**Stancetaking in media discourse : Writing through the words of "others"**

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**I. Markers of non-commitment/disassertion**

Assertion requires that alternative representations be eliminated : < r > is the case, and other than < r > is not the case :

"To be able to assert, to produce an assertion, I must declare it publicly; but there also needs be the commitment of someone who takes responsibility. For there to be responsibility, one must guarantee what one states" (Culioli 1995, 92)

Commitment is here viewed as part and parcel of assertion. Assertion can be suspended by the journalist's disclaiming responsibility for his/her utterance.

Evidential stance includes speakers' comments on the certainty, doubt, reliability, or limitations of a proposition (including comments on the source of information) and is thus related to both modality and evidentiality.

There are at least four ways in which a journalist may indicate that he/she is not presenting what he/she is saying as a fact, but rather :

- that he/she is speculating about it

- that he/she is presenting it as a deduction

- that he/she has been told about it

- that it is a matter only of appearance, based on the evidence of possibly fallible senses

All four types are concerned with the indication by the journalist of his/her lack of commitment to the truth of the proposition being expressed.

Grammar and lexicon interact. For example, a verbal form - e.g. conditional mood, or a perfect, or a passive - can develop an evidential-like meaning as a "side-effect" without having "source of information" as its primary meaning.

English has a rich repertoire of evidential devices. It expresses evidentiality with modal auxiliaries, hearsay adverbs[[1]](#footnote-1) (*reportedly, allegedly, supposedly*, *seemingly*, etc) and miscellaneous idiomatic phrases.

Consider the examples below. Example (1) is about the Monicagate[[2]](#footnote-2) :

(1) *The FBI reported that Clinton was the source of semen on the dress "to a reasonable degree of scientific certainty". Monica Lewinski has reportedly been offered $ 1 million for her DNA-stained blue dress, which she wore during her liaisons with then-President Bill Clinton in the nineties*

(2) *There was a rail accident at Amiens station last night. However, there are reported to be no casualties*

(3) *He is supposed to be dead*

(3a) *It does not seem unlikely .... / Il est fort probable* (litotes[[3]](#footnote-3)) .....

(4) *Gossip has it that he is a cuckold*

(5) *It seems that they were told* (Fr. Ils auraient été mis au courant)

(6) (Three killed in French Alpine avalanche) The prefect of Isère told AFP : *"It appears that everyone from the school trip has been found but the searches are continuing to be sure that there were no other victims"* (*The Guardian*, 14 January 2016)

(6a) *A hundred is the number of rescuers involved in the rescue which included mountain teams, search dogs and helicopters with thermal cameras* (same article as (6) above)

Also, in English, different complement clauses distinguish a visual and a hearsay meaning of the verb *see* in the examples below :

(7) *They were seen leaving the shop at 10 pm*

(8) *In the 1950s and 60s, gay men and women were seen as a medical and social problem*

(9) *As early as the 6th century B.C., the earth was seen to be spherical* (Fr. Dès le VIè siècle avant JC, on pensait que la terre était ronde)

In French, the journalistic conditional ("conditionnel d'information incertaine") and/or a parenthetical clause (*dit-on* in example (12) or *selon certains auteurs*) are used to virtualize uncertain facts, or facts gathered from unreliable sources as the journalist needs to decline responsibility for the reported statement. Consider examples (10), (11), (12) and (12a) below :

(10) *Le président envisagerait un référendum sur la question*

(10a) gloss : "A ce que l'on dit - et je rapporte ces propos sans en avoir vérifié l'exactitude -, le président envisage ..... "[[4]](#footnote-4)

(11) *D'après des renseignements communiqués par une Ursuline allemande, une légende germanique mentionnerait l'existence d'un château de Kefermont près de Metz. Nous avons répondu à Soeur Grégoria qu'il n'y a sans doute jamais eu de château de Kefermont dans le pays messin* (*Vieux Metz, le coeur de la cité*)

(12) *La rue Chèvremont tient son nom - dit-on - de l'escarpement extraordinaire de son cours avant que d'importants travaux en aient quelque peu adouci la pente* (*Vieux Metz*, A. Jeanmaire)

(12a) *Selon certains auteurs, son premier nom, DIVODURUM, aurait signifié Forteresse des dieux. C'est à notre avis une explication fort expéditive* (*Vieux Metz*, 1970)

With *report*, the speaker was told the information given in the sentence by someone else, but has no evidence of its truth value. In modern societies one important use of a report form is in journalism as in :

(13) (headline) *Tibet reported to welcome Americans* (Fr. Le Tibet accueillerait les Americains)

(14) *He is alleged to have killed him* (Fr. Il l'aurait tué)

(15) *Six appareils auraient été abattus / According to some sources / It is said that / We have heard that / six planes were shot down*

(16) *In 1947 started the rumour according to which the American army had captured aliens found in a flying saucer / En 1947 naissait la rumeur selon laquelle l'armée américaine aurait capturé les occupants extraterrestres d'une soucoupe volante* (*Nouvel Observateur*, 17.7.2002)

(17) *Selon moi, ce serait un problème de température / According to me, it might be a problem of temperature* (but I could be wrong)

It is not fortuitous that markers such as *selon X*, *d'après X*, *au dire de X* and "press conditional" are more likely to be found in journalistic discourse since that genre is especially concerned with the truth and the reliability of information. In (15), the quoting journalist attributes the statement to X and does not personally vouch for it as he/she bases his/her statement on other sources. The quoted source can be anonymous people or a clearly unreliable witness. The insistence on the attribution to somebody else highlights the potential unreliability of the source (*according to some sources*, etc).

This type of modalization explains why these expressions are clearly more used in the press because it has more of an argumentative function than a narrative one.

Assertion is suspended until conclusive evidence is provided by facts or by the addressee. The function of evidential markers is to detach the speaker from his/her utterance, which neutralises assertion and prevents him/her from forming a judgment of his/her own.

**II. From active to passive with a non-firsthand meaning : Mental state predicates in the passive**

The passive turn of phrase enables the quoting speaker to de-emphasize his/her personal commitment to what is being said. Mental state predicates in the passive mark discourse as coming from another source, without attributing it to a precise speaker. In that sense, it is distantiation without attribution. In news reporting, the journalist takes the precaution of presenting information as non-firsthand to disclaim any responsibility and leaves it to the reader to form opinions and judgments of his/her own :

"The passive is infrequent in speech. But passives cannot be dispensed with entirely. They give writers, journalists, scientists and experimental researchers alike the option of an impersonal style, which can be very useful in contexts where it is irrelevant to state who actually carried out an action" (Crystal : 225[[5]](#footnote-5))

Although the verbs *think*, *believe* and *claim* share the same property - they are mental state predicates - they are often contrasted with one another regarding their degree of commitment to the truth value of the proposition. Belief, for example, is sometimes defined as "the cognitive act or state in which a proposition is taken to be true".

When used in the passive, they are not easy to deal with because of their complex semantic structure and their linguistic behaviour :

- How does the passive interact with the semantics of mental state predicates and with complement alternation ?

- What are the common and distinctive properties of these three reporting verbs ?

- What is the semantic shift entailed by the different patterns (syntactic construction) on the meaning of these verbs and on the interpretation of the examples ?

The answer to these questions perhaps makes it necessary not only to re-examine the semantics of *think*, *believe*, *claim* and *see* but also to keep an open mind regarding the interaction of the different factors that leads to disassertion and non-commitment.

The passive turn of phrase allows the reporting speaker to de-emphasize his/her personal commitment to what is being thought, believed or claimed. There is no reference to a thinker, believer or claimer as it is no longer important who does the thinking, believing or claiming.

The speaker's intent is not to assert the occurrence of the event or state as a fact. These examples mark discourse as coming from another source, without attributing it to a precise reported speaker. In that sense, it is distantiation without attribution. This is partly due to the interaction of two dimensions, one lexical, one syntactic : the semantics of the verb and the enunciative operation of passivization.

These verbs are used in the passive to avoid quoting the information source as journalists often report state of affairs without claiming responsibility for the content of the proposition. As these passives are short, their degree of referential indeterminacy is by essence much higher. Subject raising occurs with non-agentive verbs of thinking used in the passive with no Experiencer mentioned (a form of reported speech), thus enabling the reporting speaker to convey non-factive statements and express his/her lack of commitment.

Indirect evidentials, i.e. based on reported statements such as below - examples (18) to (24) - imply that the reporting speaker is not 100% committed to the truth of the proposition :

(18) *The burglars are believed to have forced a window*

(19) *It was claimed that the incident was invented by the nasty Tory press*

(20) *Religion is seen to be a way of helping people to handle their emotional side* (Herbst and Heath 2004)

(21) *The study is seen as having contributed much to increasing awareness about climate change / On estime que l'étude a fortement contribué à sensibiliser l'opinion au changement climatique (unesco.ca)*

(22) *Tomato, believed to have been born in Sicily in 1874, was able to keep control of the narcotics syndicate / Tomato que l'on suppose né en Sicile en 1874 put garder la haute main sur le syndicat des narcotiques*

(23) (headline) *Western tourists reportedly including French nationals kidnapped in Ethiopia / Des Français feraient partie du groupe d'Occidentaux enlevés en Ethiopie (AFP)*

(24) (The Indian government revealed that a young American had paddled to shore in a kayak and aboriginal tribesmen had killed him with poisoned arrows)

*The episode appears to have been a culture clash between an adventurous 26-year-old foreigner and one of the most impenetrable communities in the world. He apparently tried several times to reach the island, the police say, offering gifts such as a small soccer ball and scissors. Police believe John Chau's body may be buried on the beach* (The *NYTs*, November 24, 2018)

It is the function of evidentials to refuse to take any responsibility for the truth of the statement by asserting the level of evidence the reporting speaker has for his/her statement.

1. Example : One of the curators discovered two striking works. One is a short video in which an elderly grandmother runs her hands over an iPhone, seemingly (Fr. apparemment) trying to figure out how it works (*The NYTs*, 14 April 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Monica Lewinski was an intern at the White House. She was Bill Clinton's private secretary. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J-M. Merle 2009 : La problématique de la source est pertinente : n'est-ce pas l'absence de source identifiable qui justifie l'emploi du conditionnel journalistique ? Cette absence de prise en charge se justifie par le caractère invérifiable du propos rapporté. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, 1995, CUP, Cambridge [↑](#footnote-ref-5)