An Analysis of Dialogic Positioning in Online Commentaries

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Abstract. The commentary as a journalistic genre that presents and comments on current events is characterized by intersubjective positioning, whereby the author constructs meaning, seeking alignment or, on the contrary, expressing disalignment with a putative audience. In line with the appraisal theory as developed by Martin and White (2005), which follows the Bakhtian dialogic perspective, according to which utterances and propositions are intersubjectively charged, the paper aims to describe the linguistic means of engagement, one of the central elements of this theory. Engagement is concerned with how the author expresses authorial voice and how s/he negotiates meaning with the readers, opening up (dialogic expansion) or, on the contrary, closing the dialogic space (dialogic contraction). In this sense, the linguistic means of engagement, such as modality, hedging and boosting devices, evidentiality, are understood to transcend the functions attributed to them within a truth-conditional framework, namely epistemic status and reliability of knowledge, and are seen as means by which the author entertains or rejects alternative voices and opinions. Taking this into consideration, the paper intends to analyse a few selected commentaries on the war situation in Ukraine found on the online platform of The Rand Corporation, a global policy think tank that performs research and conducts evaluations of various topics. It analyses the linguistic means of dialogic positioning, focusing on how the authors negotiate the dialogic space with the audience; while presumably all forms of intersubjective positioning can be found in the texts, it is expected that certain forms of engagement will outnumber others. As all commentaries can be found on the website of the above mentioned corporation, the question also arises as to what extent commentaries show similarity with respect to engagement, thereby expressing, albeit indirectly, a certain standpoint with respect to the Ukrainian warfare.

Keywords: commentary, engagement, dialogic positioning, corpus
1. Introduction

Commentaries are an integral part not only of newspapers but also of various news and research platforms that present and analyse specific topics. They are characterized by intersubjective positioning, the presence of linguistic devices by which the author takes a stance and seeks alignment with the points of view of a putative audience. While subjective positioning is traditionally captured under epistemic modality, which reflects the speaker’s assessment of the truth value of the proposition, intersubjectivity takes a wider perspective, accepting or, on the contrary, playing down other viewpoints (Defrancq and De Clerck 2009). The mechanisms by which the author expresses an attitude towards propositions can be described by the dialogistic positioning of engagement, a central term in appraisal theory, developed in the 1990s and 2000s from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Wei et al. 2015). Based on the appraisal theory put forward by Martin and White (2005), the paper analyses the linguistic means of engagement, focusing on the expressions of dialogic expansion and dialogic contraction in commentaries. More specifically, the paper examines a few selected commentaries on the situation in Ukraine that appeared on the website of the Rand research organization between 29 July and 28 November 2022.

The question that the paper seeks an answer to is how intersubjective meaning is expressed in the commentaries and to what extent dialogic expansion and dialogic contraction are negotiated throughout the texts. Analysing Thai online commentaries, Arunsirot (2012: 88) finds that stances of appraisal can be expressed not only by words and phrases but also clauses and even an entire paragraph. While the study does not analyse engagement, concentrating only on attitude and force: the other dimensions of appraisal, Arunsirot (2012) points out certain characteristics of Thai commentaries such as the increased use of metaphors as a way to create solidarity with the reader, and also the presence of quantification and intensification, strategies that strengthen rather than weaken evaluative meanings. At the same time, Arunsirot (2012) makes the observation that appraisal needs to be regarded as a social construct, rather than be universally valid, as different cultures might interpret a specific text differently even in terms of attitude (positive or negative).

2. Appraisal theory. The category of engagement

Bakhtin (1981: 259) states that “... verbal discourse is a social phenomenon – social through its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” (as cited by Bailey 2007). Inspired by Bakhtin’s dialogic perspective, which sees each verbal interaction as
An Analysis of Dialogic Positioning in Online Commentaries

dialogic, Martin and White (2005) analyse discourse from a dialogic perspective. The appraisal theory put forward by them offers an intersubjective perspective on evaluation that goes beyond grammatical and lexical codification and patterning. Appraisal is understood as a result of the negotiation of meaning between real or potential interlocutors (the author/speaker and the audience), and it operates with three semantic domains: attitude, engagement, and graduation. These domains are interconnected, expressed explicitly or implicitly in a text and can be divided into several subcategories such as affect (an emotional reaction to state of affairs), appreciation (assessment of situations), judgement (assessment of human behaviour), and also force and focus (making the message more or less intense and/or modifying the focal point of the discussion). Regarding the domain of engagement, verbal interactions can be seen either as monoglossic (not allowing for dialogic alternatives) or as heteroglossic (engaging with dialogic alternatives). Statements are monoglossic when they are regarded as describing consensual knowledge or facts (White 2003) and are often expressed by bare assertions, claims without supporting evidence. Heteroglossic viewpoint, on the contrary, shows an indirect interaction with the audience, either trying to assert a point of view and thereby concur with that of the imaginary readers (dialogic contraction) or expressing an idea in a way that is open to alternative voices and opinions (dialogic expansion). The two categories can be further divided into various subcategories: thus, dialogic contraction consists of proclaim (indicating something clearly) and disclaim (refusing to acknowledge something) and includes the elements of pronounce, concur, and endorse as well as deny and counter (consider Table 1 with the various forms of dialogic contractions summarized.) These categories are signalled, among others, by verbs such as contend, affirm, state, declare, adverbial phrases and locutions like of course, indeed, naturally, obviously, as you know, needless to say, and it goes without saying, convincingly argued, compellingly propounded, successfully explained, etc.

Table 1. Dialogic contraction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogic contraction</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proclaim</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concur: The Premier, of course, wants us to think what a fine anti-racist fellow he is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronounce: I would contend that this enviable level of tolerance is not the result of direct government laws or interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endorse: As Hastie (an Englishman of their own political persuasion) so compellingly argued, “In any society racism will increase in direct proportion to the number of people who are given well-paid and prestigious positions to discover it.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dialogic contraction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disclaim</th>
<th>New or tougher legislation is not going to solve the problem.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deny:</td>
<td>The Premier has stated that tougher anti-racial hatred laws are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter:</td>
<td>on the “drawing board”. But we already possess laws against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>threatening behaviour and incitement to violence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dialogic expansion also comprises two types: entertain (the author making an assumption and leaving it open) and attribute (the assumption is attributed to an external point of view). Entertain is often expressed by first-person CTPs (complement-taking predicates such as I believe that...), especially the ones that lack commitment, but also modal auxiliaries such as may, might, can, could, modal adverbs such as perhaps, maybe, probably, and meanings of evidence and appearance such as it seems, apparently, reportedly, in our judgement, it’s possible that, it’s probable that, non-rhetorical questions (as in example 1) below) that leave a matter open for interpretation, etc. (Table 2 gives an overview of the elements of dialogic expansion). An interesting case within this category is the CTP construction I think..., which can express dialogic expansion but also dialogic contraction, depending on the context (White and Motoki 2006, Pöldvere et al. 2016, Aijmer 1997). Thus, while example 2) merely expresses a point of view and so is an example of dialogic expansion, example 3) with an accented “do” gains the force of a conviction and can be interpreted as a form of dialogic contraction.

1) Does Premier Peter Beattie want us to think what a fine anti-racist fellow he is? (White 2003: 265)

2) Everybody wants a scalp and it’s good fun, it’s good sport but I think that the underlying issue is much more serious […] (White and Motoki 2006: 7).

3) I think, some people do want companionship (White and Motoki 2006: 10).

The other subcategory of dialogic expansion is attribute, where the author shows the viewpoint of an external voice, which is seen as one possible, contingent, and individual position. An instance of this is example 4), where the proposition is interpreted as one specific viewpoint.

4) A former Orthodox priest named Ivan Okhlobystin proclaimed that the “special military operation” should, in fact, be called a “holy war” (www.rand.org).
Table 2. Dialogic expansion

| Entertain | If we are really witnessing an increase in racial intolerance; perhaps it is time to ask whether the whole anti-racist apparatus that has grown up in the past couple of decades is counter-productive. |
| Attribute | Acknowledge: The Premier has stated that tougher anti-racial hatred laws are on ‘drawing board.’ |
| Distance  | The Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commissioner and her comrades claim... |

Source: White 2003: 274

3. Journalistic commentaries

Commentary journalism is a type of opinion-based journalism that includes not only the presentation of facts but also the assessment and analysis of current events, providing a forum for various perspectives and opinions. News commentaries are “a tool of explanation and interpretation” (Topchii 2020: 1420), having “the function of contributing to the formulation of certain ‘preferred’ viewpoints about the world” (Lavid et al. 2012: 5). They are considered to be analytical, evaluative, and persuasive and are often characterized by a distinctive and sometimes authoritative voice (Lavid et al. 2012, Marín Arrese and Núñez-Perucha 2006).

The objective of commentaries is to address and discuss a certain issue, showing possible consequences of actions and events and predicting their outcome. Commentary journalism is characterized by intersubjective positioning expressed by the author’s attitude towards a particular matter (through the illocutionary force of utterances) and the potential audience (Šandová 2015). Through the wordings they choose, including markers of intersubjective positioning, such as means of modality, modal verbs and adverbs, cognitive verbs, hedging and boosting devices, or evidentiality, authors create personae or identities throughout the text through which they negotiate a dialogic space with the imaginary/created reader (Martin and White 2005: 1). Showing similarities to news reports, the two genres are also different: while news reports are objective and use neutral language in presenting various opinions and sources (White 1998), commentaries often contribute to the formulation of a preferred viewpoint. The two genres are also different with respect to thematic roles as Lavid et al. (2012) note, more specifically the thematic head that Lavid et al. define as “the first nuclear experiential constituent within the main clause” (2012: 9) expressed by the subject or the complement in the preverbal position of the main clause and carrying experiential roles such as actor,
carrier, recipient, attributor, sayer, etc. Based on the findings, both genres have a high frequency of Actor as an experiential role, yet there is a higher percentage of the thematic role of Sayer in news reports, as compared to commentaries, where the thematic role of Carrier prevails. The two roles imply different approaches to the text: the experiential role of Sayer attributes information to an outer source and thereby attempts to maintain objectivity and factuality, whereas Carrier allows the authors to become impartial and to detach themselves from an outer source. Concerning the internal structure of thematic heads, the noun groups in news reports tend to be clarified through the use of appositions, and shorter ones than in commentaries, that contain longer and more complex noun phrases, with cases of nominalization, a grammatical device by which authors can express impartiality (Lavid et al. 2012: 18). Commentaries are also more abundant in textual themes (used to link, argue, and relate to context) and interpersonal ones (conveying the author’s attitude towards the message of a clause) than reports (that tend to use paragraphing instead). Examples of interpersonal themes found in the analysed texts are clauses such as ‘of course’, ‘admittedly’, and also cases of verbal and adverbial modality, like ‘apparently’, ‘certainly’, CTPs (I think/I believe/they say that, etc. followed by a complement clause) and evaluative lexis. Pöldvere et al. (2016) assert that interpersonal meanings result, on the one hand, from the predicates themselves and, on the other hand, from the linguistic, textual and situational context, being part of a discourse that can be understood as “a complex multimodal event of interaction and communication” (Van Dijk 2008: 272).

In order to explore the linguistic elements of engagement in commentaries, a short corpus consisting of ten selected texts (around 12 thousand words) has been compiled. An important criterion in the selection process has been to select texts written on the same topic (the Ukrainian warfare) and by different authors in order to have an overview of the way engagement is expressed in the texts, considering the fact that they all appear on the website of the Rand Corporation, an American research organization. The online sphere adds new dimensions to the texts, differentiating them from the print media through multimediality (various media platforms for covering/commenting on stories and events), interactivity (allowing and giving the public the possibility to react and respond to what has been written), and hypertextuality (connecting a story to its resources and also other stories). It also changes the way commentaries can be accessed and reacted upon to a great extent (while multimodality and hypertextuality are often present, interactivity may be more or less restricted depending on the platform commentaries appear on), commentaries themselves being considered a type of “free genre” (Topchii 2020) due to the fact that they are flexible and prone to change. This flexibility is present at various levels – verbal, visual, audio, iconic, at the composition level and style – so that authors can choose the elements they wish to include in the text. As they often give room for further comments
An Analysis of Dialogic Positioning in Online Commentaries

and reactions from the audience, the text will not be perceived as a complete whole, rather as something open for multiple interpretations (also including the interpretation of the additional comments).

4. Methodology

The paper analyses a few selected commentaries on the Ukrainian warfare found on the online platform of Rand Corporation, an American research organization that provides research-based analysis on current events and topics. Created in the aftermath of World War II, with the goal of connecting military planning with research and development decisions (https://www.rand.org/about/history.html), the organization works with highly qualified experts in various fields (more than half of them having a master’s and/or doctoral degree (https://www.rand.org/about/glance.html)). Rand, with its head office in Santa Monica, California, is globally present, having offices in Cambridge, the UK, and Belgium (Rand Europe) and also Australia (Rand Australia), and it defines itself as a non-profit and strictly non-partisan organization, with focus on facts and evidence. Regarding commentaries, Rand shares articles found in several newspapers and online platforms, most of them of American origin, such as The Hill, Foreign Affairs, War on the Rocks, The National Interest, Los Angeles Times, but also foreign sources like The Moscow Times, in addition to their own (some commentaries appear originally on the website).

The analysis comprises ten commentaries (more than 12 thousand words in total), written by different authors. Taking into consideration the sensitivity of the topic and the fact that all the commentaries have been published on the website (despite the fact that most of them have originally appeared elsewhere), it is expected that a certain form of engagement prevails in the texts, which indirectly reflects the standpoint of the organization towards the topic discussed.

5. Results

In the texts, examples of both monoglossic and heteroglossic linguistic expressions can be found, as it has been expected. Monoglossic statements were found to be expressed by the present tense (e.g. A hybrid war is a zero-sum game and such scenarios are often modeled using wargaming or game theory – www.rand.org) and also other tense forms in the indicative mood, modal verbs (can, will) expressing general truth, as well as the construction there is/are (there is/are turned 21 hits in total in the texts). Consider examples 5) and 6) with the monoglossic expressions in italics:
5) there are many models for the various tactical and technical aspects of warfare [...] 
6) many new leaders in comparable circumstances have decided to keep fighting an ongoing war.

In addition, adjectival and noun phrases that describe specific situations/states of affairs have a factive value and can be considered monoglossic. There are quite a few examples of such constructions in the texts, e.g., horrific costs, at an acceptable cost, an eternal struggle, nuclear sabre-rattling, nontrivial possibility, massive retaliation, compelling evidence of (example 7), etc. These adjectival phrases, some of them with a strong philosophical content (nihilistic violence, apocalyptic ideology) also express the author’s attitude towards the described state of affairs.

7) There is also the compelling evidence of Putin’s wealth-maximizing rule for the past 20 years...

Nevertheless, in the case of commentaries, heteroglossic expressions outnumber monoglossic ones, regardless of whether they close down or open up the dialogic space. In the first case, the author asserts his/her voice, proclaiming commitment to a view that is not only considered the only valid one (hence it closes down the dialogic space), but it also matches that of the readers’ (and is often seen in opposition to a specific standpoint). As the findings show, monoglossic statements are often used in combination with heteroglossic ones. Such is the case in example 8), where the statement “the leadership is more vulnerable to attacks [...] and more susceptible to backstabber and sellout” can be regarded as a bare assertion, a claim with no supporting evidence. What comes next is a heteroglossic statement, containing an example of counter (introduced by but) and deny (is no easy task). Similarly, in example 9) the monoglossic statement “Russia has achieved many of its foreign policy objectives” is followed by a counter-statement (and yet....) and pronounce (call ...into question). In example 10), counter (however, these arguments...) is preceded by endorse (most arguments show) and pronounce (arguments are implicitly predicated...):

8) Absent this support, new political leadership is more vulnerable to attacks by hawkish elements of the political opposition and more susceptible to backstabber and sellout accusations. But garnering military leadership backing for military withdrawal in such a scenario is no easy task.

9) In the same period, Russia has achieved many of its foreign policy objectives at a relatively low cost. And yet, the mounting costs and mistakes of this war call the rational-actor assumption into question.

10) Most arguments show that using nukes would not help Russia achieve its objectives at an acceptable cost. However, these arguments are implicitly predicated on the assumption that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decisions are motivated by a basic cost-benefit analysis [...]

11) Based on my research, *I argue that* new leaders behave as if they are at risk of punishment for a failed war...

The category of *counter* has been frequently found in the texts, often accompanied by other categories, such as *pronounce or endorse* (also consider example 11) as a further example of *pronounce*); these formulations are heteroglossic in the sense that the textual voice often opposing a specific standpoint intends to concur with the point of view of an external source or that of the imaginative reader.

Finally, there are examples of adverbials that express relations of consequence or indicate that something is self-explanatory such as *of course* (7 hits), *indeed* (4 hits), *thus* (7 hits), *clearly* (1 hit), *certainly* (4 hits). By using these adverbials, the author concurs with the point of view of the imaginary audience (sentence 12)):

12) Russia can, *of course*, inflict greater damage and cause more horrifying deaths with the weapons it does have.

Nonetheless, despite the presence of various forms of dialogic contraction, cases of dialogic expansion seem to be more prominent. Examples of dialogic expansion are non-rhetorical and open-ended questions, modal verbs and evidentials such as *it seems, likely, probably, potentially, perhaps, if clauses, etc.* (example 13)). All these linguistic expressions can be found in abundance in the analysed texts.

13) The politics of blame can have a powerful impact on war termination decision-making and *potentially* drive new leaders to keep fighting.

Concerning the questions found in the texts, they can either open up or close the dialogic space between the author and the readers. Out of the queries returned (16 questions in the ten texts), only a few of them (4 in number) imply self-evident answers, where the author acknowledges the voice of the imaginary audience – consider examples 14) and 15), both containing examples of *concur* and implying that the self-evident answer to the questions is *no, we shouldn’t do that*. The majority of the questions open up the dialogic space, making the answers less self-evident and allowing/entertaining alternative voices (examples 16–18).

14) Why send untrained mobilized soldiers into battle if Russia’s main problems are poor tactics, low morale, and persistent logistical issues?
15) Why make negotiations impossible while losing ground?
16) How does one negotiate for peace with a state that has proved itself irrational?
17) Should Ukraine consider input from the West?
18) Could it be worthwhile to try to retake Crimea militarily?

The texts are abundant in epistemic modality that are also intersubjectively charged. The number of modal verbs is high, especially that of *may/might*, but also of *could* and *would*; they often appear as part of *if clauses*, as is also the case in example 19). Contrary to this sentence, which opens up the dialogic space,
sentence 20) with the modal verbs cannot and must does not allow for alternative viewpoints:

19) If the gamble fails and Ukraine continues to fight on with Western support, the West may conclude that it still can fight through Russian nuclear use—albeit at horrific costs.

20) The war in Ukraine features two different types of competing societies: open and closed. However, the critical characteristics of this competition cannot be captured using a single analysis framework. Instead, multiple tools must be integrated to help generate a robust policy response to modern hybrid threats.

Table 3 shows the number of instances of modal verbs in the texts. Some of them express dialogic contraction (e.g. cannot, should, must in their deontic and epistemic sense), while others (would, may/might, could) entertain several possibilities and viewpoints, opening up the dialogic space:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modal verb</th>
<th>Number of instances</th>
<th>Value expressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Epistemic/prediction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May/might</td>
<td>43/39</td>
<td>Epistemic possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May not/might not</td>
<td>8/7</td>
<td>Epistemic possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Epistemic possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Epistemic impossibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Deontic obligation/strong recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Deontic obligation/strong recommendation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to modals, other hedging devices, such as introductory verbs (seem, tend, look like, appear) and certain lexical verbs (believe, assume, suggest), can also entertain alternative viewpoints and thereby weaken the probability of a statement (sentences 21–23). Other constructions that returned hits were likely (23 instances), unlikely (7), perhaps (3), and seem/s, seemingly (5).

21) There appears to be no single analytical framework that can generate robust strategies and policy responses to evolving hybrid threats.

22) The notion that Russia, a nuclear superpower, could use its nuclear weapons in a war of choice against Ukraine [...] seems absurd.

23) To be sure, support for Russia and its war has persisted among many religious conservatives in both Russia and the United States, though in the latter case supporters tend to be fewer, and farther to the political fringe.

The number of attribute is quite high in the texts; the external voice is present and is often understood as one possible voice (that not necessarily concurs with the textual voice) such as: Russian Gen. Alexander Lebed declared to the
media [...]; According to Mathieu Boulègue, a researcher at Chatham House [...]; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has taunted that the “occupiers have started fleeing” across the Kerch Strait Bridge to southern Russia. By using these formulations, and also reporting verbs, such as [...] calls, says, condemns, the author manages to gain distance from the external voice.

All in all, findings seem to point to a higher number of dialogic expansion as compared to dialogic contraction. The authors manage to present the facts and formulate their observations clearly, yet the ideas are often formulated as suggestions rather than statements with a declarative value. This is also reflected by the relatively high number of non-rhetorical questions, of modal verbs (especially would and may, expressing prediction and future possibility), and of other hedging devices, which are meant to invite the readers to formulate their own opinions and ideas about the facts presented.

6. Conclusions

The present article analysed the category of engagement in a few selected commentaries on the Ukrainian war published on the website of the Rand organization between 29 July and 28 November 2022. While the data are by no means exhaustive and further analysis would be necessary to come to more conclusive results, the following tendencies can be observed: the commentaries, in addition to presenting the facts related to a specific topic, intend to open up the dialogic space and invite alternative viewpoints. While various examples of dialog contraction could be found (especially that of counter combined with pronounce and/or endorse, but also forms of dialogic contraction together with categories of dialogic expansion), the most common strategy that has been found in the text tends to be entertain: the increased use of open-ended questions, epistemic modality, and other hedging devices are prevalent and show that the authorial voice is but one among the possible voices. This, I believe, reflects the mindset of this organization: namely, to critically present current events and states of affairs and offer an analysis that highlights the actions and their consequences from various angles (hence the relatively high number of concur), at the same time giving room for alternative voices and viewpoints.
References


An Analysis of Dialogic Positioning in Online Commentaries


The analysed articles

Bauer, Ryan: How Russia’s War in Ukraine Has Impacted Its Christian Image [published on Rand on 4 November 2022].


Cohen, Raphael S.–Gian Gentile: Why Putin’s Nuclear Gambit is a Huge Mistake [published on Rand on 19 October 2022].

Courtney, William–Peter A. Wilson: Ukraine’s Crimea Conundrum [published on Rand on 4 November 2022].


Marcinek, Krystyna: Nuclear Weapons and Putin’s Holy War [published on Rand on 2 November 2022].

Müller, Karl: Might Russia Turn to Terror Bombing Civilians in Ukraine? [published on Rand on 29 July 2022].

Sacks, Benjamin J.–Kristin Van Abel: How the Russian Invasion of Ukraine May Impact the Arctic [published on Rand on 22 August 2022].


Spirtas, Michael: Ukraine’s Dream Could be Taiwan’s Nightmare [published on Rand on 28 October 2022].