

A Semiotic Approach of Features

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Abstract. We present in this paper some elements of our ongoing doctoral research which investigates “features” (extraordinary news, matters not classifiable in journalism) in the light of a recent development of French semiotics: the tensive semiotics (cf. Zilberberg). At the core of this theory is the concept of event, which is defined as something that unexpectedly arises in the field of presence of the semiotic subject. The event, in semiotics, is governed by concessive logic, according to which, although such a thing was not possible to occur, it happened. Our aim is to propose that such a concessive logic underlies the structural categories proposed by Barthes (1964) for the *fait divers* (features). Therefore we analyze a features what has been known in Brazil in 2008 as “the Isabella Nardoni Case”, in which father and stepmother murdered their own daughter/stepdaughter. This event characterizes, according to the concept formulated by Barthes (1964), a feature story [*fait divers*]: it is a news story of the order of unusual, holding a transgressive, amazing nature. Briefly, it could be said that Barthes (1964) outlined from his paper a kind of “semiotics of the event” *avant la lettre*, conceived and so named by Zilberberg (2011a). The absence of duration, the intensity at which the event occurs, the passions, named or not, raised and inherent in such unexpected, punctual, “monstrous” information are perfectly transferable to a tensive approach of the feature.

Keywords: Journalistic Discourse, French Semiotics, Features.

1. Introduction

The features in English speaking, or *fait divers* in French, designate journalistic stories, which do not fit traditional editorial sections like politics, economics, culture, international affairs etc. Pierre Larousse’s *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* presents the entry with descriptive richness:

Under this rubric newspapers group with art and regularly publish all sorts of stories that run the world: minor scandals, car crashes, heinous crimes, suicides for love, a mason who fell from the fifth floor, robberies, rains of locusts or toads, shipwrecks, fires, floods, burlesque adventures, mysterious kidnappings, fatal executions, cases of hydrophobia, cannibalism, somnambulism, lethargy [...] natural phenomena [...] two-headed calves [...] twins pasted together through the belly, a three-eyed child, extraordinary dwarfs, etc.

In short, the term, which dates back to the nineteenth century European press, refers to reports of the order of unusual, monstrous and sometimes private. Barthes (1964) was the first theorist to cast light on that kind of journalistic narrative. The specificity of Barthesian approach lies in conjecturing a structure for the *fait divers* from relations of causality and coincidence.

Unlike semiological perspective, however, we theorize and analyze the features in the light of recent developments in French-line semiotic theory, which focus the matter of the sensitive, especially tensive semiotics (Fontanille & Zilberberg, 2001; Zilberberg, 2007; 2011a; 2011b). It must be said that such a theory is one the current developments of Paris School of Semiotics, also known as Greimasian school in honor of its founder A. J. Greimas.

Our *corpus* is made up of the coverage of the features Isabella Nardoni Case conducted by *Jornal Nacional*, a news program shown at 8:30 pm from Mondays to Saturdays by Globo TV, Brazilian Network. Our doctoral research is under development in São Paulo University with the guidance of Prof. Dr. Waldir Bevidas under the auspices of São Paulo State Research Support Foundation (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo – Fapesp). We will present in this paper some elements of our research now in progress.

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2. Corpus

Exhaustively reported by Brazilian media in 2008, Isabella Nardoni Case revolves around the assassination of Isabella, a five-year-old girl. The suspects at that time were her own father Alexandre Nardoni and her stepmother Anna Carolina Jatobá. This suspicion was confirmed throughout the investigation: indicted on the crime, they were charged and convicted by the court of justice. As narrated by the press, the girl was asphyxiated and then thrown out the window of her father's apartment on the sixth floor. Isabella was spending the weekend with her father and stepmother. Rescued by firefighters, she came to die on the way to the hospital. The event characterizes, according to the concept formulated by Barthes (1964), a *fait divers*: it is a news story of the order of unusual, holding a transgressive, amazing nature.

The coverage of the assassination of the girl dragged on for months during the first semester of 2008 and the media *ad nauseam* reported information about the incident. To have an idea of the scale achieved by Isabella Nardoni Case, a survey conducted by CNT/Sensus Institute in April that year showed that 98.2% of the population was aware of the murder (cf. Vaz & França, 2009, p. 13). For these authors "it is a record, making it [Isabella Nardoni Case] the best known crime among Brazilians.

3. Semiotics and Event

We turn now to a brief introduction to our theoretical-methodological support.

Barthes (1964) outlined from his paper a kind of "semiotics of the event" *avant la lettre*, conceived and so named by Zilberberg (2011a). The absence of duration, the intensity at which the event occurs, the passions, named or not, raised and inherent in such unexpected, punctual, "monstrous" information are perfectly transferable to a tensive approach of the feature.

According to Zilberberg, the event is defined as the syncretism of *tempo* and tonicity. These are sub dimensions of intensity (the axis of sensitivity), which, protruding over extensity (the axis of intelligibility), create a semiotic field of presence, the space of tensity, as it could be seen below:

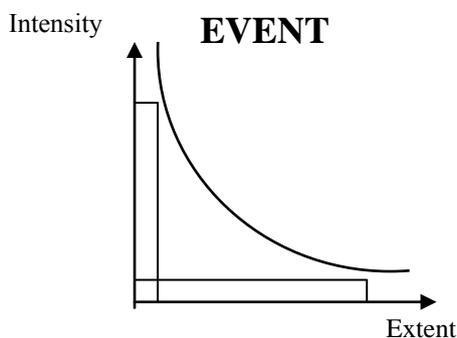


Fig. 1: Tensive diagram of event

The syntax of the event, according to tensive semiotics, is defined as the product of paroxystic subvalencies *tempo* and tonicity. In simple and brief terms, it is the product of the acute speed of an event with its energy and power of impact on the subject. These sub dimensions of the intensity (the axis of the sensitivity) act together disturbing the subject through an instantaneous "modal storm" (Zilberberg, 2011a, p. 236) and leaving him only a suffering that overlaps the action: "the event, by being the bearer of the impact, manifests in itself that the subject has changed 'unwillingly' the universe of the measure by the universe of the *mismeasure* [desmedida]" (p. 163). In other terms, the event means taking the affectivity to the peak and making void the readability, the intellection. This system would take into account the concessive mode, which is opposite to the already referred implicative, according to which: *although it was not possible, such a thing happened*. Proceeding against this program, the discourse would act as a counterprogram, a kind of a breaking in the accelerated *tempo*, that is, an intellection about what is essentially sensitive: "[...] the discourse strives to undo what the exclamation undid" (Zilberberg, 2011a, p. 194).

4. Features and Event

After briefly introducing the theory on which we stand and the *corpus* under analysis, we can now conjecture that the concessive style of which Zilberberg (2011a, 2011b) speaks, which takes into account the achievement of unachievable, fortuitous, seems to underlie the structure of the features. It is possible thus suggesting that the concession lies in the substrates of immanent relations proposed by Barthes (1964): causality and coincidence.

Consider how such relations, according to Barthes (1964), find resonance in the proposal of Zilberberg. Firstly we can think about the relation of causality: the “relation of aberrant causality” is opposite of what is expected and therefore of the implicative style (if... then). Consider now the features whose causality (disturbed cause) loses strength and the accent is put on the *dramatis personae*: these are figures carrying a very high thymic load. For example, on the figure of the mother who loses a child lies in popular imagination the *mater dolorosa*, the *Pietà*. Or still the child whose figure conveys the sense of the beginning of the life, and the elder who reminds the end of this journey. Returning to the quotation of Barthes (1964, p. 197), *dramatis personae* are “*kinds of emotional essences*, responsible for giving life to a stereotype” (our italics). Hence these are figures behind which lies a figural basis with an eminently intense nature.

Think now, still in the light of the Zilberbergian concept of event, in the relations of coincidence of the features. The word *coincidence* bears many semantic features in common with other terms such as *chance*, *fortuitous*. These are therefore events of the order of unexpectedness. As regards the first kind of coincidence, there is a repetition. However it is not a repetition in the sense of “natural order of things”, or the repetition which rules everyday life or even that of Fordist assembly line parodied for instance by Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Repetition here brings always something peculiar, monstrous, as we can read in this headline at the news portal G1²: “Number of women raped at a party in Paraíba rises to 6, says a police officer.” That is because the repetition, based on common opinion, is distributive, not reiterative.

The second kind of relation is the antithesis that is the opposition of two different logics. Such a figure of rhetoric finds resonance in Zilberbergian proposal of concessive style to which underlies the achievement of unachievable. In both instances the opposite of what is expected takes place.

It is thus possible to catch a glimpse of similarities between the concepts of *fait divers* (features) and *event*. This first approximation between that concept formulated by Barthes (1964) and tensive grammar shows a series of intersections to be explored throughout our ongoing research.

Next steps of the research are to establish from tensive semiotics a typology for features, which includes elements such as durativity (short *vs.* long), seriality (continuity *vs.* discontinuity), memory *vs.* oblivion, and others. Through these typologies, the feature stories can be seen as an event, according to Zilberberg’s concept, which makes the semiotic subject speechless. The features might also last more or less in the axis of temporality. It may be forgotten almost immediately after being read or watched. It could, however, remain in the collective memory. Analyzing the feature stories from the semiotic perspective, the concern is not about the correspondence between language and the “real” world. We are mainly interested in the architecture of the meaning, its *modus operandi*, which is already quite enough. If the access to the real is possible only through the language, the act of examining and analyzing it allows us to get the form - in the Hjelmslevian sense – that, ultimately, give meaning to all that we are.

5. References

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