

Literature review

There are considerable differences between written and spoken discourse (Johnstone, 2008; Chafe & Danielewicz, 1987), but few studies have examined the differences between the written discourse used in newspapers and written and spoken discourse in general. Written discourse tends to incorporate more varied vocabulary, as well as more traditional or standard words than spoken discourse. Written discourse also features specific references, avoids the use of hedging, and uses few (if any) colloquialisms. Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) also found that written discourse rarely uses contractions except in quoted conversations. In their examination of academic writing, Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) concluded that academic writers, specifically college professors, produce works that are “maximally literary, with almost no colloquial items or contractions” (p. 111). However, Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) only examined letter writing and academic writing; they did not study news writing. Johnstone (2008) discusses the works of van Dijk, who *did* examine news articles, but he focused on their structure rather than the written discourse used by journalists.

Chafe and Danielewicz’s (1987) conclusion that written discourse uses fewer instances of contractions than spoken discourse is supported by textbooks and style guides designed to teach journalists what is considered appropriate in news articles. Pape and Featherstone (2005) advise students to avoid contractions at all costs; the only exception is when quoting direct speech. Kershner (2009) agrees: “In formal writing it is generally better to spell out *it is* [and other contractions]” than to use the shortened forms (p. 34). Chovanec (2003) is one of the few dissenters on this topic. His research indicates that newspapers are increasingly incorporating features of spoken discourse, including the use of contractions, into the written discourse they publish. Similarly, Cooke (2005) found that over the past 40 years, there has been an ongoing “media convergence” as print, television, and internet media have influenced the type of

discourse used by each of these sources of information. Her research indicates that print media have incorporated more features of spoken discourse, such as contractions, due to the expansion of television news coverage.

The Associated Press Stylebook (2009), which is considered the Bible of news writing style, includes an entry on contractions that echoes the above “contractions are bad” statements. Contractions, the stylebook states, are a sign of informal writing. However, the AP does not explicitly forbid their use, offering instead a suggestion to “Avoid excessive use of contractions” (p. 68). Having worked as a professional journalist, however, I know from firsthand experience that contractions are often used in newspaper articles, including stories considered “hard news” rather than “soft features.” This small-scale discourse analysis project examines the use of contractions by the AP and reporters in news articles published five consecutive Sundays at a small daily newspaper.

Methods

For this project, I analyzed news articles published in the Danville Register & Bee (R&B), the small daily newspaper covering my hometown of Danville, Va. This project focuses on three types of news stories printed in Sunday editions in January 2011: articles written by R&B staff members; wire articles written by different uncredited reporters from The Associated Press; and articles written by staff members at The News & Advance (Lynchburg, Va.) and The Mooresville Tribune (Mooresville, N.C.). These three papers are all owned by the same parent company, Media General News Service, a media conglomerate that owns newspapers and television stations in Virginia, North Carolina and nine other states. Media General properties share news stories among themselves in a “mini-wire” service modeled on the AP wire. The

R&B has a paid Sunday circulation of just over 19,000; several thousand additional copies are printed for distribution in paper boxes and for sale in stores.

My first step was to acquire print copies of the R&B, which was easy to accomplish because my parents are subscribers. Next, I separated the sections of the newspapers, keeping the A section and recycling the rest. The A section contains the front page of the paper and generally includes the most important news stories. Front page news articles can be local, national or global in scope. (Other sections of the R&B are devoted to regional news, features, sports, and classified ads.) I decided to study the front page stories because the 1A page is the most viewed; it's the page people see when they first pick up a copy of a newspaper. The Sunday editions examined in this project are from January 2, 9, 16, 23, and 30. Each 1A uses a similar design, and each front page contains at least one locally created story.

Using the print versions of the newspaper as my guide, I searched the R&B's web site <http://www.godanriver.com> for online versions of the same stories featured on 1A. I was able to find digital versions of all the stories from January 2011's 1A pages, which made searching for uses of contractions considerably easier. Once I found electronic copies of the news stories written by R&B reporters, I conducted Google searches to find online versions of the AP stories. I also used Google to search for digital versions of the three Media General stories included in this analysis. I copied and pasted the text of all the articles into Microsoft Word documents in order to easily determine word count and search for the use of apostrophe, which is the punctuation mark used to create contractions.

I separated the articles into two different Word documents based on the origin of the stories. One document contains the R&B stories as well as the articles from Lynchburg and Mooresville. I had originally omitted the Media General stories, but I decided to add these articles to the corpus in order to surpass the 5,000 word mark. The other Word document

contains AP stories and falls under the 5,000 word minimum. However, there were no other AP stories used on the 1A pages of the R&B in January 2011, so rather than extend my search into February 2011, I decided to accept the 4,763 word count as sufficient since I was able to find many instances of contractions within that word count.

Once I had the text collected, I printed all the articles and read them to manually search for uses of apostrophes. I underlined instances of apostrophes used in possessive forms and circled instances used in contractions. I included contractions that were in the normal text of the article and in direct quotations. After my original count, I created a table to list my findings; this information is included in the results section below. To verify my results, I used Word's find-and-replace feature to replace all apostrophes in my electronic documents with a triangle symbol (▼). Then I read the articles on the computer screen, changing the triangle symbol back to an apostrophe when it was used in a possessive. Now that all the contractions were clearly marked with a triangle symbol, I printed the two Word documents again and did a second manual check for contractions. My data matched my original chart, so I went back to the electronic copies and used Word's find feature again. This time, I searched for each of the contractions I had listed on my data chart. I found a few mistakes, so I manually checked the articles again and corrected any errors.

Results and discussion

I discovered the following 26 contractions used in both locally created and AP news articles. I have listed the contractions alphabetically and indicated where the word was found. I divided the list of contractions between locally created articles (news reports written by R&B or Media General staff members) and articles created by an AP writer. I then identified whether the

contraction was used by the article's author or included in a direct quotation. The following table shows my results:

Contraction	Instances in locally created articles	Instances in quotes in locally created articles	Instances in Associated Press articles	Instances in quotes in Associated Press articles	Subtotal: Uses by article authors	Subtotal: Uses in reported speech	Total uses
aren't	2			1	2	1	3
can't		1		3		4	4
couldn't	1	1			1	1	2
didn't	2	2	2		4	2	6
doesn't	2		2		4		4
don't		3	1	3	1	6	7
hadn't	1		1		2		2
hasn't	1				1		1
haven't		1				1	1
he'd (had)			2		1		2
he'll	1				1		1
he's				1		1	1
here's (is)			1		1		1
I'm		4				4	4
I've		2				2	2
it's (it is)	2	8	4	3	6	11	17
that's (is)			2	1	2	1	3
they'd (would)		1		1		2	2
they've	1				1		1
wasn't			1		1		1
we're (are)		2				2	2
we've		2				2	2
what's (is)				2		2	2
who's (is)				1		1	1
wouldn't		1		1		2	2
you'll		1				1	1

Based on my data, the most commonly used contraction is “it’s,” which was used a total of 17 times. Eleven of these instances occurred in reported speech where speakers are quoted directly. For example, the main story for January 16 quoted Del. Danny Marshall as saying, “We need to get this fixed; it’s gambling and gambling in Virginia is illegal.” The R&B also used a partial quote, “It’s gambling,” as the headline for this story. Other direct quotes include this example from January 9: “Stanley agrees, noting, ‘Uranium was banned for a reason; it’s unsafe.’” AP writers also reported the use of “it’s,” particularly in partial quotes such as, “Judge Roll told the Post in May 2009 that ‘any judge who goes through this knows it’s a stressful situation’ and that he and his family were grateful for the protection.”

Both reporters for the R&B and the AP used “it’s” in their articles outside of direct quotes, which is contrary to what AP style and general news writing guidelines suggest. The two uses of “it’s” in the R&B are from the same article: “It’s hard to take the state’s word for it that the mill would protect the environment, she said,” and “VUI may visit the Piñon Ridge Mill site when it’s constructed, Wales said, adding the company would search for the best technology in the world for its mill, he added.” AP writers used “it’s” twice as often as part of their articles. An example is found in the lead sentence to a January 2 story about the rising national debt: “Two early showdowns on spending and debt will signal whether the new Congress can find common ground despite its partisan divisions or whether it’s destined for gridlock and brinkmanship that could threaten the nation’s economic health.”

The next most commonly used contraction in the articles I examined is “don’t.” The shortened form of “do not” appeared six times in reported speech but only once in the written discourse of an AP reporter; no R&B or Media General reporters used “don’t.” In an AP article about the national debt, the author wrote, “That’s what happened in 1995, and many Republicans don’t want a repeat.” Examples of quotations using “don’t” include, “I don’t envy John

Boehner,' said David DiMartino, a Democratic consultant and former Senate aide," from the same AP article about the debt, and "You'll have your dedicated political voters, but a lot of people don't seem to realize there is an election," from an R&B article about a special January election to fill a recently vacant state Senate seat.

Another commonly used contraction was "didn't," which was used twice each by reporters from the R&B and the AP, as well as twice in reported speech in R&B articles. AP writers used "didn't" in this sample from an article about Jamestown, Va., "Settlers, Kelso said, were under 'tremendous pressure' to give investors the instant gratification they needed because 'they put so much money into it,' and didn't want to lose their lifeline to England," and this sample from an article about the man accused of shooting an Arizona congresswoman, "When his cell phone rang, the incoming number was listed as blocked, so he didn't answer." Reporters with the R&B or Media General used "didn't" in stories about uranium mining and about a military veteran: "The alliance hired independent scientists and an economics professor to assess the mill's socioeconomic impacts, but the state didn't consider that analysis, she said;" "Anderson said her son didn't tell her all of the details of the ambush."

The use of contractions seems common among reporters who work for small, local newspapers and reporters whose articles are transmitted over the AP wire service. I found 75 examples of contractions and 26 different contracted forms. My results are contrary to what Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) found about the use of contractions in academic writing. However, since they did not study news writing, it is difficult to generalize about the use of contractions I found in my corpus. It is possible, nonetheless, to describe trends among the articles and among the different authors. In all, I examined 10 locally produced articles written by six different reporters: Bozick wrote three articles; Thibodeau wrote three articles; and Doane, Dumond, Fuller and Reed each wrote one article.

Two of the R&B reporters used contractions the most. Bozick had the most widespread use of contractions in her written discourse. Two of her articles had one instance each of a contraction, but the third featured six examples of five different contractions. This same article only featured two examples of contractions used in reported speech. Thibodeau, another R&B reporter, used one contraction in two of her articles but zero contractions in the third. Doane, also from the R&B, did not use any contractions, but I only had one example of his written discourse to analyze. The three Media General reporters differed in their use of contractions. Dumond and Reed both work for The News & Advance in Lynchburg. I only had one sample text from each of them; Dumond used a single contraction, and Reed did not use any. Finally, the article by The Mooresville Tribune writer Fuller included two contractions, but as with the other Media General stories, I only had one sample of her written discourse. The only reporter who consistently used contractions in all her articles was Bozick from the R&B.

Conclusion

Are the examples of contractions I found indicative of a general trend in news writing, or are they simply stylistic choices made by individual reporters? I am unable to conclusively determine an answer to these questions, but there is certainly a need for more study into the differences between news writing and traditional written discourse. More research is needed to determine what percentage of newspapers are strictly following the guidelines established by the AP about avoiding the use of contractions. Future studies could also examine journalism education programs to see if teachers are instructing students to spell out words that are generally contracted in spoken discourse. A more in-depth discourse analysis could also compare the written discourse of male and female reporters. Finally, a future study could investigate how readers respond to the use of contractions in modern news writing.

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