

Evaluation and audience acceptance in biotech news texts

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Abstract

It is well known that news texts are not value neutral and that in these texts even genuinely factual statements can function as evaluations. Hence, only an analysis of the *types* of evaluation used will reveal the true picture of the attitudinal import of reporting texts. The paper explores these features by analysing the coverage of the biotechnology debate in one of the largest Danish newspapers, *Politiken*, during the first 9 months of 2004. The aim of this analysis is to uncover how seemingly objective and ‘neutral’ accounts of events and state of affairs can be used by journalists to significantly influence the attitudes of the readership.

In the analysis, it is shown that the feature Judgement (of people) is virtually absent, whereas Appreciation (of things) is quite frequent, reflecting the fact that the perceived risk factor associated with biotechnology was paramount in the said period. Furthermore, the metaphorical construction of the audience is discussed through the combination of conceptual and rhetorical theories. This combination allows for the assessment of metaphor’s role in constructing a conceptual common ground between the writer and his audience with the aim of convincing the audience of a particular viewpoint. Moreover, it is shown that the newspaper caters to a readership which sees risk as a societal and ethical issue rather than a scientific one. Along these lines, the imagined reader is constructed as a less change oriented person than the reader of the newspaper’s opinion articles.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, much research has been carried out to establish European public attitudes towards biotechnology. In Denmark, as in many other European countries, the genetic modification (GM) debate has been marked by a great deal of scepticism, significantly so in relation to the growing and spreading of GM crops as well as the consumption of food containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Generally, in food-related technologies research has pointed out that risks are considered high and benefits low (Frewer et al., 1995; Hviid Nielsen et al., 2002).

With scepticism being markedly stronger in Europe than in e.g. the US, various studies have tried to ascertain what causes scepticism to be strong and not least what could be done by scientists to meet the challenges experienced on European soil. One reason, it seems, is that at least in Denmark discursive constructions in the print media have to a large degree catered to the scepticism and feeling of risk voiced by the public, confirming the readership in its rejection of biotechnology as a safe alternative to conventional or organic food production and consumption (Holmgreen, 2008). Even more important, however, the construction of risk is not only visible in the media, but has also become

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institutionalized in societal rules and regulations (Breck, 2000), significantly hampering the scientific community's possibility of communicating and gaining acceptance of a different view. Thus, a dichotomy seems to have emerged between what the scientific community perceives as a technology with much potential and what the general public sees as a latent risk. The most notable outcome of this construction of a 'risk scenario' was the EU moratorium from 1999 to 2004 suspending all permissions to grow and market GM plants and crops.

However, 'risk' is here an ambiguous term, adding to the complexity of the above dichotomy. Studies have suggested that although risk forms part of the institutionalized discourse on biotechnology, the construction and assessment of risk in this context is made on the basis of objective, scientific criteria, ruling out ethical and societal arguments and concerns, and hence, creating public alienation (Breck, 2000; Cook et al., 2004; Wynne, 2001). Closely connected to this argument, and thus in support of a broader platform for risk assessment, is the public knowledge and experience of technology posing serious societal and environmental risks as exemplified by e.g. the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the 1980s, the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy scandal (the mad cow disease) in the UK in the 1990s, or the groundwater pollution by pesticides in Denmark in the 1990s (Bauer and Gaskell, 2002; Cook et al., 2006; Lassen and Jamieson, 2006). Thus, the scientific community is not only up against a general public which perceives of biotechnology as highly risky, but it must also seriously consider how to approach this sense of risk, both ideologically and communicatively.

It is against this background of attitudinal and discursive studies that the present analysis takes place, examining some of the argumentative and rhetorical choices made by journalists to present the above issues of risk and GMO to their readership and in this way contribute to the formation of public attitudes. The focus of the analysis is on the parts of news discourse, i.e. news articles, where information is presented as being 'neutral' and factual, although it may often be evaluative and value-laden. The reason for this focus is that although claiming to be the communicators of objective and impartial information, news reporters are seldom entirely neutral in their choice of events and words (Wilsher et al., 1985). Thus, many instances of attitudinal import are to be found in news texts, and through the use of its often implicit nature, the journalist is able to catch the reader 'off guard' and hence exercise significant influence on his/her attitudes and beliefs.

Overall, this approach may contribute to a better understanding of how a *Danish media discourse of risk* works argumentatively and rhetorically, i.e. how writers position themselves vis-à-vis the reader, providing the interested reader, including scientists in the biotech field, with tools for adopting a suitable communicative approach in response.

2. Data and method

The data for the analysis consist of a small corpus of eighteen news articles from the Danish broadsheet *Politiken* in the period from January till September 2004—a period in which the EU moratorium on GMOs was lifted, revitalizing the debate on biotechnology. The reason for this choice is, first of all, that in terms of readership, the newspaper is the second largest in Denmark (Nyhedsavisen.dk, 2007), and secondly, it is one of the most influential papers in setting a critical agenda on GMO. The choice is further supported by the fact that in the said period significantly more articles were published in *Politiken* on GMO and genetic modification than in Denmark's largest broadsheet, *Jyllands-Posten*.² Hence, in order to uncover salient rhetorical and argumentative choices in the Danish print press on biotechnology, this is an important source for analysis.

In order to find relevant articles, the Danish web-source Infomedia.dk, a leading provider of Danish media-intelligence, was accessed, and the terms *GMO* and *gensplejsning* ('genetic modification') along with the name of the newspaper were entered for the search. This approach rendered a number of articles including everything from short notes, over news articles to opinion pieces. However, since we were interested in studying statements purporting to be factual, we chose only to include the articles in our corpus that would be considered objective accounts of recent events, i.e. news articles proper, thus excluding editorial material such as leading articles, opinion articles as well as letters to the editor (for a survey of the genres of the press see Bell, 1991:12–15) This resulted in a corpus of eighteen articles amounting to 7378 words. This is a rather small corpus, but as the nature of this study is exploratory, it does have the advantage that the relevant examples can be found by means of a manual search.

² The search in the Danish web-source Infomedia.dk for *GMO* and *gensplejsning* rendered 236 articles from *Politiken* and 125 articles from *Jyllands-Posten*.

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