

Systemic Linguistic Analysis of a Breaking News English Article and Comparison with a Thematically Similar Authentic Article

Barry Condon

Abstract

This paper applies the principles of systemic linguistic analysis (SLA) to a comparison of the style and communicative functionality of two short texts. The texts cover the same subject matter but differ in that they are aimed at two disparate audiences. The first text was taken from the Breaking News English (BNE) website; the second appeared on the BBC website. The employment of Michael Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) allowed for a deeper analysis of the language than other grammars could provide. While some of the findings were as expected, the analysis unearthed some significant differences in terms of textual, interpersonal and in particular, experiential meanings. The differences in the texts highlighted some of the elements necessary for the successful composition of a simulated authentic material.

Keywords: systemic linguistic analysis, systemic functional grammar, Breaking News English, simulated-authentic texts

Giving students the opportunities to negotiate authentic materials in the ESL classroom will enable students to better manage in real-world situations. To pursue this end, writers such as Grellet (1981, in Hedge, 2001, p. 68) have advocated using unaltered reading comprehension texts. This practice prioritizes authenticity over comprehensibility. To cater to the needs of students at lower levels, *simulated-authentic* materials are often viewed as a common sense approach. Hedge defines these hybrid texts as "authentic to the needs of the learners" (2001, p. 68) and as tools to build confidence as well as providing more immediate educational benefits. Breaking News English (BNE) is a widely used provider of such materials. The website offers "high quality news summaries at various levels of simplification for second language learners" (Mandya, Nomoto & Siddharthan, 2014, p. 2003). BNE articles have undergone various analyses. Most recently, Butterfield (2013) established, by means of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and comparison with a CDA analysis of an authentic text, that BNE

articles, regardless of their value to the learner, should not be treated as authentic news sources.

Using tools based upon Halliday's principles of systemic functional grammar (SFG), this paper will attempt to analyze the linguistic and contextual properties of a BNE text and compare the analysis to that of the authentic source material, an article that appeared on the BBC website. It is hoped that the deep analysis that SFG provides will uncover patterns in the choices made by the respective authors that may point towards a "formula" or "blueprint" that can be employed in the composition of simulated-authentic texts.

Systemic functional grammar (SFG) as pioneered by Michael Halliday is concerned with semantics and functionality. It was developed to better understand the quality, value and meaning of a text. It differs from traditional grammars, described by Matthiessen & Halliday (2014) as "systems of wordings" (p. 2), in that its purview extends beyond the simple understanding of the class of a word, which only allows us to accurately provide a description of it and predict its behavior in different contexts. Understanding its function enables us to understand more about the person who used it and the culture that surrounds both the person and the message (Butt et al., 2000). SFG requires the practitioner to break down texts into clauses, groups and words, analyze what each part represents and discuss how it all relates back to the whole. Ravelli (2005) warns against thinking of functional analysis as merely a labelling for its own sake; "the labels reflect a semantic and grammatical interpretation of a text" (p. 37). She maintains that the complex nature of the analysis is worthwhile as it "enables powerful analyses of language, and a rich account of meaning" (p. 34).

Before analyzing a text, its register must be established. The register of a text is made up of three components: field, tenor, and mode. The field refers to the kind of topic being discussed and in what environment this event is happening. The tenor concerns those who are interacting in the discourse and their relationship to each other. The mode is the term given to the channel or method of communication.

A key aspect of SFG is Halliday's division of the functionality of language into three metafunctions. The experiential or ideational metafunction enables the language user to describe their relationship with and perception of the world around them. It is concerned with events and happenings and who or what is affected by them. In terms of register, the field is most closely linked to this function. The interpersonal

metafunction expresses how we interact with other people; how we express our attitudes and communicate our judgements. It will correspond to the tenor. The textual metafunction is closely related to the mode, and it is concerned with how a text is organized. The communicator will make choices as they go along which will affect how the information is construed in the mind of the receiver. Making the choice to foreground certain information or organize a text in such a way as to place a focus on one particular actor, for example, will have a considerable bearing on its interpretation. To communicate ideas efficiently we must be coherent: “a text lacking organization lacks meaning” (Ravelli 2005, p. 51). Although these distinct metafunctions operate together to produce meaning, they may be studied separately by different means.

Both texts deal with the announcement of the imminent availability of an upgraded automobile and can be found in the appendices. The texts will be examined using the analytical tools that have been developed for each metafunction. The results of each analysis will be summarized, interpreted and compared with those of the other text. At each metafunctional stage, the headlines of both stories will be used to illustrate the analysis being conducted.

Pre-analysis

Before parsing the texts for meaning and function, it may be useful to see and record what is readily apparent. The texts are both taken from online sources. Both of them deal with the same news story, namely the availability of an upgraded version of the car manufacturer Tesla’s latest electric car. Due to its intended audience, the story as it appeared on the BBC website is more grammatically complex than that which appeared on the Breaking News English website. This may indicate that there will be similarities with regard to field and experiential metafunction but differences in aspects relating to tenor and interpersonal metafunction and mode and textual metafunction. The headings of each article represent a convenient starting point.

BNE	Electric Car Does 0 to 100 kph in 2.8 Seconds
BBC	Tesla’s ‘Ludicrous’ Model S is a 2.8-second Monster

They bear some obvious similarities. They are both written in the style typical of news headlines, both refer to the automobile that will form the basis of the respective articles, and both make mention of 2.8 seconds. The first headline puts the 2.8 seconds into context. It is in fact the rate of acceleration of the “electric car”. The BBC headline specifies the automobile model name and describes it as “ludicrous” although the adjective is framed in quotation marks, indicating that there will most likely be another instance of the word within the text or at least some explanation for its use. It does not however use the adjective “electric” to describe the car, nor does it acknowledge the 0 to 100 kph to which the 2.8 seconds is linked. Instead, it refers to the car as a “monster”. More information can be gleaned by viewing the headings through the prism of systemic functional grammar.

Experiential Metafunctional Analysis

First, from an experiential metafunctional viewpoint, we shall focus on the actions, events or Processes and those involved; the Participants. It is also important to take into account other details such as when or why or where the Process took place; the Circumstance. Examining the BNE headline, we can see that there is a verb that denotes a physical action. This is a material Process. The Participant who performs this action is the Actor and is, in this clause, ‘Electric Car’. The other Participant is the acceleration from 0 to 100 kph which may be labelled as the Scope. Additional details, in this case the time taken for the acceleration, are represented by the Circumstance. We can now represent the BNE headline as:

Electric Car	Does	0 to 100 kph	in 2.8 Seconds
Actor	Pro: material	Scope	Circumstance

The BBC headline uses the third person present tense of the verb *to be*, which is not a physical action as was the case in the BNE headline. Instead, the Process is showing how one thing relates to another, which is a relational Process. In such cases, the Participants are labelled as Carriers & Attributes or as Tokens & Values. This headline is clearly communicating an attribute of the first participant:

Tesla's 'Ludicrous' Model S	is	a 2.8-second Monster
Carrier	Pro: relational	Attribute

Comparing the two we can see that the first headline is telling the reader what something did, while the second is communicating what something is.

The second headline omits the Circumstance. This choice of ellipsis may have been made on the basis that the intended reader would probably understand that the 2.8 seconds referred to the time taken to accelerate from 0 to 100 kph and would therefore be somewhat redundant in a headline designed to attract the attention of car aficionados. Although this choice would seem related to the tenor, and therefore the interpersonal metafunction, there is much scope for overlap within a systemic functional grammar analysis.

	Processes	Material (%)	Relational(%)	Verbal (%)	Mental (%)	Existential(%)
BNE	18	5 (28%)	11 (61%)	2 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
BBC	40	20 (50%)	12 (30%)	5 (13%)	2 (5%)	1 (2%)

Table 1: A comparison of Processes in the texts

As shown in Table 1, the BNE article has a more limited variety of Process types than the BBC text. Also, the most common type of Process is relational which would indicate that there is more explaining of terminology and explicit ascribing of attributes than in the BBC article, which seems more dynamic in nature, having a higher proportion of material Processes. The larger variety of Processes equates to a wider array of Participants which may indicate a more challenging read. This difference in complexity of the articles is to be expected due to their respective intended audience. Since both texts are reporting the same news story and both appeared as online articles on current affairs websites, it can be argued that the field of both texts is similar. The differences between the texts will be explained more readily with reference to interpersonal and textual metafunctional analysis.

Interpersonal Metafunctional Analysis

An interpersonal analysis is concerned with the interactions taking place within

the act of communication. This metafunction should be studied in the context of tenor. To understand the tenor of the articles, it may be instructive to examine the websites on which they were posted. The Breaking News English website is not a conventional news source. The author posts an article based on current events several times a week. The end users of the articles are generally intermediate level ESL students and the language used is tailored accordingly. Unfortunately, there are no figures available for how many students use the website itself or use the articles and activities in a classroom setting. The BBC article first appeared on the BBC owned www.topgear.com website before being adapted for use on the main site. The core audience will most likely be similar to that of the television show that lends its name to the site; males between 18 and 54 years of age (“The world’s favorite digital motoring platform,” 2017) who are interested in cars.

While language is limitless in its potential utterances, at its most basic level, it fulfills four roles; the giving or asking for information or the giving or asking for goods or services (Thompson 2004). These roles are represented by statements, questions, offers and commands. Whether we are negotiating, arguing, empathizing, telling a joke or communicating with one another for any other reason, our utterances will fall into at least one of these categories.

	Give	Demand
Information	statement	question
Goods & services	offer	command

Table 2: The functions of language

News articles will tend to favor statements and use a declarative mood. Their function is to convey information. Other written media, for example, opinion pieces, blogs or text commentary on a live event may well issue commands, ask for information or make other requests but “hard” news stories will rarely stray from the standard. While the BNE text is not to be considered as hard news, it does mirror the typical format of a hard news article. Every sentence is declarative in mood and forms a statement. Examining our headings once again, we can see some of the elements that make up an interpersonal metafunctional analysis.

Electric car	does	0 to 100 kph	in 2.8 seconds
Subject	Finite [present] +	Predicator	Adjunct
Mood Block	Residue		

from the BNE text

Tesla's 'Ludicrous' Model S	is	a2.8-second Monster
Subject	Finite [present] +	Predicator
Mood Block	Residue	

from the BBC text

The clauses of the BNE text follow the same pattern: subject ^ finite ^ residue whereas there is some more variety in the BBC article. There is also a higher incidence of modality in the BBC article which spends more time speculating on the future of Tesla, using more modal verbs of probability than the BNE text. Moreover, the BBC story has a less formal register. It seems more similar in tone to a blog than a hard news article, yet it is still reporting factual matters and thus predominantly uses the typical declarative statements a reader would expect to see in a hard news piece. While there is still no scope for issuing commands or requesting goods/services, the writer does use the interrogative mood several times and asks some rhetorical questions which are designed to engage the reader. The following extract is representative of the tone and also of the presupposition of the reader's opinions:

“Yes, we agree electric cars have their limitations, in terms of emotional impact as well as infrastructure, but are you really going to argue that the Ludicrous Tesla isn't incredibly impressive?”

It is as if the reader has voiced their reservations about the electric car and the writer and his or her team has been listening. This pseudo-interactivity engages the reader and make the relationship between reader and writer that much closer as if they are similarly minded people having a shared experience. In fact, if the reader shares any of these views they are likely to feel satisfaction that someone of good standing on the topic has become their ally. Moreover, there is a marked lack of formality in the BBC article. A standalone expression like “Sheesh” further emphasizes

the comfortable relationship that the writer desires. Softeners such as “well,” “actually” and “yes” are used to promote a friendlier tone. The writer uses contractions throughout the text — a practice that would not be permitted in a hard news setting and indeed is absent in the BNE article. There is no friendly language to draw the reader closer though this impersonal tone should not be construed as negative. The roles here are more similar to teacher and student than two friends exchanging opinions about a new car. The distance that is implied by the language choices increases the perception of objectivity. Nevertheless, upon reading the BNE text, the reader may extrapolate that the writer had at least some measure of admiration for the Model S car. He describes the original model as being “incredibly” fast and excitedly likens the feeling of rapid acceleration to that felt while falling from a plane. This sentiment is more readily apparent in the analysis of the BBC text. The writer describes the speed of the Tesla automobile as “fairly brisk” which may not seem as powerful an adjectival phrase as “incredibly fast” but is in fact a deliberate understatement that underlines its great speed. The writer again emphasizes the power of the car by drawing an incongruous comparison to a “family saloon crying out for a power boost”. In the next sentence the writer makes offhand reference to the Tesla founder’s space rockets’ superior acceleration being the driving motivating factor behind the upgrade. This informal style of description continues throughout the text: “beefy” battery, “Nürburgring-crushing Seat Leon Cupra 280,” “crackers” and “bonkers” as synonyms for “impressive”. It is possible to infer that the writer of the BBC text holds the founder of Tesla, Elon Musk, in high regard. He is referred to as being “yet again, one step ahead” and somewhat familiarly, as “the billionaire.” The language in the BNE article is more measured. The writer avoids making judgements, favorable or otherwise, about Musk in his appraisal, referring to him in neutral tones and in one instance (BNE 12), mistakenly as Tesla. The BBC text presupposes a certain level of understanding of the technological terminology being used and it does not spend any time giving explanations. The BNE article is largely free of jargon, presumably to facilitate comprehension among its intended audience.

One final note on the choices made in the BBC article relates to the readership’s knowledge of popular culture. It could be argued that “streaks of flames” (BNE 15) is a reference to a well-known time-travel film. Perhaps slightly less likely is the association of “you know it makes sense” (BBC 21) with a catchphrase from a popular British

sitcom of the 80s and 90s. These are choices that are unavailable to the writer of the BNE article which must remain culturally neutral for the most part lest it disengage the students reading the article.

Textual Metafunctional Analysis

The final part of the linguistic analysis relates to the textual metafunction. This may be analyzed through examination of the Theme. The Theme is the starting point of the clause. It is the first mentioned experiential element: Process, Participant or Circumstance. The remainder is labelled as the Rheme. The choices made in this regard will affect the coherence of the text. The writer may wish to foreground particular actors or events and may do so by starting off with the appropriate Theme. Once again, we can use the headings of the texts to demonstrate the analysis:

Electric Car	Does 0 to 100 kph in 2.8 Seconds
Theme	Rheme

BNE

Tesla's 'Ludicrous' Model S	is a 2.8-second Monster
Theme	Rheme

BBC

Whether or not the Theme is the subject of the verbal group will determine its marked/unmarked status. If the Theme appears first in the clause it is branded as the topical theme. If however, there are other words that come before the Theme, it will be considered either an interpersonal theme or a textual theme.

2	In fact,	with a verified 0-62 mph time of 3.2 seconds in 'Insane Mode',	it [i]s hardly the sort of family saloon crying out for a power boost.
	Interpersonal	Marked Theme	Rheme

from the BBC text

There are six instances of "you" as Theme in the BBC text. Furthermore, there

are eight examples of interpersonal Themes. The frequency with which the pronoun *you* is used serves to personalize the text. This tallies with the friendly and conversational tone that the writer has adopted. The final Theme is “we” which has the effect of concluding the discourse with a possible sense of unity. The writer has positioned himself with us, the readers, and by doing so, may have made it more difficult for us to disagree with the stance that he has taken. In contrast, there are no interpersonal Themes to be found in the BNE text. Sixteen Themes from the eighteen contained in the text refer to, or are, technical terms. The Themes are all unmarked, hinting at a conventional subject ^ verb ^ object style.

12	The engineers	managed to increase the battery power by ten per cent, resulting in the extra acceleration
	Theme	Rheme

from the BNE text

Elon Musk is foregrounded as Theme five times while Tesla, the company, is twice positioned as such. Somewhat surprisingly, considering it forms the basis for the article, the Model S P85D is only once chosen for the role. This is in contrast with the BNE article in which it is Thematically placed five times. The graded nature of the BNE text is once again apparent in the lack of marked Themes. The BBC text in comparison has five, indicating more complex structures that may pose challenges to an intermediate learner of English as a second language. The predictable nature of the BNE article is integral to its comprehensibility. The texts at Breaking News English adhere to a fixed template. They are between 250 and 280 words in length, and are divided into two paragraphs. The first paragraph deals with the news story while the second will give further details about the story, usually through quotes from an individual that is well placed to give extra information or opinions.

Just as the first element in the clause becomes the Theme, the first clause in the paragraph sets out the writer’s thematic stall (and by extension, the first paragraph will also determine the theme of the article or essay). This allows us, as readers, to check for likely coherence before reading through the entire text. Applying the test to the first sentences from each article:

- BNE 1 A new, upgraded version of an electric car from Tesla Motors is capable of going from 0 to 100 kph in just 2.8 seconds.
- BBC 1 If you've watched any You Tube drag races lately, or read our Speed Week head-to-head between the Tesla Model S P85D and the BMW i8, you'll be aware that the range-topping electric Tesla is fairly brisk.

It is clear which article will be organized in a more coherent way. This will assist the ESL student in their understanding of the text. However, it would be wrong to dismiss the BBC article as incoherent based solely on this simple test. The article is aimed at a fluent English speaking audience who do not require such a rigid format. The reader merely needs to finish the first sentence to discover the topic of the text. A further point to consider is that the paragraph is not necessarily the basic unit of news articles any more. News stories are frequently written in pars which can be made up of only one or two sentences. The BBC article is an example of this modern style of journalism.

Conclusion

Systemic functional analysis yields much information that would remain hidden otherwise. At the outset, by comparing the two texts purely in terms of field, tenor and mode, the author had expected the experiential metafunctional analysis to be quite similar while anticipating the comparison of interpersonal and textual metafunctions to yield more differences. However more disparities than had been predicted were demonstrated by the experiential analysis. While further analyses of a larger number of articles would be required to provide a specific "formula," or "blueprint," the differences in the texts uncovered by the systemic linguistic analyses highlight many elements that are required for the successful composition of simulated-authentic materials.

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Appendix A - BNE article

<http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/1507/150721-electric-car.html>

Sean Banville - 7/21/2015

Electric car does 0 to 100 kph in 2.8 seconds

1. A new, upgraded version of an electric car from Tesla Motors is capable of going from 0 to 100 kph in just 2.8 seconds.
2. The original 691 horsepower Tesla Model S P85D was already incredibly fast.
3. It even had a function called Insane Mode, which meant the car could get from 0-100 kph in 3.2 seconds.
4. The upgrade is called Ludicrous Mode and will take the horsepower up to 762, thus providing the extra power to get to 100 kph in less than three seconds.

5. This is close to the acceleration of a Porsche 911 Turbo S supercar.
6. That kind of horsepower means the car can accelerate at a force of 1.1G.
7. This means the acceleration will make the driver feel that he or she is going faster than the speed of falling out of an airplane.
8. Tesla CEO Elon Musk explained that the new improvement in acceleration came from research into an advanced battery.
9. Engineers were working on a new power train for its cars.
10. A power train is the system that delivers the power from the engine to the wheels.
11. The engineers managed to increase the battery power by ten per cent, resulting in the extra acceleration.
12. Tesla said: “Unlike a gasoline internal combustion engine with hundreds of moving parts, Tesla electric motors have only one moving piece: the rotor.
13. As a result, Model S acceleration is instantaneous, silent and smooth.”
14. The Tesla S P85D car is priced at \$87,500 as a basic model; the “ludicrous” upgrade will be an extra \$13,000.

261 words

Appendix B - BBC article

<http://www.bbc.com/autos/story/20150720-teslas-28-second-model-s-the-p85d-ludicrous>
By Ollie Kew 7/20/2015

Tesla's 'Ludicrous' Model S is a 2.8-second monster

1. If you've watched any YouTube drag races lately, or read our Speed Week head-to-head between the Tesla Model S P85D and the BMW i8, you'll be aware that the range-topping electric Tesla is fairly brisk.
2. In fact, with a verified 0-62mph time of 3.2 seconds in 'Insane Mode', it's hardly the sort of family saloon crying out for a power boost.
3. But the P85D just got faster anyway.
4. Clearly disappointed that his space rockets accelerate faster than his cars, Tesla founder Elon Musk has announced a new \$13,000 option package for the 682bhp Model S.
5. Complete with a beefy new 90 kWh battery pack, the tweak unlocks 'Ludicrous

Mode’.

6. No joke — that’s its official name.
7. And the numbers are indeed crackers.
8. Musk claims the flagship Tesla’s front motor now develops 259bhp — pretty much the same as the output of the petrol engine from the Nürburgring-crushing Seat Leon Cupra 280.
9. But pushing from the Model S’s rear is another e-motor, creating a Mercedes C63-sized 503bhp.
10. That’s 762bhp in total, on tap from standstill, and without a single upgrade to the motors themselves.
11. How?
12. Well, the limiting factors in the Tesla’s already bonkers performance were its poor fuses, which simply couldn’t cope with the monster battery pack lobbing full amperage at the motors all at once.
13. So Tesla’s come up with a new ‘intelligent fuse’ — with its own little battery — which can adapt its resistance tolerance every millisecond, depending how heavy the driver’s right foot is.
14. In Ludicrous Mode, that equates to 0-60mph in a fuss-free, gear change-free 2.8 seconds.
15. And, presumably, streaks of flames left in the road behind you.
16. The upgraded P85D will also run the quarter-mile sprint within a second of a Porsche 918 Spyder, at 10.9 seconds, and hit 155mph 10-percent faster than the hardly tardy standard car.
17. Musk also confirmed this powertrain will find its way into the Model X, Tesla’s upcoming seven-seat SUV.
18. Sheesh.
19. Yes, we agree electric cars have their limitations, in terms of emotional impact as well as infrastructure, but are you really going to argue that the Ludicrous Tesla isn’t incredibly impressive?
20. Incidentally, if you’ve already bought a Model S P85D with just 682bhp, Tesla will offer the upgrade package to you at half price for the next six months.
21. You know it makes sense.
22. It leaves us wondering what comes next for Tesla.

23. Bizarre Mode?
24. Singularity Generator?
25. A test track built around the Large Hadron Collider?
26. Actually, Musk is, yet again, one step ahead.
27. In a statement, the billionaire hinted: “There is of course only one thing beyond ludicrous, but that speed is reserved for the next generation Roadster in 4 years: maximum plaid.”
28. That’s an obscure reference to the ultimate speed in the universe, according to 1987 sci-fi spoof Spaceballs.
29. Geeky movies aside, will human beings actually be able to cope with the sheer pace of the next Tesla Roadster?
30. We’ll find out in 2019..

505 words