

Using Corpus Analysis to Ascertain Positioning of Argument in a Media Text

Kieran O'Halloran¹

Abstract

This presentation starts by examining an argument in a media text. The argument which I consider comes from the popular UK tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, on the expansion of the European Union, on 1st May 2004, to include 10 new countries. The argument concludes that it is understandable that large numbers of Eastern European migrants, from new accession countries, should want to come to Britain given open access to jobs, the large number of vacancies and the attraction of a benefit system if migrants pay tax and national insurance. Through corpus-informed analysis, I then go on to indicate how target readers have been positioned to understand the argument differently due to regular exposure to topoi (patterns of inference) in relevant previous stories from the same newspaper.

I draw on a 30, 000 word corpus of *Sun* texts on the subject of the EU expansion and migration in the 6 weeks leading up to 1st May, that is, during the time that *The Sun* began to regularly inform its readers of the 1st May accession date. I employ the corpus analysis software, Wordsmith Tools 4.0, and a British National Corpus reference corpus, BNC-baby (4 million words), to help locate regular topoi in the *Sun* corpus. An important concept in the presentation is 'keywords', words which show up more frequently in a corpus than in a reference corpus. By locating common keywords and keyword linkages across the *Sun* corpus, I ascertain how regular topoi accompany similar lexicogrammatical patterns which, in turn, can function as cues of these topoi in subsequent news texts. Importantly, the keyword method of analysis constrains arbitrary analysis and thus the choice of what are regarded as topoi. I also employ the 45 million word *Sun* corpus from The Bank of English to see whether less specific but related topoi had been built up in preceding years.

¹ Open University, UK
e-mail: k.a.ohalloran@open.ac.uk

Examining the argument in the Sun 1st May text only, it can be seen to contain an enthymeme (a suppressed premise), one which is readily recoverable. However, from the corpus analysis, I will show that, if a reader had been regularly exposed to the topoi identified, the following can take place: the suppressed nature of the premise can allow the topoi to operate in place of the enthymeme being realized, with the effect that the reader is positioned into making a pernicious kind of argument coherence where Eastern European migrants would be a threat to Britain's lifestyle and welfare system. This is despite the fact that this information is not directly inscribed in the 1st May argument.