peacefully, and not as a result of violence. All journalists interviewed at *The Australian* and the *Herald* regarded this headline as adequate, some seeing it even as a tribute to Derrida. There are obvious differences in the acceptability of humour in headlines about death as perceived by journalists in the two countries. These can be traced back to the respective cultures, as German and Australian (as an extension of English) cultures have different conceptions of humour.

Humour is a cultural phenomenon “whose interpretation requires the reference to a common frame where speaker and hearer share a history and a way to interpret experience” (Rojo Lopez, 2002: 34). German linguist Hans-Dieter Gelfert (1998) examined and compared English and German humour

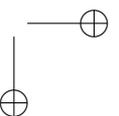
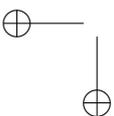


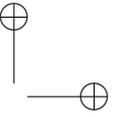


and argued that the two had actually been quite similar until the 18th century. After that time, however, German social values placed strong emphasis on social stability and national security. As a result, humour became either moralising (ridiculing the disturber of the social order) or *gemütlich* (creating a tension-free zone). This was still expressed today in German political cabaret and Saturday night family TV shows, Gelfert argued.

In contrast, the English values of individual freedom meant its humour poked fun at everyone and disrespected any form of authority. Again we can see the interplay of the four dimensions of the cultural framework, in that in this case the nations' values impacted on the development of humour, an aspect of language. Gelfert listed four typical forms of English humour: eccentricity (against the authority of social conventions); wordplay (against the authority of serious discourse); nonsense (against the authority of sense); and black humour (against the authority of morals). Looking at the headline about Jacques Derrida's death then, we can identify the expression of wordplay, to act against the normally so serious nature of a newspaper as well as black humour. By writing a funny headline, the writer presumably aimed to lighten the mood. This play on words is not as permissible for German journalists ("you don't joke about death" – this statement indicates it is still a kind of taboo subject) and secondly the tighter restrictions on serious newspaper journalism don't allow journalists at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* or *Süddeutsche* to take the liberties that Australian journalists have. Again this circumstance needs to be seen in the context of Australian newspapers displaying more tabloid characteristics than the German newspapers. The headline in Australian newspapers is extremely important – it serves as a marketing tool, as a funny headline could attract readers.

The issue of humour can also here be linked to Hofstede's value dimensions, specifically the individualism dimension. Australia is considered by Hofstede to be a very individualist country, which, as Gelfert's (1998) research indicates, has led to a different type of humour. Germans score less highly on individualism which can be seen in the fact that German humour takes account of societal implications.





Ethical considerations

A common theme that runs through all of the above discussion on how death is portrayed in terms of language used is the consideration of what German journalists called *Menschenwürde* (human dignity), but which can also be grouped within the larger context of taste and privacy. This issue needs to be investigated in more depth and a comparison of the differing ethical considerations in the two countries is necessary.

Comparing the journalistic codes of conduct in Germany and Australia, it becomes apparent that the Australian journalist union's code of ethics is much less detailed, consisting of only 12 clauses. In regard to privacy, the code states: "Respect private grief and personal privacy. Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude" (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2005). There are no further explanatory sub-clauses. The Australian Press Council, the self-regulatory body of the print media, addresses the issue in two clauses of its Statement of Principles. Clause 3 states that

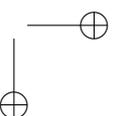
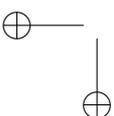
readers of publications are entitled to have news and comment presented to them honestly and fairly, and with respect for the privacy and sensibilities of individuals. However, the right to privacy should not prevent publication of matters of public record or obvious significant public interest (Australian Press Council, 2003).

Clause 6 states that

publications have a wide discretion in publishing material, but they should have regard for the sensibilities of their readers, particularly when the material, such as photographs, could reasonably be expected to cause offence. Public interest should be the criterion and, on occasion, explained editorially (Australian Press Council, 2003).

The clauses are relatively broad to allow for individual circumstances, but past adjudications by the Press Council give some insights into how they are applied. The Council's executive director Jack R. Herman (2002) reported how the Council had argued that the publication of scenes from overseas events, which identified individuals, was more acceptable:

The Council has adopted a general approach that there is a difference between photographs of the unidentified victims of foreign carnage and a front-page

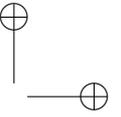


picture of a body in a local community where the victim is well known. (...) It is a matter of balancing the use that can be made of a picture that might be considered offensive against the public interest in having the matter brought to attention (Australian Press Council, cited in Herman, 2002).

Hurst and White (1994: 117) noted Channel Seven's (Melbourne) policy in this regard. The TV station's policy was to not show bodies except when it served the purpose of illustrating the horror of an overseas disaster or war. Hurst and White also noted that pictures of human agony boosted newspaper sales, thus identifying a possible profit motive behind such decisions to publish graphic photos. One could argue that the same would apply also to the use of sensationalist language. If we again relate this to the fact that Australian newspapers are sold at newsagencies, decisions that will add this drama to news coverage can be seen in light of the need to sell papers. German quality newspapers, as they are mainly subscription-based, are not confronted with this problem as strongly as in Australian newspapers.

In Germany, the ethics code (*Pressekodex*) includes a larger number of clauses and is far more prescriptive with many sub-clauses. Of the 16 clauses, four can be applied to the issue of the coverage of death. Firstly, Clause 1 states that the highest precept of the press is the respect for truth, respect for human dignity and truthful reporting (Deutscher Presserat, 2005: 3). Additionally, Clause 8 states that the press needs to respect people's privacy. If private conduct affects wider public interests, however, this could be considered on a case-by-case basis. In sub-clause 8.1 the code states that the naming and visual illustration of victims and culprits were generally not justified in the reporting of accidents, crimes, investigations and court cases. Further, as sub-clause 8.2 states, victims of accidents or crimes have a right to special protection of their identities. Some exceptions could be made for public persons or in special circumstances. This protection of names means that in German newspapers, victims of accidents or crimes are almost always referred to by their first name and the first letter of their surname. In Australia, victims are generally identified by their full name, unless legal restrictions prevent this.

Two further clauses of the *Pressekodex* apply to covering death. Clause 10 states that written or visual publications which could offend moral or religious sensibilities are not allowed. Clause 11 deals with the sensational depiction of violence and brutality. Thus, according to sub-clause 11.1, a depiction is



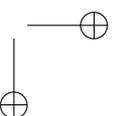
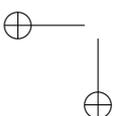
The impact of cultural dimensions on language use in quality newspapers 71

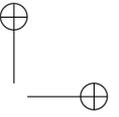
inappropriately sensational when the person is disparaged down to an object, a bare instrument. Further, sub-clause 11.3 states that the reporting on accidents and disasters is to be restricted by the respect for the suffering of victims and the feelings of relatives. Those affected by the event should as a rule not become victims a second time through the nature of the reporting.

As can be seen from the descriptive nature of these clauses, German journalists have a more explicit rule system to work with. According to Hofstede (2001), Germany is a strong uncertainty avoiding country, while Australia is considered as weak uncertainty avoiding. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) have noted that uncertainty avoiding cultures favour precise laws over more general laws. This would also apply more generally to language and its complexity in rules. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) found that most English-speaking countries had weak uncertainty avoidance, while German-speaking countries were medium-high uncertainty avoiding and romance language-speaking countries were generally high uncertainty avoiding. They pointed out that, in high uncertainty avoiding countries, language tends to be governed by more complex rules, explaining in part why German journalists were more concerned about linguistic details.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) have argued that what is ethical depends on a culture's value position. It is clear that Australia and Germany both adhere to Judeo-Christian principles, and in fact overall the codes of conduct do not differ all that much in their basic ideas. But there appear to be small differences in their details. Yet another theme that ran through a number of interviews with German journalists was the consideration of self in such decisions, well expressed by Journalist SZD: "*Would you want to be shown like that in the newspaper? I think it's disfiguring. And that's about respect for the dead, and it doesn't matter where he is from or whether he is culprit or victim.*" These sentiments are important, as they were not as clearly displayed by Australian journalists. Cultural differences in this thinking might well be accountable for these sentiments, in that Australia ranks higher on Hofstede's individualism scale.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) have argued that individualist countries value individual interests over collective interests. While both countries are considered individualist compared to 72 other countries and regions, Australia ranks second only to the US on this scale, scoring 91, while Germany scored 67 and was ranked 18th. Thus, comparatively, Germans could be expected to



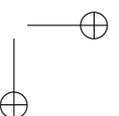
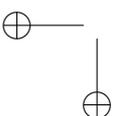


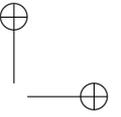
value the benefit to the collective society somewhat more so than Australians. Therefore, German journalists may take into consideration the privacy of the dead from other countries as much as they would for their own compatriots, a sentiment that was expressed in the interviews.

Conclusion

This study has examined in detail how cultural factors impact the language of news when reporting on death. In this context, the work by anthropologist Geert Hofstede (2001) was found to be extremely useful in accounting for differences in journalistic practice in Germany and Australia when it came to the reporting of death. Cultural value dimensions such as individual/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance were particularly useful in helping us account for reasons as to why German journalists from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* were more concerned with specific language use when reporting death, had different attitudes to humour and operated within a more prescriptive ethical framework. On the other hand, Australian journalists from *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* displayed comparatively less concern with certain types of words and found the use of humour when reporting death quite acceptable within certain circumstances. In terms of ethics, these journalists also had a slightly less restrictive framework to deal with, allowing for a wider range of options.

The analysis has shown how anthropological models such as Hofstede's can help in providing a more holistic level of analysis to journalistic practice. It had been noted by Lie (2003) that information flow analyses required an analysis of cultural aspects, on top of economic, political and power analyses. However, studies examining this cultural aspect have been few and far between, which is why this particular study relating to language use can be useful in providing a starting point. It should be noted that the analysis was of an experimental nature and examined a limited sample. Future studies should further investigate how Hofstede's work can be applied to comparing journalistic practice. This study was limited in the sense that it only examined quality newspapers. This study hypothesised that the underlying cultural backgrounds would still apply in the case of tabloids, and while the tabloids would likely be on the more extreme side of using sensational language, there

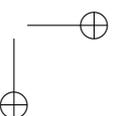
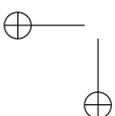




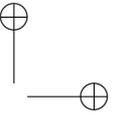
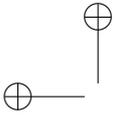
would still be differences along national lines. Future studies would need to investigate this link to determine how much an influence cultural backgrounds are in this context.

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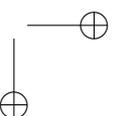
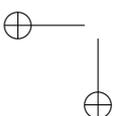


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