

Ermida, Isabel

When the trails go cold : British press narratives on Maddie

Brno studies in English. 2009, vol. 35, iss. 1, pp. [45]-62

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/105122>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



Brno Studies in English
Volume 35, No. 1, 2009
ISSN 0524-6881

ISABEL ERMIDA

WHEN THE TRAILS GO COLD: BRITISH PRESS NARRATIVES ON MADDIE

Abstract

The amount and variety of press narratives on the disappearance of Madeleine McCann are fertile ground for critical discourse analysis. Not only do they offer ideologically informed representations of the actors involved in the plot, but also of the ethnic-cum-national groups to which they belong. In particular, the British coverage of the story largely focuses on the ensuing police investigation in Portugal, thus putting forth identity portrayals which arguably derive from value judgements. The present paper intends to examine the linguistic and discursive devices which convey marks of subjectivity and alignment, along with preferential portrayals and strategies of othering. Furthermore, it aims at discussing such issues as topic selection, perspective and focalisation, with a view to revealing mechanisms of construction of ethnic difference and alienation. The corpus of analysis is a set of news reports and opinion articles taken from two major UK titles: a quality paper, *The Times*, and a tabloid, *The Sun*.

Key words

ethnic; national; Maddie; press; discourse; ideology; representation; difference; othering; power

1. Introduction

The unprecedented media coverage of the ‘Maddie case’ worldwide lends itself to an analysis of the many ways in which her story is told. How do the media portray the actors, render the events and organise the ‘plot’? In particular, news reports and opinion articles in British quality and popular newspapers provide a large and

miscellaneous scope of narrative constructions of the characters, events and facts related to the disappearance of the 3-year-old girl.

This article aims at examining some of these constructions with a focus on issues of ethnicity and difference involved in press treatments of the ensuing police investigation in Portugal. The corpus of analysis is a set of news reports and opinion articles taken from two British newspapers – a quality paper, *The Times*, and a tabloid, *The Sun* – spanning over a year (namely, from May 2007 to July 2008). Using a critical discourse analysis framework, the article intends to unveil features of narrative perspective and focalisation, along with marks of subjectivity and alignment. It also intends to assess how far the affirmation of national identity and the building of ethnic difference implicate related questions of power, and whether or not they put forth an ideological product that naturalises failure.

In light of this, two preliminary sections, of a theoretical nature, are in order. The first one addresses the questions of difference and power against a critical discourse analysis background. Accordingly, it discusses the issues of the ideological construction of identity in media discourse and the production of biased portrayals of minority groups in the press from the point of view of such authors as Fairclough (2001, 2003), van Dijk (1991, 1998), Fowler (1991), Myers et al (1996), Hafez (2000) and Riggins (1997). The second section frames the questions of ethnicity and national identity – two core issues in the present media case – by looking into contributions by Anderson (2006), Barbour (2000), May (2001), Said (1978), Singh (1999), and Smith (1991), among others.

2. Difference, Power and the Media

From a critical discourse analysis perspective, media constructions of difference – be it ethnic, national, gender, age or otherwise – are closely related to the question of power and, by extension, of ideology. The media, controlled by existing power-holders, provide ideologically manipulated representations of subjects and events so as to serve the interests of the dominant classes. According to Fairclough (2001: 27), ideological power – or “the power to project one’s practices as universal and common sense” – is exercised in *discourse* by such institutions as education, the law, religion, the family and the media, in such a way as to “manufacture consent [...] or at least acquiescence” (2001: 3), which is simpler than coercion or repression. In light of this, *ideology* means the “institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking” and regard as ‘natural’ (2001: 3). News discourse, in particular, being a “heavily interpretative and constructive process, not simply a report of ‘the facts’”, can be regarded as “part of the apparatus of governance” (2003: 85). Furthermore, the mass media involve “hidden relations of power” (2001: 41), insofar as their discourse is subtle, indirect, and characterised by a sharp divide between producers and receivers. In the particular case of the British press, Fairclough states that “the balance of sources and perspectives and ideology is overwhelmingly in favour of existing power-holders” (2001: 43).

Van Dijk sides with Fairclough in claiming that the “exercise of power in modern, democratic societies, is no longer primarily coercive, but persuasive, that is, ideological” (1991: 37, cf. also 1998: 162). For a powerful group to control other people, then, it is essential to control their group attitudes and especially their “fundamental, attitude producing, ideologies”. Therefore, ideologies are model vehicles for prejudice and discrimination, especially because prejudice, in van Dijk’s view, “is not a personal opinion about other groups”, but rather “a shared group-based attitude” (1991: 38, see also 1998: 114, 163). Van Dijk’s *Racism and the Press* (1991) offers a framework of analysis that perfectly lends itself to dealing with other instances of *mediated* prejudice, like ethnicism, as is the case of the present study. According to van Dijk, the media “provide specially selected ‘facts’ and preformulate preferred meanings and opinions”: thus, if the press endorses, say, a xenophobic ideology, it is likely to “ignore, discredit, marginalise, or problematise [another country’s] positions or groups” (1991: 39).

Along similar lines, Fowler (1991: 4–11) analyses the discourse of the news media, stating that “news is a representation of the world in language” which imposes “a structure of values, social and economic in origin, on whatever is represented.” Like every discourse, the press “is not a value-free reflection of ‘facts’”. Rather, it provides a pre-selected account of events, which gives us a “partial view of the world” and is socially, economically and politically situated. As a result, the “world of the press is not the real world, but a world skewed and judged”, based on stereotypes and ideology-laden patterns. Hence the need for a “critical linguistics”, Fowler claims, whose task is to “enquire into the relations between signs, meanings and the social and historical conditions which govern the semi-otic structure of discourse.”

The dual role of the print media in shaping readers’ opinions and in disseminating the political discourses of the ruling groups is essential to acknowledge, as other critical discourse analysts do. According to Myers et al. (1996: 23), the press is not only a “powerful shaper of public perceptions” of events, but also “a medium by which national political discourses are disseminated”. The importance of the press in spreading ethnic (as well as other) stereotypes also derives from its graphic nature and consumption practices. As Hafez (2000: 506) remarks, newspapers “are a rich source of stereotyping because their headlines and illustrations are hurriedly read.”

Riggins (1997) elaborates on the “rhetoric of othering” which stereotypes and dehumanises minority (non-white Christian male) groups. By looking at print media news discourse, he analyses the recurrent linguistic ploys it uses – such as foregrounding, backgrounding, presupposing, etc – in an attempt to show that these mechanisms create a sense of exclusion, inferiority and guilt. Besides, the newspapers render the minority groups’ beliefs as irrational, obtuse or cruel, at the same time as they “silence” their voices by omitting relevant information. Vagueness, satire and exaggeration are yet other strategies which the press employs to exercise prejudice and provide a negative construction of difference.

3. Press narratives on Maddie and the question of national identity

In July 2008, when the Portuguese police announced the imminent closure of the ‘Maddie case’, with no arrest made, no body found and no substantial evidence gathered, the story of the missing girl became news again. In fact, it never ceased to be. After more than one full year of an agitated investigation (it all started on May 3, 2007), the amount of information regarding the topic that leaked to the press, or was simply made up, was so huge that some newspapers on-line present Maddie as a separate folder. With the proviso that the selection of texts has proved a gigantic task, the focus of the present analysis is to reveal a number of negative portrayals of the Portuguese and to discuss the extent to which they are constructed as an alien ‘other’. Given that the two nationalities – the British and the Portuguese – are the actors in this process, it is unavoidable to address the concepts of *nation* and, by extension, of *ethnicity*.

The question of national identity bears on a satellite notion – that of ethnicity (authors such as Gellner 2006 and Anderson 2006 support this view, while others, like Hobsbaum 1990 and Carmichael 2000, claim that nationhood and ethnicity are unrelated). At the outset of this discussion, it is important to point out that the Greek root of the word *ethnic* is *ETHNOS*, meaning ‘nation’, which can be roughly defined as a community which has a common history, language, cultural traditions and religious affiliations. Springing from these factors are such ethnic markers as, for instance, family practices or types of food, which set a foreign group apart from the mainstream community. In the light of this, the notion of ethnicity is tightly connected with that of “difference”: as Singh (1999: 84) puts it, “the use of ethnic really means ‘different’”. Within a multicultural nation-state, different ethnicities will be minority groups, seen as atypical and exceptional, whereas the majority culture will be regarded as the norm.

Looking at the concept of “nation” from different theoretical traditions reveals several other notions – some convergent, others conflicting – which makes the term, together with the neighbouring words *nationality* and, crucially, *nationalism*, “notoriously difficult to define”, as Anderson (2006: 3) remarks. From a variety of tentative definitions, we could pick up Smith’s (1991: 14), which has gained widespread support among social scientists: a nation is a “named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights for all members.” The legally-based nature of this approach strikes a chord in the idea of what a ‘country’ is. Conversely, Anderson’s four-fold definition of *nation* is more conceptual and emotional than institutional: it is a “political community” which is “imagined”, “limited” and “sovereign” (2006: 6–7). It is a ‘community’ because, despite the discrimination and inequity it may shelter, it is conceived as a “deep, horizontal comradeship”; it is ‘imagined’ because the members of all groups larger than primeval face-to-face tribes never know most of their fellow-members; it is ‘limited’ because its boundaries are finite, albeit elastic; and it is ‘sovereign’ because all nations dream of being free and autonomous. On the other

hand, nationalism, Anderson (2006: 141) holds, carries a “near-pathological character”, having “roots in fear and hatred of the Other”.

May (2001: 61–64) sets the discussion of the concept of nation against that of “modern nation”. This, he claims, is directly equated with the political organization of a nation-state, therefore being both a “historical culture-community” (people living within a nation-state) and a “legal political” one (*the* nation-state). Curiously enough, May points out, very few of 200 contemporary nation-states have existed for more than two centuries – he refers to Portugal (dating back to 1143), as well as France, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Morocco, Japan, China, Iran and Ethiopia. Modern nation-states are characterised by a bureaucratic organization, a capitalist economy, the exercise of external rights of self-determination, a literate and scientific culture and, crucially, a significant and distinctive language.

It is important to distinguish the concepts of nation-state, or “modern nation”, from that of nation *tout court*. Barbour (2000: 5) accurately explains that “the nation-state is a legally defined entity”, whereas “nation is a population”. If it is true that most modern populations that regard themselves as nations aspire to attain a nation-state visibility, other populations *are* nations before they achieve independence, as was the case of the republics of the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, Barbour adds, nowadays it is still possible to mention several cases in which nation-states and nations do not overlap, as happens when countries contain populations that do not abide by the national identity promulgated by the state. Many Scots and Welsh in Great-Britain illustrate this case. In fact, as Barbour puts it, “for many people an ethnic (non-national) identity is so strong that it renders the (state-orientated) national identity so weak as to be virtually unimportant” (2000: 5).

The case of the Welsh is particularly significant insofar as a great deal of today’s research on nations and nationalisms, ethnicity and ethnicisms, evolves around the question of language. There is indeed a broad literature regarding the role of language in defining and sustaining ethnic and national identities. Examples include Fishman’s (1989) groundbreaking study, focusing on the language and ethnicity of minorities and on the need for a worldwide cultural democracy and ethnic pluralism; Williams’ (1994) approach to language and nationalist political activity in Wales and Quebec; Grillo’s (1998) examination of the cultural politics of difference; Garrett et al’s (2003) analysis of language attitudes in multi-ethnic nation-states; and May’s (2001) pioneering work on ethnic and ethno-national movements and conflicts that are language-based, as well as some nation-states’ preoccupation with establishing a ‘common’ language and culture via mass education. Among edited books on the ethnic questions raised by language stands out O’Reilly’s (2001) two-volume collection of sociologically and ethnographically oriented articles on the politics of language in Europe, which allows the reader to compare developments in different ethno-linguistic revival movements within the European Union.

The lavish debate on the questions of ethnicity and national identity, springing mainly from ethnography and anthropology, is too broad to be possibly covered

here. Suffice it to mention such cornerstone titles as Eriksen (1993, 2002), Berdún et al (1997), Baumann (1999), Cohen (1999), Ozkirimli (2000), and Gellner (2006). One last essential reference, which bears on the self-proclaimed superiority of some nations over others, is Said's (1978) classic, albeit polemic, reflection on colonialism. His words, which bear on western views of the East, are worth quoting, since they can be borrowed to illustrate the British news discourse on the Maddie case as regards the Portuguese nation:

How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')? (1978: 325)

The issues of ethnicity and national identity are inherent in the news coverage of Madeleine McCann's disappearance, insofar as the media established, from early on, a serious rant between the two countries involved – which is the same as saying, between the two 'nation-states'. *The Times* was so explicit in acknowledging this divide as to title that a "clash of cultures" was "closing in on the McCanns" (A3). Besides, the importance of the international repercussions of the largely demeaning media treatment of the Portuguese nationality is important to consider. As a Portuguese MP allegedly told *The Times*, "This is the highest profile case ever to be handled by the PJ [Portuguese "Policia Judiciária", an investigation police force], and besides the judicial issues, this case directly affects the *image* the world has of Portugal" (A10) [emphasis mine]. Images entail 'representations' on the production end and 'identities' on the reception one – two key terms on which the present paper dwells.

4. Representing the Portuguese in the Maddie case

This section describes how British newspapers construct and articulate local meanings from a lexical, grammatical and pragmatic point of view. This analysis is aimed at unveiling the ideological backdrop that frames the different narrative productions. It applies van Dijk's (1991) three-fold descriptive framework, namely 'perspective / implicit meanings / semantic strategies'. The two newspapers analysed – *The Times* and *The Sun* – will be referred to by means of letters, respectively A and B, whereas the articles selected (15 from each newspaper) will be numbered according to their position on the annex list (which is organized chronologically, from least to most recent).

4.1. Perspective – Word and topic choice

Perspective is, as van Dijk (1991: 179) claims, an important feature of discourse meaning, inasmuch as it reveals whether or not the speaker sympathises with one news actor rather than another. Being both a global and a local characteristic of discourse, perspective or point of view may apply to semantic and pragmatic strategies throughout the whole text, or to single words and sentences. Let us now focus on single words, that is, on lexical choice, starting with adjectives.

The variety of negative adjectives applied to the Portuguese police is significant. The following is just a sample, ranging from cognitive, through social, to professional, cultural, emotional and personal characteristics. All of them, as is typical of adjectives, express subjective opinions. The first three passages, next, contain adjectives within stretches of reported speech. “In other words, the journalist does not directly use adjectives of his/her own choosing to qualify the nouns, but quotes the (disparaging) adjectives which other people have used:”

British newspapers have painted the Portuguese authorities as **bumbling** and **inept**. (A1)

Police have also been accused of being **uncommunicative** and **inconsistent** with the press. (A1)

They [the men from Portugal’s crime squad] have already been criticised for being **slow** to seal off the apartment. (A3)

The next cases, conversely, are all instances of direct speech. Just like reported speech, quoting directly from people’s words may at first sight seem to clear the paper from any bias guilt. Yet, even if apparently the papers do not endorse such judgements, they contribute to their dissemination. Actually, the point I want to make is that the very voicing of these opinions, with no further comment or framing, helps to reinforce them:

A furious family friend slammed the latest reports [by Portuguese police] as “**inaccurate**, **unsubstantiated** and **malicious**.” (B1)

The blunder by **careless** Portuguese cops [cigarette ash contaminating evidence] was discovered by forensic experts... It is outrageous to think that **messy** cops could have ruined vital evidence about Maddie’s abductor... And a holidaymaker staying nearby branded the forensic operation “**haphazard**”: “It just looked all **wrong**.” (B2)

A friend of the McCanns added: “(...) They feel the chances of catching Madeleine’s abductor may well have been affected by the **slapdash** way the forensics and police have behaved.” (B3)

The British experts accused the Portuguese of ‘**unprofessional** behaviour’ saying that their collection of the samples could have been handled in a better manner. (B5)

Yesterday Mr Mitchell attacked the Portuguese cops’ “smear campaign”

against the parents as “**shameless and brazen**”. (B9)

Last week Mr Mitchell warned police that ‘the gloves were off’ following the leak and condemned it as ‘**brazen, shameless and cackhanded**.’ (B10)

A FRIEND of Kate and Gerry McCann, who was with them the night their daughter Madeleine disappeared, has accused detectives of “**outrageous**” leaking of information to the media. (B11)

Kate’s dad Brian Healy said: “It’s **unbelievable, obscene and disgusting** that the police think Kate or Gerry were involved. (B12)

More seldom, however, are the adjectives attributable to the journalist, rather than to a source external to the newspaper. The next extract illustrates adjective usage as authored by the reporter:

The press has urged caution, expressed compassion and been reluctant to judge the McCanns, if not the apparently **shambolic** Portuguese police. (A2)

Noun choice goes down a similar path of negative portraying. In fact, the following passages confirm the representation of the Portuguese police as inept and chaotic:

The police theory was described as “**total rubbish**”. (A6)

It was **chaos**. The world and his dog were in that room just to look under a bed. It was **crazy** allowing so many people to trample through. (A9)

The McCann family spokesman, Clarence Mitchell, rejected as “**utter nonsense**” claims [by Portuguese police] that the campaign had hindered the investigation. (A9)

The tabloid *The Sun* goes as far as typing open insults:

Brian blasted the police for “time-wasting” instead of looking for Madeleine. Gerry’s sister Philomena branded them “**imbeciles**”. (B12)

Another trend the media seem to follow as far as noun selection goes is to label the Portuguese police as the “enemies” of the McCanns’, on the grounds of the harm their “leaked statements” have caused the couple:

For every chat with the couple’s cheerleaders, how about a set-to with their **enemies**; whoever it is in Brussels who opposes the introduction of the US-style Amber Alert system that the couple want to have introduced across Europe; **the Portuguese police**. There was a good bit when it emerged that **leaked police statements** had coincided with the day of the McCanns’ Brussels trips, a smear, the McCanns thought. (A12)

An important point to make regarding lexical choice has to do with the repetition of certain key-words. ‘Failure’ is one such case, which pervades through the present corpus, be it openly, as in the next passage, or implicitly. Also, it should be noted that the construction of this extract reports on a rejection of the ‘failure’ label at the same time as it repeats it three times. In other words, by denying the claim, the reporter paradoxically confirms it, all the while making its echo stick to the readers’ ears:

He [the Portuguese justice minister, Alberto Costa] rejected accusations that the nine month investigation, which has been marred by accusations of mistakes by Portuguese detectives, had been a **failure**. “People are talking of an ultimate **failure**, they are suggesting **failure** ... I would say that that is premature,” he said. (A10)

If newspapers characterise the Portuguese as recurrently incompetent, clumsy and untrustworthy, the representation tends to become naturalised (cf. Fowler 1991: 125). Also, linking the image of Portuguese police with failure tends to reify such a view as commonsensical. As Fairclough (2003: 85) argues, the naturalisation of certain identity portrayals derives from choice of topic, or ‘selectivity’, which is ideologically made: if the topics of news stories about the investigation were also positive, for instance, if they also focalised on the amount of police staff and facilities readily used to search for Madeleine, or on the support and care with which the local population reacted, etc., the representation of the national group would be less biased.

4.2. Implicit meanings

Besides lexical choice, van Dijk (1991: 181) discusses ‘implicit meanings’ as important players in the semantic construction of news discourse, since they are a short-cut to the journalists’ underlying ideologies. There are four categories to analyse: implications, presuppositions, vagueness and overcompleteness / irrelevance. To begin with, the use of the verb ‘admit’ *implicates* the truth of its complement, as can be seen in the following two extracts, both of which put forth negative ‘truths’ involving the subjects:

The officers from the Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR) **admitted** that a “circus” of people trampled through Madeleine’s bedroom on the night she went missing. (A9)

Police – who **admit** they have leaked information to the press – also revealed they plan to reinterview the friends who ate with the McCanns the night Maddie vanished. (B2)

The noun ‘failure’, analysed earlier, also implies that something should have been done but was not:

British police experts have said that vital evidence could have been destroyed or contaminated because of the **failure** to seal off the ground-floor flat and the surrounding area. (A9)

Another typical example of implication is the use of *only*. In the following passage, it implies that the Portuguese police should have pursued “other” lines of inquiry, but failed to:

For the past 12 months the Portuguese police have pursued **only** two lines of inquiry: that Gerry and Kate McCann were involved or that their daughter was abducted by a stranger. (A15)

Placing a piece of information immediately after another may also carry implications. In the next sentence, the two clauses are linked to one another via the conjunction *and*, which implies that the second is a result of the first. In rhetoric, this is usually referred to as a “post hoc ergo propter hoc” fallacy (“after the fact, therefore because of the fact”), as e.g. Tuman (2003: 83) points out. Once again, the Portuguese police are to blame for the McCanns’ unjust suffering:

“They have suffered for far too long in this process **and** the Portuguese authorities must now lift their ‘arguido’ status,” he said. (A14)

A very interesting case of implication occurs when *The Times* refers to the demotion of a Portuguese head of inquiry. By saying that this was due to the fact that he criticised the British police, the implied message is that the British police are untouchable, i.e., flawless and perfect, and if anyone (even the head of investigation) dares criticise them, the result will be punishment:

Although the briefings stopped this month after the head of the inquiry **was demoted for criticising British police**, British and Portuguese media have continued to report a series of highly damaging allegations. (A7)

A final example of implication takes place at the end of the court process, when Kate and Gerry eventually see their status of ‘formal suspects’ lifted. When the reporter states that they were expecting “much greater” disclosure of information by the Portuguese police, the implication is that they did not reveal “enough” information – which is yet another piece of criticism against the Portuguese authorities:

The couple were also looking forward to **much greater** disclosure of information once their status as “arguidos” or formal suspects was, as

expected, lifted by the Portuguese authorities, he said. (B15)

Presuppositions are present in the corpus as well. In the following extract, the complement clauses used (a purpose clause in the first case and a noun clause in the second) also presuppose the truth of what they predicate, respectively: that the McCanns were operating in a twilight zone and that there are anti-McCann smears circulating in Portugal:

This just goes to show what a **twilight zone** we are operating in. (Clarence Mitchell) (B1)

The McCanns' wealthy benefactor Brian Kennedy hired Mr Mitchell in September, in **part to counter the anti-McCann smears circulating in Portugal**. (B10)

The next passage – a quote by an anonymous actor in the story – also presupposes that Portuguese 'locals' are dark-haired, which not only conveys a common ethnic stereotype but also implicates that the culprit, whoever s/he is, is Portuguese:

The nanny said the **dark-haired** man, aged 25 to 35, "looked like a local" (B3)

Another interesting case of presupposition in the corpus takes place in a report on the McCanns' lift of their "arguido" status. On account of this fact, they are reportedly free to return to Portugal, where they can "properly" – the adverb is very significant – start the investigation anew. Of course, the presupposition which underlies the statement is that the investigation carried out prior to that point is not a "proper" one:

When their *arguido* status is lifted the couple could return to Portugal without fear of arrest or prosecution. They could **then properly** coordinate an investigation to find out what really did happen to Madeleine. (A15)

Thirdly, cases of vagueness also hint at implicit meanings. The use of passive voice in the following extract conceals agency (cf. Fairclough 2001: 92–3), even though it hints at it in the same sentence. In other words, the reporter suggests that the Portuguese police 'widely misused' the lab findings even though he does not directly state so:

The laboratory was reported yesterday to have sent an e-mail to Portuguese police complaining that its findings had been "**widely misused**". (A5)

The fourth category on van Dijk's list of implicit meaning strategies – overcompleteness – conveys biased perspective (cf. 1991: 185). Providing additional details, extra information and side comments may be a way of surreptitiously passing

judgements. This can be spotted in the next cases. Both of them focus on Portuguese police detectives who claim that Maddie was killed, and both of them provide additional information, as an aside, so as to discredit the police investigators:

Encarnacao and Amaral, the men from Portugal's crime squad, are under pressure to justify their decision to treat the McCanns as suspects. **On top of this, Amaral is facing criminal charges** (A3)

Paulo Cristovao, **who is facing trial over torture allegations**, describes [in his book, "The star of Madeleine"] how missing Maddie did not survive May 3, 2007 – the night she vanished. (B7)

Likewise, the next quote also uses a relative clause to convey the idea of British excellence as opposed to Portuguese inefficiency:

Police should lift their arguido status and should pass their information over to our investigators **who continue to work on the case**. (B14)

4.3. Semantic strategies

The so-called 'semantic strategies' constitute goal-directed properties of discourse used to further implicit or explicit argumentation (van Dijk 1991: 187). Some such strategies are mitigation, ridicule, reversal, comparison, contrast and division (van Dijk 1991: 190–7). Establishing contrast is a recurrent semantic strategy used in the corpus as regards the two nationalities, which creates a division and implies irreconcilable differences. It is curious to notice that the existence of cultural differences is explicitly stated in the second case, whereas in the first there is a suggestion of Portuguese ineptness which is attributed to the country's poor infrastructures – as if this fact somewhat naturalises Portuguese failure:

Portuguese police have had fewer leads to follow than their British counterparts. The country does not have the extensive CCTV network that blankets Britain, making kidnapping cases far more difficult to crack. (A1)
England and Portugal are the world's oldest allies but there are some things the two cultures find hard to understand in each other. (A3)

A similar contrast – focusing on the Portuguese lack of specialised staff – is set in the following passage:

"It's a total mess. It is unbelievable that **in Portugal** a technical team which preserves evidence has not yet been created." (B3)

An interesting contrast between the two nationalities occurs when reporting on the Portuguese police's reconstruction of the night of Maddie's disappearance. Besides stating that this is a sign that the police "have no idea what happened", the following passage uses a curiously patronising tone in saying that the UK police "had advised" their Portuguese counterparts of the need to hold the reconstruction a long time ago. In other words, the incompetence of one party as opposed to the other's professionalism:

Critics will see it [the reconstruction of the crime] as a sign that the **investigators have no idea** what happened to Madeleine. Experts from Scotland Yard and Leicestershire Constabulary **had advised** Portuguese police to hold a reconstruction within weeks of Madeleine's disappearance. (A11)

Likewise, the following passages show that, as van Dijk remarks (1991: 197, 1998: 267), there is an "implicit contrast between (good) 'us' and (bad) 'them'". The use of third-person plural personal pronouns indicates this division and suggests distance and disaffiliation:

THEY had no leads nor evidence, so the Portuguese police turned on the McCanns. After more than a month covertly investigating them, **they** brought the couple in for questioning – and officially made them suspects in their daughter's disappearance. (B12)

The use of deictics – like 'this/that', which is very often used in the phrase 'this country' – also helps to convey the idea that 'we' (British) know how to do things properly, as opposed to 'them' (Portuguese). A very interesting case reports on the words by former Scotland Yard Chief, and is present in both *The Times* and *The Sun*:

THE revelations came as former Scotland Yard Chief Lord Stevens slammed Portuguese cops for the way **they** have conducted the case, saying: "There's absolutely no chance they would be charged with murder in **this** country." (B2) (Also A8)

Albeit rare, given perhaps the nature of the topic (the tragic disappearance of a child), the use of 'ridicule' against the Portuguese butt is present in the corpus too, as happens in the following extract from *The Sun*:

El Mundo said she [the Nanny] reported the sighting to her [Portuguese] boss – but he "seemed more worried about the rats". (B2)

The next cases are instances of comparisons. The first conveys the idea that there is a Portuguese 'witch-hunt' against the McCanns, and that it is the worst ever

seen, whereas the second compares the work done by Portuguese police unfavourably to the one by the McCanns' private detective team:

“I’ve been a detective at the most senior level for 30 years and have never seen such a witch-hunt, or one based on such flimsy evidence.” (Lord Stevens of Kirkwhelpington, the former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police) (A8), (B2)

The McCanns believe the only work to find Maddie is being done by their team of private investigators from the Controlled Risks Group. (B1)

The next extract is the perfect example of a grammatical comparison targeted at the Portuguese police, in which the adverb *badly* is used in the superlative degree (*worst*):

The problem with the police investigation was that it was crucially flawed from the very start. It was the **worst-preserved** crime scene I have seen. (A15)

Even more common than comparison is the semantic strategy of ‘reversal’. Although Kate and Gerry McCann are the official suspects, the newspapers manage to turn them into prosecutors, and the Portuguese police into suspects. The following extracts illustrate this reversal of roles – between those who should be investigated and eventually punished for wrongdoing on the one hand, and those who hold the moral prerogative to judge on the other:

KATE and Gerry McCann **could sue Portuguese cops** for £1million for failing to find missing daughter Maddie. (B4)

[...] we now want the Portuguese government to mount an investigation into how elements within their own police force can apparently do this with impunity... (B8)

“The Portuguese police have yet to explain how these statements came to be leaked [...] Their criticism of me doesn’t explain how that confidential material came to be made public, and with very curious timing.” (B10)

The strategy of reversal is particularly obvious when *The Times* portrays the McCanns as being the “victims” of Portuguese officers, even though they are facing charges of neglect and murder, among others (to be precise, “homicide, abandonment, concealment of a corpse and abduction” – cf. A13):

The briefings by Portuguese officers led to complaints by friends of the McCanns that the couple were the **victims** of “black propaganda”. (A7)

Much along the same lines, *The Sun* clearly *reverses* the spotlight of guilt onto the Portuguese police, by stating that they were the very ones to “question the validity” of their own proceedings:

You cannot have the head of the police force **openly questioning the validity** of the way in which they [Kate and Gerry McCann] were made suspects and then not have a review. (B7)

Lastly, it is interesting to point out the presence of ‘mitigation and excuse’ – another semantic strategy which van Dijk posits (1991: 190). In the next passage, the British spokesman mitigates the McCanns’ abandonment of their children on May 3 and labels their behaviour as ‘responsible parenting’. Curiously enough, Mr Mitchell mentions ‘that week’ instead of ‘that night’, which is the core of the neglect case:

“If there is any suggestion of neglect charges being considered that will be vigorously denied because the legal advice that Kate and Gerry have received both in Portugal and Britain is that legally speaking everything they were doing that week was well within the bounds of **responsible parenting**.” (B13)

5. Conclusion

The corpus under focus represents the British as a single homogeneous group, laden with positive features, as opposed to the Portuguese, a disaffiliated group that embodies a set of negative characteristics – such as incompetence, ineptness and unprofessionalism, as well as irresponsibility, carelessness and even stupidity. The ethnically prejudiced tinge of these judgements cannot be ignored in a discursive construction that recurrently sets a division between the two nationalities. This division is established through metonymic extension, since the initial object of criticism is but a group (the Portuguese police) within a larger group (the Portuguese people). The British (newspapers, forensic experts, spokespersons) also assume an active self-righteous posture, as seen in their reported actions: they *accuse*, *attack*, *condemn*, *blast* and *slam* the Portuguese, who are correspondingly represented as deserving targets of such disapproval.

The employment of van Dijk’s analytical framework has allowed us to unveil a rhetoric of difference in the newspaper extracts, with a systematic repetition of negative labelling and unfavourable portrayals of a group which in accordance becomes, commonsensically and as if ‘naturally’, the ‘alien other’. In fact, the narration of the events and characters in the Maddie case by both papers – quality and popular alike – reveals biased perspectives and focalisations, always to the detriment of the opponent group. Ideologically, this amounts to a manipulation of information material that may serve nationalist purposes, insofar as the ‘image’

of the British is rendered as being intact and, also by metonymic extension, as being as *flawless* and *innocent* as the McCanns'. Discredited and disempowered, the Portuguese actors in this crime story become 'victims' – as if the very 'smear campaign' they are so heartily accused of were now being targeted at 'them', the purported villains. In a nutshell, the analysis just presented reveals a logic of 'othering' which renders the Portuguese nationality as ethnically inferior to, and culturally poorer than, the model of 'Britishness' which the newspapers embody.

Annex (Corpus of analysis)

A. *The Times*:

1. "Angry Portuguese ask why couple left the children alone". May 9, 2007;
2. "Madeleine McCann: You are all guilty". Sep 16, 2007;
3. "Police leaks, gossip and a clash of cultures close in on McCanns". Sep 16, 2007;
4. "Portuguese judge balks at ordering Madeleine McCann's parents to return". Sep 17, 2007;
5. "No body means no conviction of the McCanns, admits prosecutor". Sep 25, 2007;
6. "Kate and Gerry McCann's friends refute 'missing hours' claim as smears continue". Sep 29, 2007;
7. "Why I'm being persecuted, by Kate McCann". Oct 17, 2007;
8. "Police speak to Kate and Gerry McCann's friends". Oct 22, 2007;
9. "Kate and Gerry McCann 'created information monster' that hindered search for Madeleine McCann". Nov 6, 2007;
10. "Madeleine McCann investigation 'nearing conclusion'". Feb 14, 2008.
11. "Madeleine McCann's parents called back to Portugal". April 8, 2008;
12. "Madeleine, One Year On: Campaign for Change". May 1, 2008;
13. "Madeleine McCann's parents investigated for neglect". May 29, 2008;
14. "Madeleine McCann inquiry ends: 'parents to be cleared'". July 2, 2008;
15. "Madeleine McCann was abducted by an opportunistic paedophile". July 28, 2008.

B. *The Sun*:

1. "McCanns 'live in twilight world'". Oct 9, 2007;
2. "Maddie cops' ash on clues". Oct 22, 2007;
3. "Nanny: I saw lurker in bushes". Oct 31, 2007;
4. "McCanns may sue dud cops". Nov 9, 2007;
5. "Maddie cops row over DNA". Dec 6, 2007;
6. "Shut up: Judge told Maddie cop". Feb 5, 2008;
7. "McCanns accept apology". Mar 19, 2008;

8. "McCanns' fury at police leak". April 11, 2008;
9. "Leaks, smears ... now plain lies". April 12, 2008;
10. "McCann cops deny 'smears'". April 15, 2008;
11. "McCann friend blasts police". April 24, 2008;
12. "'A year in jail and you can go home'". April 29, 2008;
13. "'Maddie parents neglect rap' fear". May 29, 2008;
14. "Portuguese cops deny Maddie case is over". July 1, 2008;
15. "Cops hand 80 files to McCanns". July 7, 2008.

Note

This article is an enlarged version of a paper presented in a seminar entitled "Changing narratives in British Media", at the ESSE 9 Conference (European Society for the Study of English), which took place at Aarhus University, Denmark, on 22–26 August 2008.

References

- Anderson, Benedict (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Barbour, Stephen (2000) 'Nationalism, Language, Europe'. In: Barbour Stephen and Cathie Carmichael (eds.) *Language and Nationalism in Europe*. Oxford: OUP, 1–17.
- Baumann, Gerd (1999) *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities*. New York: Routledge.
- Berdún, Guibernau, M. Montserrat and John Rex (1997) *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Migration*. Cambridge, UK / Malden, MA: Polity Press; Blackwell Publishers.
- Carmichael, Cathie (2000) 'Language and Nationalism in the Balkans'. In: Barbour Stephen and Cathie Carmichael (eds.) *Language and Nationalism in Europe*. Oxford: OUP, 221–239.
- Cohen, Phil (1999) *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms?* London and New York: Zed Books.
- Eriksen, Thomas (1993) *Us and Them in Modern Societies: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Mauritius, Trinidad and Beyond*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.
- Eriksen, Thomas (2002) *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fairclough, Norman (2001) *Language and Power*. 2nd ed. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, Norman (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London-NY: Routledge.
- Fishman, Joshua A. (1989) *Language & Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*. London: Multilingual Matters.
- Fowler, Roger (1991) *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Friesen, John W. (1993) *When Cultures Clash: Case Studies in Multiculturalism*. 2nd ed. Calgary, Alta: Detselig.
- Garrett, Peter, Nikolas Coupland and Angie Williams (2003) *Investigating Language Attitudes: Social Meanings of Dialect, Ethnicity and Performance*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Gellner, Ernest (2006) *Nations and Nationalism (New Perspectives on the Past)*. 2nd ed. London: WileyBlackwell.
- Grillo, R. D. (1998) *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference: State, Culture, and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press.

- Hafez, Ola (2000) 'Book review of S.H. Riggins (ed.) (1997)'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32, 505–511.
- Hobsbaum, E. (1990) *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: CUP.
- May, Stephen (2001) *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language*. London: Longman.
- Myers, Garth, Thomas Klak and Timothy Koehl (1996) 'The inscription of difference: news coverage of the conflicts on Rwanda and Bosnia'. *Political Geography*, 15(1), 21–46.
- O'Reilly, Camille C. (ed.) (2001) *Language, Ethnicity and the State: Minority Languages in the European Union. Vol 1*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Ozkirimli, Umut (2000) *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Riggins, Stephen H. (ed.) (1997) *The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Riggins, Stephen H. (1997) 'The Rhetoric of Othering'. In: Riggins, Stephen H. (ed.) (1997) *The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 3–29.
- Said, Edward W. (1978) *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 25th anniversary ed. 2003. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Singh, Ishtla (1999) 'Language and ethnicity'. In: Thomas, Linda and Shân Wareing (eds.) *Language, Society and Power*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Anthony D. (1991) *National Identity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Smith, Anthony D. (1995) *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*. London: Polity Press.
- Tuman, Joseph S. (2003) *Communicating terror: The rhetorical dimensions of terrorism*. London: Sage.
- van Dijk, Teun A. (1991) *Racism and the Press*. London and New York: Routledge.
- van Dijk, Teun A. (1998) *Ideology*. London: Sage.
- Williams, Colin H. (1994) *Called Unto Liberty: On Language and Nationalism*. London: Multilingual Matters.

ISABEL ERMIDA is associate professor of English Linguistics at the University of Minho in Portugal. She holds a Ph.D. on the language of humour and is the author of *The Language of Comic Narratives*, recently published by Mouton de Gruyter (2008, Berlin-New York). She has also authored *Linguistic Ambiguity in The Comedy of Errors by William Shakespeare* (1998) and *Humour, Language and Narrative: Towards a Discourse Analysis of Literary Comedy* (2003), both in Portugal. Her research interests include, besides humour studies, the linguistics/literature interface and sociolinguistic analysis, especially the expression of gender, age and ethnicity in media language, on which she has published various articles.

Address: Professor Isabel Ermida, Department of English Studies, University of Minho, 4710-320 Braga, Portugal. [email: iermida@ilch.uminho.pt]