

**Framing Violence: A Content/Discourse Analysis of Representations of Violence in
Bahamian Newspapers**

Raymond Oenbring

School of English Studies

Abstract

This project is the first scholarly study of representations of violence in Bahamian newspapers. Using the methods of discourse analysis, content analysis, and corpus linguistics, the study compares the content of a corpus of violent crime articles from the *Nassau Tribune* and *Guardian* with similar corpora of violent crime articles collected from the leading establishment newspapers of Jamaica, Trinidad, and South Florida. Features searched for include N-grams (frequently reoccurring strings of words) and keywords (terms occurring at a higher rate in one body of text versus another). The study finds that, in general, newspaper articles reporting on violent crime in the Bahamas tend to rely heavily upon stock phrases and also, following Standard Bahamian English in general, rely heavily upon passive voice expressions, expressions that may remove the agency of the actors involved. The study finds no evidence of sensationalism of violence in mainstream Bahamian newspaper articles, at least on the linguistic level.

Introduction

As Bahamian journalist Noelle Nicolls notes in her recent commentary piece in *The Tribune* “How far can the media go in search of truth?” (2010) lamenting the state of journalism in the Bahamas, “The representations of reality that bear themselves on the pages of newspapers and in the images of a television broadcast are simply constructs of reality; they are angles. Understanding them as anything different is to be drawn into an illusion; to conflate the opinions of a few with absolute truth.” In this pithy quote Nicolls affirms in the Bahamian context several broadly held assumptions among contemporary academics in the social sciences and humanities around the globe: specifically, that language practices — including those of the media—in effect create reality for much of the population.

Indeed, one of the major contentions of current research in the humanities and social science falling under the multidisciplinary banners of *cultural studies* and *postmodernism* is that the available language practices of a given society constrain how individuals in that society think about the world (see, for example, Mills [1997] and Jaworski and Coupland [1999]). That is to say, language constructs conventional wisdom. To categorize and critique the language practices of socially important practices of representation, including the discourse of the media, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have developed numerous sets of methods, including discourse analysis, content analysis, narrative analysis, corpus linguistic analysis — several of which are put to use in the current study.

Discourse analysis is a set of methods originally stemming from linguistics but now put to use in many areas of the humanities and social sciences used by researchers to interrogate the reigning practices of language in a given area. Journals such as *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across the Disciplines* have developed so that researchers can critically interrogate

socially important discourses such as mainstream media. However, to date there no discourse analytic studies of language practices in contemporary Bahamian media. A similar, yet more quantitatively-focused set of methods for asking similar questions used more frequently in communication studies is content analysis (see, for example, Major and Atwood [2004] and Krippendorff [2004]).

The current study is the first scholarly study of Bahamian media using the methods of discourse analysis, content analysis, and corpus linguistics. The goal of this study is to analyse, categorize and critique several of the most important and unique features of Bahamian media discourse about violent crime. However, to make project more manageable, I have limited my analysis to newspaper articles reporting on acts of violence. In particular, my goal has been to flesh out the conventional terms, and stock expressions in Bahamian newspaper writing about violence. In a less theoretical vein, this study is a contribution to recent discussions in the Bahamas regarding whether or not Bahamian media outlets sensationalise violence, thereby potentially damaging the tourism sector (see, for example, the late 2009 debate regarding the reporting of violence in Bahamian media after the holdup of 18 tourists on New Providence in November, 2009 [e.g., “Bahamas Can’t Hide Crime Problem”]).

Methods

For the study, I collected corpora of 50 articles of reporting on violent crime using a weapon from various newspapers in several different locations around the English-speaking Caribbean. After initial analysis of the Bahamas corpus collected in spring 2010, I determined that it would be useful to develop similar corpora of newspaper writing on violence for several different locations around the English-speaking Caribbean for comparison. Accordingly, corpora

for South Florida, Jamaica, and Trinidad were collected during summer 2011. All of the articles were collected from the websites of the respective newspapers, and were saved in .txt format to facilitate analysis.

The newspapers selected for each region were mainstream, established publications within their respective regions –what are often called *newspapers of record*. In addition to being established, the papers also had to do substantial reporting of local incidents of violent crime. (This precluded more national newspapers in the United States [e.g., *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*]). Tabloid-style publications such as the *Punch* were avoided. (Nonetheless, I recognize that the *Punch* and similar publications in other countries may have much greater effects on discourse about violence among the general populations of their respective countries.) Articles selected for the corpora included primary reporting on violent incidents, court cases stemming from violent incidents, and commentary pieces about violence in the local regions. To be included the respective corpora, articles must involve either threatened or real acts of violence — including both actual cases, and mere threats of physical harm involving weapons (that is to say, armed robberies and related crimes involving only the threat of physical violence were still treated as acts of violence). Articles on violent actions from nations and regions other than the local area of the respective newspapers, often reprinted from wire services such as the Associated Press, were also included and treated the same as other articles. Oftentimes, several articles reporting on the same incident were included in the corpora. It should also be noted that articles reprinted on the newspapers’ websites may not reflect exactly the exact patterns of articles printed in each of the newspapers’ print versions. What’s more, the location of the articles in the original print versions was not taken into consideration.

For the Bahamian corpus, most of the articles were selected from *The Tribune*, with a handful of articles coming from each of *The Nassau Guardian*, and *The Freeport News*. For Jamaica, articles were selected from the websites of the *Jamaica Gleaner*, and the *Jamaica Observer*. For South Florida (chosen to represent the United States due to its geographical proximity and cultural bonds to the Caribbean proper), articles were selected from the *Miami Herald* and *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. For the Trinidad corpus, articles were selected from the *Trinidad Guardian* and *Express*. For ease, this study shall refer to the corpora as the BVCC (Bahamas Violent Crime Corpus), the SFVCC (South Florida Violent Crime Corpus), the JVCC (Jamaica Violent Crime Corpus), and the TVCC (Trinidad Violent Crime Corpus).

Once each corpus was collected, a content analysis was performed in which were sorted based on the types of incidents reported on. Articles were placed into one or more of the following categories: firearm incidents involving death (including incidents in which the death is a suspect at the hands of police); knife/machete incidents involving death; cause of death unknown or unreported; incidents of death with other cause of death; firearm incidents without death; knife/machete incidents without death; assaults without death involving other weapon or not identified weapon; commentaries on violence (including op-eds, social ramifications commentaries, and *aftermath* stories as part or all of the piece); and, finally, pieces in which is robbery identified as motive.

For the corpus linguistic analysis, each corpus was searched using corpus linguistic software packages (specifically, Wordsmith and AntConc) for N-grams and keywords. Broadly stated, the goal of corpus linguistic analysis is to search for patterns in a group of text (the corpus) using computer programs to speed up the tedious process of tallying features, and to uncover patterns that would not necessarily be clear to the naked eye. N-grams are frequently

reoccurring strings of words with the corpus. Particular attention was paid to strings four words or longer (e.g., 4-grams and 5-grams). The goal of n-gram analysis is to tease out commonly used *stock expressions* within a particular corpus. Conversely, keywords are words that are determined to occur at a significantly higher rate in one corpus in comparison to another corpus that is used as a baseline. For the purposes of this study, the max p value was set to 0.000001. For a more detailed explanation of corpus linguistic methods see Oenbring (2010), Fielding and Oenbring, et al. (2011), and/or Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998).

Results

The results of the content analysis suggest that incidents of armed robbery are more frequently reported in the BVCC than any of the other corpora (see, for example, the comparatively higher rates of robbery being indicated and firearm incidents not involving death in the BVCC). Note that this should not be read as a difference in patterns of incidents of violent crime, only as a difference in the *reporting* of violent crime. A possible explanation for this difference could be as simple as the fact that the Bahamas has a smaller population than any of the other respective areas (and a lower murder count than both Jamaica and Trinidad). Thus, one might expect armed robbery to be a more newsworthy event in the Bahamas. Nonetheless, the difference seems noteworthy. At the time the JVCC was collected, Jamaica was experiencing a horrific spike in beheadings. Thus, we should view the 50% *knife/machete incidents involving death* figure as an outlier.

Table 1: Content Analysis

	Bahamas	South Florida	Jamaica	Trinidad
Firearm incident without death	35%	26%	0%	8%
Robbery identified	30%	14%	4%	20%
Firearm incident involving death	26%	40%	38%	44%
Knife/machete incident without death	17%	0%	4%	8%
COD unknown or unreported	11%	10%	4%	10%
Assault without death other weapon or not identified	7%	0%	2%	4%
Commentary	6%	2%	12%	2%
Knife/machete incident involving death	2%	16%	50%	18%
Other COD	6%	6%	4%	6%

Stock Expressions

From a stylistic perspective, perhaps the most interesting feature of the BVCC is the large number of stock expressions, expressions not used at as high of a rate in the other violent crime corpora (see table 2). As a whole, the high rate of stock expressions suggests that Bahamian newspapers demonstrate a preference for straight, uneditorialized reporting of violent crime. One might go so far as to describe the bulk of Bahamian newspaper writing on the subject of violent crime as staid, perfunctory, or even tending toward boilerplate. To explain this pattern, one might look to the Bahamian esteem for formality and protocol, a cultural pattern noted in many areas of Bahamian life and culture.

Table 2: Stock Expressions in Bahamas Violent Crime Corpus (4-grams)

Rank	Frequency	N-Gram
1	20	<i>was taken to hospital</i>
2	15	<i>armed with a handgun</i>
3	14	<i>taken to hospital by</i>
4	11	<i>a year old man</i>
5	10	<i>an undetermined amount of</i>
6	10	<i>not required to enter</i>
7	9	<i>a group of men</i>
8	9	<i>man armed with a</i>
9	9	<i>required to enter a</i>
10	9	<i>to enter a plea</i>
11	9	<i>undetermined amount of cash</i>
12	8	<i>a man armed with</i>
13	8	<i>a plea to the</i>
14	8	<i>and a year old</i>
15	8	<i>enter a plea to</i>
16	8	<i>is listed in stable</i>
17	8	<i>listed in stable condition</i>
18	8	<i>of an armed robbery</i>
19	7	<i>a small amount of</i>
20	7	<i>an armed robbery at</i>

Rank	Frequency	N-Gram
21	7	<i>approached by a man</i>
22	7	<i>Her Majesty s Prison</i>
23	7	<i>in an unknown direction</i>
24	7	<i>officer Sergeant Chrislyn Skippings</i>
25	7	<i>the Central Detective Unit</i>
26	7	<i>to Her Majesty s</i>
27	7	<i>was approached by a</i>
28	7	<i>were not required to</i>
29	6	<i>a search warrant on</i>
30	6	<i>A year old man</i>
31	6	<i>arrived at the scene</i>
32	6	<i>by a man armed</i>
33	6	<i>caused the death of</i>
34	6	<i>executed a search warrant</i>
35	6	<i>in the parking lot</i>
36	6	<i>It is alleged that</i>
37	6	<i>of an undetermined amount</i>
38	6	<i>pleaded not guilty to</i>
39	6	<i>police received information of</i>

As Oenbring (2010) notes, Standard Bahamian English, that is the variant of Standard English used in formal situations, including in news reporting, often displays overly formal preferences of usage (e.g., the legalistic *persons* over *people*). Similarly, Oenbring (2010) notes that Standard Bahamian relies heavily upon passive voice constructions (see, for example, table 4), something that the author reads as a technique to increase the appearance of formality. To a grammarian and/or a linguist, a passive voice sentence is a sentence in which the agent, that is the person or thing doing the action, isn't the grammatical subject of the sentence.¹ Accordingly, passive voice constructions can allow the writer to avoid imparting individual volition on (what is referred to by linguists as *agency*) or avoid even naming the person doing the action. In violent crime reporting, passive voice constructions can hide or downplay the role that government actors such as the police, EMTs, or magistrates play in causing an action to happen. See, for example, the following pairs of constructions, one passive and one active. Note that all of these passive voice constructions appeared in the BVCC n-grams.

Passive 1: *The victim was taken to hospital.*

Active 1: *EMTs took the victim to hospital.*

Passive 2: *The accused were not required to enter a plea.*

Active 2: *The magistrate required the accused to enter a plea.*

Passive 3: *It is alleged that Mr. Rolle did something.*

Active 3: *The police allege that Mr. Rolle did something.*

As table 3 and 4 suggest, violent crime reporting in all locations displays a greater rate of passive voice constructions than general newspaper reporting discourse in the same respective

¹ Active voice: *Ms. Rolle ate the conch salad.*

Passive voice: *The conch salad was eaten by Ms. Rolle.*

locations (table 4 is taken from Oenbring [2010]). What's more, Caribbean variants of English display much greater use of passive voice than British or American variants in both studies. In general newspaper writing and violent crime reporting, the Bahamian corpus has the highest rate of passive voice constructions.

Table 3: Passive Voice Frequency in the Violent Crime Corpora

Area	Corpus size	Percent Passive Voice
Bahamas	19,000 words	36%
Trinidad	17,000 words	33%
Jamaica	20,000 words	31%
South Florida	21,000 words	19%

Table 4: Passive Voice Frequency in General Newspaper Corpora (from Oenbring [2010])

	Percent Passive Voice
Bahamian	23%
Jamaican	20%
American	5%
British	4%

The preference for passive voice constructions in the BVCC stems, for certain, in large part from the general preference for passive voice constructions in formal Bahamian English.

However, one might also speculate that unwillingness to call out or pin down government actors in regards to their actions -- perhaps in the interest of politeness -- also plays a role in the high rate of passive voice constructions in the BVCC. Indeed, a common critique of writing heavy in passive voice constructions is that can lead to 'bureaucratese' (e.g., the passive voice construction *I am advised*).

Keywords

Table 5 presents the top 20 keywords for the BVCC with different reference corpora used as baseline. I have placed the particularly interesting terms in bold. Note that the corpus linguistic software (in this case WordSmith) only produced seven keywords for the BVCC when the TVCC was used as the reference corpus.

Table 5: BVCC Keywords with Different Reference Corpora

Rank	JVCC	SFVCC	TVCC
1	AROUND	YESTERDAY	MEN
2	OFFICERS	ROAD	ARMED
3	ARMED	ARMED	MS
4	CAR	MS	SKIPPINGS
5	STREET	CASH	STAFF
6	POLICE	ON	CASH
7	MS	INVESTIGATIONS	FREEPORT
8	ROBBERY	MAGISTRATE	
9	CONDITION	ARE	
10	STABLE	MEN	
11	SKIPPINGS	SKIPPINGS	
12	OFFICER	FREEPORT	
13	AT	AROUND	
14	ROBBED	AREA	
15	CASH	TAKEN	
16	MEN	AMOUNT	
17	HANDGUN	MR	

Rank	JVCC	SFVCC	TVCC
18	SMALL	BAHAMAS	
19	MR	STABLE	
20	BAHAMAS	RESIDENT	

Of course, all three lists of keywords have several terms relating to the fact that BVCC takes place in the Bahamas that are not particularly interesting from a linguistic perspective. These terms include: *Bahamas*, *Freeport*, and *Skippings* (the surname of a particular officer). More interestingly, Oenbring (2010) finds that Standard Bahamian English has a particular sensitivity to gender and social roles. This sensitivity to social titles and roles likely accounts for the presence of *Ms.* and *Mr.* in the BVCC keywords. Following the content analysis of the current study, several of keywords indicate greater reporting of armed robbery in the BVCC in comparison to the reference corpora. Suggestive terms include: *armed*, *robbery*, *robbed*, and *cash*. Moreover, following the N-gram analysis of the current study, several BVCC keywords are indicative of stock expressions, including: *sable*, *condition*, and *taken* (to hospital or into custody). Other common terms in the BVCC include *around* (to indicate the time of the incident) and *amount* (almost always in the stock phrases *a small amount of cash* or *an undetermined amount of cash*).

Discussion

Although by no means attempting to be a final word on the subject, the current study is a first tentative step toward a more comprehensive understanding of representations of violence in Bahamian media. While the author recognizes that the two mainstream newspapers in Nassau may not play a primary role in regulating discussions of violence in The Bahamas — and, moreover, he recognizes that other forms of media including music, television, and radio may

play a much more important role in framing discussions of violence in The Bahamas — he does believe the findings of the current article to be a valuable rejoinder to what he hopes will prove to be a lively discussion regarding the effects violence in the media have on Bahamian society. As to the question of whether Bahamian newspapers sensationalize violence, the current piece finds no significant evidence, at least on the level of language choices, that the mainstream newspapers use overly emotive or embellished language to report acts of violence. Indeed, if anything, the language of mainstream Bahamian newspapers appears more staid and perfunctory than sensationalistic.

References

- Biber, D., Conrad, S., & Reppen, R. (1998). *Corpus Linguistics: Investigating Language Structure and Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Bahamas Can't Hide Crime Problem. (2009). *The Nassau Tribune*. Retrieved from http://www.tribune242.com/Print/12172009_crime_editorial_pag4
- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analyzing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Chouliaraki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Fielding, W. J., Oenbring, R. A., Brennen, S., Carroll, M. C., Bethel, N., & Minnis, J. (2011). A first look at harm toward animals by Bahamians in childhood. *The International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 17(2), 27-49. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/cob/index/php>
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. New York: Routledge.

Jaworski, A., & Coupland, N. (Eds.) (1999). *The Discourse Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Major, A, and Atwood, E. (2004). Environmental Stories Define Problems, Not Solutions. *Newspaper Research Journal*. 25 (3).

Mills, S. (1997). *Discourse*. New York: Routledge.

Nicolls, N. (2010). How far can media go in search of truth?. Retrieved from http://www.tribune242.com/editorial/Insight/08162010_Noelle-s-Insight_Insight

Oenbring, R. A. (2010). Corpus linguistic studies of Standard Bahamian English: A comparative study of newspaper usage. *The International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 16, 51-62. Retrieved from <http://researchjournal.cob.edu.bs>

Stubbs, M. (1996). *Text and Corpus Analysis*. New York: Blackwell, 1996.

Wodak, R., and Michael Meyer. (Eds.) (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage.