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Text bite news:

The metapragmatics of feature news

by

Tom Van Hout [©] (University of Antwerp & Leiden University)

Peter Burger [©] (Leiden University)

tom.vanhout@uantwerpen.be

p.burger@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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Text bite news: the metapragmatics of feature news

Tom Van Hout, University of Antwerp, Belgium & Leiden University, the Netherlands
Peter Burger, Leiden University, the Netherlands

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Abstract

Drawing on a weekly news feature of journalistic metadiscourse published on a Belgian news site, this paper examines journalists' uptake of political (mis)communication. We label such mediatized speech events *text bites*. Text bites present us with juicy or otherwise revealing bits of reported speech about the main characters: the politician whose words are being quoted and the journalist captioning the quote. Rather than speak for themselves, the quotes speak through recontextualization - that is, through the inflection of prior discourse with new meanings. Drawing on the linguistic anthropology of intertextuality, we analyze how the journalistic responses evaluate the reported politicians, their statements, and their communicative performance. Findings show how a media logic conditions what politicians can and cannot say, to whom and about whom, and how journalists portray politicians who do not comply with this logic. Evaluations of the moral and verbal merits of what politicians do with words evince an appreciation for colorful characters, self-deprecatory humor, plain language, and stylistic craftsmanship. Media criticism is generally rebuffed: text bites do boundary work, demarcating the professional territory of journalists and politicians. Text bites address a highly media literate readership of news consumers who recognize the characters in the plotline of political communication.

keywords: news quotes, political communication, metapragmatics, mediatization, message, boundary work

1. Introduction

Following Agha (2011b: 171), we observe that metadiscourse – and more specifically, news discourse about reported speech – can serve as a semiotic resource for constructing “figures of personhood”, or recognizable social personae, “by mediatized institutions in contemporary society”. The coherence attributed to such interdiscursive representations of performable behavior is open to reinterpretation and remediation. Our interest in this paper lies in tracing how recycled snippets of political talk position speakers socially. How do journalists talk about politics and politicians through recontextualization? What recognizable social personae emerge when reported speech (about speech) gets re-reported? How do journalists voice politicians and their public performances? We address these questions by examining journalists' uptake of political (mis)communication. Following an outline of our theoretical and methodological framework, we analyze what we call *text bites*: soft news stories reduced to a single quote, captioned by short journalistic comments, and inviting the audience to evaluate the characters portrayed.

2. Theoretical framework

Within applied linguistics, the notion of intertextuality - that is, the historical and conceptual links between texts - often draws attention to genre (e.g. Pander Maat 2007). For a text to be recognized as, say, a news story, a number of genre conventions have to be met. Typically,

news stories report on social events in print, on air or online. They narrate newsworthy happenings and doings for public consumption. The style may foreground authorial presence ('news analysis') or authorial absence ('hard news'). The reported events are often communicative in nature, and so on. Interestingly, genre conventions can be bent and stretched in creative ways, sometimes leading to new genres such as soft news (Fürsich 2012), social news (Goode 2009) or fake news (Waisanen 2011).

Work within linguistic anthropology sees intertextuality as a form of "symbolic play, the drawing of iconic, indexical or other connections between texts, genres, and media to create meaning" (Peterson 2003: 69). This body of work traces the *circulation of discourse* across contexts of production and consumption in an attempt to connect micro-level events to macro-level institutional processes and ideologies (Briggs & Bauman 1992, Silverstein & Urban 1996). For instance, in their study of American electoral politics, Lempert & Silverstein (2012: 1) examine one such macro-level process: the circulation of what personal branding experts and political insiders call *message*, meaning "the politician's publicly imaginable 'character' presented to an electorate, with a biography and a moral profile crafted out of issues rendered of interest in the public sphere". Rather than denoting what politicians say about the issues, message has to do with the politician's performance (on and off the record, scripted and impromptu) of a recognizable social type and, of particular interest here, how their performance gets reconstructed in media representations. Indeed, readings of a public figure's message - someone's *intertextual ethos*, are always co-constructed, emerging "both within and across mass-mediated texts as different voices struggle to characterize a person and his or her discourse" (Oddo 2014: 50). We are dealing with speech events that can only be understood against the backdrop of *mediatization*, and more specifically, the highly intertextual media representations of people, their ideas and discourse (e.g. Cole & Pelicer 2012).

Hailed as both "a paradigmatic shift within media and communication research" (Hepp et al. 2015: 315) and critiqued as a "conceptual bandwagon" (Deacon & Stanyer 2014), mediatization refers loosely to the interplay of media, culture, and society and can be defined as "a broad meta-process of media-related social transformation" (Ekström et al. 2016: 1097). In sociolinguistics, mediatization is seen as an ongoing process of socio-cultural change driven by the saturation of media(ted) communication in society (Androutsopoulos 2014, Van Hout & Burger 2016). In linguistic anthropology, mediatization is defined in the broad sense as "institutional practices that reflexively link processes of communication to processes of commoditization" (Agha 2011a: 163) and in the more narrow sense as "the representational choices involved in the production and editing of text, image, and talk in the creation of media products" (Jaffe 2009: 572). Both definitions stress the intertextual nature of mediatization and how it involves "extracting the speech behavior of particular speakers or groups from a highly specific context and refracting and reshaping it to be inserted in another stream of representations" (Hiramoto & Park 2010: 179). Drawing on this body of research, we focus on political communication and its uptake in news discourse (cf. Graber 2012 or Squires 2014).

Following Agha (2011b), we argue that journalistic metadiscourse formulates acceptable and unacceptable interactional styles and political behavior. Such normative assumptions tie down mediatization processes to specific contexts of use (Ekström et al. 2016) and they associate types of language use with types of speakers (Agha 2005, Kramer 2011). Indeed, when reportable bits of information about a public figure make their way through the echo chamber of digital news, aspects of context beyond the immediate speech event are inevitably made relevant. More specifically, the mediatized speech events we examine here present us with juicy or otherwise revealing bits of reported speech about the main characters: the politician whose speech is being quoted and the journalist captioning the quote. Rather than speak for themselves, the quotes speak through recontextualization - that is, through the inflection of

prior discourse with new meanings. We analyze how the journalistic responses evaluate the reported politicians, their statements, and their communicative performance.

Metapragmatic and metadiscursive speech abounds in journalism (Verschuere 1985, Peterson 2015). Reports of press releases, press conferences, social media debates are fundamentally metapragmatic (i.e. descriptive of how language performs social action) and metadiscursive (i.e. news discourse about communicative events). In addition, short, snappy quotations extracted from longer stretches of public discourse are the staple of radio and television news (Grabe & Bucy 2009, Kroon Lundell & Ekström 2010, Lee 2012, Schohaus 2013). Sound bites and image bites have hitherto been studied as constituent parts of journalistic genres in flux, primarily from a quantitative, and increasingly from a cross-national perspective. The micro level speech events we call text bites are presented as a news genre in themselves: not the bricks, but the building.

3. Data and methods

Our data are taken from a corpus consisting of news quotes by politicians published in the *Ongehoord* news feature in *De Standaard*, a Belgian news site. The *Ongehoord* weekly news feature highlights politicians' (as well as other newsworthy actors such as celebrities, entrepreneurs, and athletes) verbal hits and misses from the week in news that was. Here are three examples in Dutch, followed by an English gloss in square brackets.

1. "Als mijn vrouw vraagt hoe mijn dag is geweest, ga ik er zelden op in. Ze leest wel in de krant wat ik doe."
CD&V-voorzitter Wouter Beke vertelt het geheim van een goede relatie in Dag Allemaal.
["When my wife asks how my day was, I rarely go into details. She can read all about it in the newspaper."
CD&V-president Wouter Beke shares the secret of a good relationship in Dag Allemaal.]
2. "Ik geloof niet in die onzin over de luie Walen."
Jan Peumans, de voorzitter van het Vlaams Parlement, houdt een opvallende 11-julitoespraak.
["I don't buy this crap about lazy Walloons."
Jan Peumans, the speaker of the Flemish Parliament, makes a remarkable 11th of July speech.]
3. "Een onafhankelijke Vlaamse staat is niets in deze wereld. Niets!"
Daniel Cohn-Bendit verdwijnt uit het Europees Parlement, maar heeft voorts nog niets van zijn vurige temperament verloren (in Knack).
["An independent Flanders is nothing in this world. Nothing!"
Daniel Cohn-Bendit may no longer be an MEP, but his fiery temperament lives on (in Knack).]

Ongehoord offers a weekly dose of light-hearted but nonetheless revealing news-about-the-news, ranging from a sarcastic paraphrase of a politician's anecdote about his public and private life in (1); over a response to a claim about the nature of people in the south of Belgium, the newsworthiness of which ('a remarkable speech') is qualified but not explained in (2); to an assessment of a member of the European Parliament's tenacity based on his opinion about the future of Belgium. Rather than dismiss such text bites as the low-hanging fruits of journalistic

labor, we argue that this type of personality-driven news speaks to broader social meanings of identity, aesthetics, and morality (Wortham & Locher, 1999; Drake & Higgins 2012). The *Ongehoord* column is published as opinion news and features 10 quotes each week (Figure 1).

Ongehoord

13/07/2012 om 03:00 door tbo

Er werden ook deze week weer heel wat dingen gezegd die beter de media niet gehaald hadden. Een overzicht voor wie daartegen bestand is.

'Ik geloof niet in die onzin over de luie Walen.'


Jan Peumans, de voorzitter van het Vlaams Parlement, houdt een opvallende 11-julitoespraak.

'Uw probleem, meneer Weyts, is het probleem van de krokodil: een geweldige bek, maar te korte beentjes.'

Michel Doomst (CD&V) is de N-VA-kritiek op het BHV-akkoord beu.

'Met de sjerp rond je buik ben je net een opgeknoopte haring.'

De burgemeester van Londerzeel, Jozef De Borger, is blij dat het voortaan toegelaten is de burgemeestersjerp ook over de schouder te dragen in plaats van enkel rond de taille.

Figure 1: The first part of the 13 July 2012 installment of the *Ongehoord* feature on De Standaard's news site (http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20120712_137)

In most cases, the original context in which the quotes appeared, is edited out. Each episode of *Ongehoord* can be seen as a narrating event that embeds a number of narrated events (Wortham & Locher 1996): a reanimated news quote from a public figure and a journalistic response (Fig. 2).

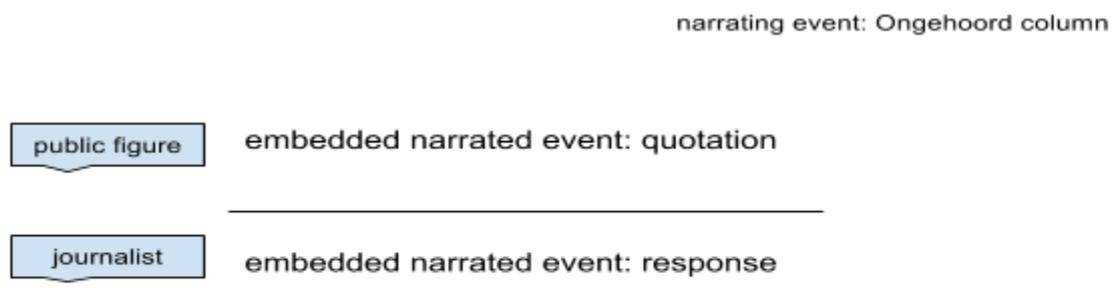


Figure 2. *Ongehoord* news as a narrating event with embedded narrated events

Each *Ongehoord* entry juxtaposes two journalistic voices: reporter voice and commentator voice (Thomson et al. 2008, Van Hout et al. 2012). The reported speech of the politician echoes the discursive conventions of attribution, factuality, and accuracy in the reproduction of quotations from sources. Here we see journalists in their traditional roles of *observers* and *reporters*, giving voice to newsworthy information by reporting speech. The juxtaposed caption in the form of a paraphrase, comment or evaluation, inscribes a more playful journalistic stance

while also providing some background information, such as the occasional reference to the original source of publication. Here, journalists take on the more interpretive role of *commentator* and *arbiter* of political behavior. By reanimating and thus metapragmatically framing the selected quotations, journalists appear calm, moderate, and rational, whereas the quoted politicians appear wild, emotional, and antagonistic. What we find here is soft news, focusing less ‘on in-depth content and background reporting, and (...) more (on) the presentation and form of the political discussion - often highlighting conflict and competition’ (Weizman 2008: 44).

The recycling of interview quotes as examples of (un)successful public discourse is not limited to the *Ongehoord* column, nor is the format entirely new. From 1996 onwards *The Irish Times*’ print edition ran a *Quotes of the Week* column dedicated to sports quotes. Its use of irony and sarcasm in the lines of comment is more outspoken than that of its present-day Flemish counterpart, e.g.:

“Gazza has got a problem - it’s been building up for quite a few years.”

Paul Gascoigne’s on-the-ball manager Bryan Robson ‘reveals’ what the rest of us knew ten years ago. (12 Oct. 1998)

BBC sports journalist Chris Charles ran a similar news feature for nine years, partly filled with audience contributions: “As you may have noticed, the Quotes of the Week format has been tweaked to incorporate it into this blog. The idea is that you add any decent quotes/chants/banners/announcements you may have seen or heard and the best ones will be highlighted in next week’s.” (4 Nov. 2009, www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/chrischarles/2009/11/quotes_of_the_week.html, retrieved 10 September 2015). A similar use of quotes can be observed in television talk shows, e.g. in two popular talk shows on Dutch national public television, *De wereld draait door* and *Pauw & Witteman*, which both featured items with bloopers and gaffes in quick succession.

3.1 Data collection and analysis

For the present study, we selected *De Standaard*’s *Ongehoord* column because it provided us with an accessible archive of conveniently monomodal text bites (www.standaard.be/tag/ongehoord). *Ongehoord* debuted on *De Standaard*’s website in March 2011. When the data for the current study were collected, each installment was introduced as follows: “Each week quite a few words are spoken that should not have made headlines. An overview for those who can stomach it”. In Dutch: *Er worden elke week weer heel wat dingen gezegd die beter de media niet gehaald hadden. Een overzicht voor wie daartegen bestand is.* The sample we studied consists of 678 text bites referring to national and international politicians. A student compiled the corpus by manually copying quotes by politicians and about politics published in *Ongehoord* between 2011 and 2014. We then imported the corpus into Dedoose, a software application for qualitative data analysis. To analyze how journalists voice and evaluate the quoted politicians, we used an open-ended, bottom-up coding design, during which both authors tagged excerpts in Dedoose. This consisted of systematically categorizing journalists’ stylistic devices used to assess political performance positively (praise) or negatively (blame). Quotations that criticized news media or that referred to policy matters (i.e. substance rather than performance issues) were given separate parent codes. 54 codes were defined and applied 1261 times during coding. Stylistic devices included style errors, the use of slurs, self-reference, puns, verbal comebacks, and figures of speech. ‘Ongehoord’ mostly targets form, not substance: consequently, our analytical toolbox comprises 39 codes for style, versus a mere six for substance and we tagged about twice as many excerpts for style than we did for substance.

Understanding the metadiscursive references proved challenging. Although one of us (Van Hout) is Flemish and we are both native speakers of Dutch, we frequently had to search the Internet to understand particular text bites. Nor did we agree in each instance on how to read the editors' positive comments: as praise, or as irony. Text bites featuring explicit praise or blame proved to be the outliers: we coded no more than five items as containing explicit praise, and ten as containing explicit blame. To illustrate the problems posed by the text bites' density, we present two memos from our Dedoose coding files.



Figure 3: Memo 1: ‘This is irony, but is it also self-deprecating humor? I have no clue about its context.’



Figure 4. Memo 2:

‘I remember in particular the racier scenes from Last Tango in Paris.’

In Het Laatste Nieuws, Vande Lanotte replies to the comparison.

Is there something missing or was it obvious for contemporary readers what ‘the comparison’ meant? I had to Google: the NMBS’ former CEO Descheemaeker compared Vande Lanotte to Marlon Brando. To be clear: the Godfather Brando. Vande Lanotte turns this attack into a compliment, pretending that the comparison was to Brando in Last Tango in Paris.

The last text bite is highly topical and packed with indexical and intertextual meaning. It presupposes a reader who is aware not only of Vande Lanotte’s political reputation and the conflict he was involved in at the time, but also a reader who is familiar with pop-cultural references to Marlon Brando in his roles as a criminal (*The Godfather*) and a lover (*Last Tango in Paris*). Rather than an obstacle for analysis, we consider this one of the format’s features, underscoring the level of media literacy and strategic indeterminacy that characterize the news feature. Readers can only ‘get’ the inside jokes if they recognize the stereotyped persona indexed by a politician’s language use. In other words, the *Ongehoord* column presupposes a readership that recognizes the indexical link between specific ways of speaking and particular types of people (Agha 2011a, b). In what follows, we tease out the normative

assumptions that the *Ongehoord* journalists use to interpret or otherwise represent the repurposed quotes.

4. Findings

In *Ongehoord*, *De Standaard*'s journalists flag rhetorical blunders and prowess of public figures from Belgium and abroad. The performance criteria that can be deduced from the sample consist of general communicative rules ('use simple and plain language') and media-specific rules ('avoid media criticism'). Two core categories of politicians' performance that emerged were the moral and the verbal; both were subject to blame and praise by the *Ongehoord* editors. These cover the majority of the text bites we analyzed. Moral evaluations focus on self-referential statements, which tend to be situated on a continuum from self-deprecation to self-aggrandizement. Assessments of verbal performance - the second major category - praise both self-effacingly plain language and more daring rhetorical craftsmanship. The opposite qualities of plain language use, such as idiosyncratic language use, and botched attempts at verbal artistry elicit criticism. Two other categories occurred less frequently, but since they speak to the core of our argument about recontextualized metapragmatic news discourse, they enjoy pride of place in the presentation of our findings. The first is politicians' media criticism, which frequently draws flak because it encroaches on journalists' professional space. The second is a politician's biographical illusion, e.g. body, temper or speech characteristics, which text bite news both cultivates and castigates. The biographical illusion is "the politician's publicly imaginable 'character' presented to an electorate, with a biography and a moral profile crafted out of issues rendered of interest in the public sphere" (Lempert & Silverstein 2012: 1). Focusing on the politicians' idiosyncrasies, Silverstein uses the term *biographical illusion*: "a plotline moving the politician emerged on the electoral stage as focal character through situations with respect to a whole cast of others" (Silverstein 2011a: 180).

4.1 Implicit evaluation

Criteria for praise or cringeworthy behavior are rarely stated explicitly. In fact, although the *Ongehoord* column's purpose is advertised as listing quotes "that had better remained unpublished in the first place", it assumes that its selection is self-explanatory, which normalizes media logic as common knowledge. We found only ten instances of explicit blame (inscribed judgement), and five instance of explicit praise, for instance:

1. "Mijn kinderen voelen zich als joodse families in Duitsland onder Hitler."
Silvio Berlusconi voelt zich gevisieerd door het gerecht, en dat wil hij met een weinig subtiële vergelijking duidelijk maken.
"My children feel like Jewish families in Nazi Germany."
Silvio Berlusconi feels persecuted by law enforcement authorities, and he makes the point by using a none too subtle analogy. [emphasis added]
2. "Op de Open VLD stemmen."
Karel De Gucht antwoordt (in Villa Politica op Eén) gevat als hem gevraagd wordt wat hij gaat doen bij de verkiezingen volgend jaar.
"Vote Open VLD."
Open VLD politician] Karel De Gucht wittily replies when asked (in Villa Politica at Eén) what he will do come next year's elections. [emphasis added]
3. "Wat ik niet begrijp, is dat u, terwijl uw partijgenoot Wouter Beke als informateur in de vuurlinie staat, vanuit de bunker van de generale staf een paar 'bouletten' afschiet die een paar stevige knallen geven."

Sven Gatz (Open VLD) gebruikt mooie stijlfiguren om minister-president Kris Peeters terecht te wijzen.

“With your fellow party member taking heat as informateur, I don’t understand why you’re in the high command bunker launching meatballs.”

Sven Gatz (Open VLD) employs lovely figures of speech to chide prime minister Kris Peeters. [emphasis added]

In (1), the phrase “none too subtle” qualifies the analogy used by Berlusconi through understatement, thereby inscribing judgment. In (2), verbal wit is praised through metapragmatic description (Wortham & Locher 1996). In (3), the journalist uses a metapragmatic descriptor (“lovely figures of speech”) to qualify the politician’s idiosyncratic speech.

As a rule, however, these text bites rely on implicit evaluations and presume a sophisticated level of media and news literacy on the part of the reader. In this respect, *Ongehoord* resembles a game of trivial pursuit: each text bite requires the audience to recognize the characters, remember their current relationship and political status, and be aware of the tacit rules of engagement in political communication in this context. Perhaps the most basic rule is that politicians should respect the journalist’s authority as stage director of news media discourse.

4.2 Compliance imperatives

Ongehoord praises language use that shares the general characteristics of approved news media language, such as clarity, audience focus, and the use of quotations to convey freshness and immediacy (Cotter 2014). The relationship between journalists and politicians emerges as one similar to that of jury and contestants in a talent show. This hierarchy, in which politicians provide the content and journalists the format, is also expressed and enforced by the numerous *Ongehoord* quotes in which politicians try to subvert this hierarchy. These attempts are almost invariably frowned upon: a commandment of media communication that can be summed up as ‘Thou shalt comply with media logic’.

4. “Als journalisten ons een vraag stellen, proberen we daar op de meest ernstige manier op te antwoorden.”

Europees Commissaris Karel De Gucht legt in De Ochtend uit waarom zijn Europese collega Olli Rehn misschien iets te veel vertelde over de bankencrisis en de inspanning van de spaarders daarbij. Het ligt aan de journalisten en de ernst van de Europese commissarissen.

“When journalists ask us questions, we try to answer them in the most serious manner.”

European Commissioner Karel De Gucht explains in De Ochtend why his European colleague Olli Rehn spoke too much about the banking crisis and depositors’ efforts. Journalists and the European Commissioners’ seriousness are to blame.

5. “Neen aan de Berlusconiëring van Wallonië.”

De overname van de krant L’Avenir door de intercommunale Tecteo is volgens MR-voorzitter Charles Michel een poging van de PS om greep te krijgen op de pers.

“No to the Berlusconiization of Wallonia.”

MR-president Charles Michel sees in the takeover of the L’Avenir newspaper by intercommunal company Tecteo an attempt to put the press in a stranglehold.

6. “Geen hond gelooft de media nog. Mochten ze buiten komen, ze zouden het zelf vaststellen.”

Bart De Wever moest het even kwijt. (uit Apache.be)

‘Absolutely no-one believes the media anymore. Should they venture outside, they could see it for themselves.’

Bart De Wever needed to get this off his chest. (from Apache.be)

These text bites are verbal spats in the eternal turf war between journalists and politicians. When politicians voice their media criticism in memorable words, however, their oratory skills may compensate for their faux pas, but in our sample, these are the exceptions.

7. “Zelfs als ik de wc te hard doortrek, zullen analisten er allerhande dingen achter zoeken”

Bart De Wever vindt dat hij wel erg nauwgezet gevolgd wordt door politieke specialisten.

“Even if I flush the toilet too hard, analysts are bound to read something in it.”

Bart De Wever feels political experts follow his actions with too much zeal.

In these instances, the text bites perform explicit boundary work by demarcating the borders between the journalistic and the political. They also draw the line between *De Standaard*, which presents itself as a quality news medium, and other news media. In examples (8) and (9), *Het Laatste Nieuws* refers to a print tabloid, and *Villa Politica* to a political current affairs show broadcast on Belgian public television.

8. “Als Luc Van der Keren tegen mij wil opkomen, moet hij op een lijst staan. Hij moet niet doen alsof hij journalist is.”

Bart De Wever heeft het niet zo begrepen op de commentator van Het Laatste Nieuws. “Alles wat excessief is, heeft geen betekenis.”, zegt De Wever daarover.

“If Luc Van der Keren wants to run against me, he should stand for election. He shouldn’t try to pass himself off as a journalist.”

There’s no love lost between Bart De Wever and the HLN political analyst. ‘Anything excessive is meaningless’, says De Wever.

9. “Dit is Villa Politica, dit is geen diepte-interview.”

Minister Vanackere wil gerust een babbeltje slaan met Linda De Win, maar al te serieus moet het niet worden voor hem.

“This is Villa Politica, not an in-depth interview.”

Minister Vanackere is not averse to a pleasant chat with [reporter] Linda De Win, but does not want it to become too serious.

In (8), a conflict between a fellow but rival journalist and a politician is commented on. The second quotation (“anything excessive is meaningless”) is embedded in the journalistic response. In (9), the authority of the current affairs show *Villa Politica* is undermined by ironically referring to the lack of adversarialism (“a pleasant chat”).

4.3 Stock characters

In *Ongehoord*, politicians are cast as flat characters in an ongoing soap opera. Politicians need to remain in character, one that is co-created and maintained by the politicians themselves, their

spin doctors, and the news media. The traits - appearance, mannerisms, idiom, standpoints - that make them socially recognizable are part of their message, or biographical illusion (Silverstein 2011a: 180).

In *Ongehoord* the biographical illusion does not appear as a plotline, because the text bites are cropped so close that they offer very little in the way of narrative. Despite this limitation, the best-known politicians appear as recognizable characters. Bart De Wever - one of the most prominent politicians in the *Ongehoord* corpus in terms of number of appearances - self-consciously refers to his efforts to lose weight, using self-deprecating humor.

10. “Toen de camera’s me onlangs in het toilet opwachttten, overwoog ik ernstig om via het toiletraampje aan de journalisten te ontsnappen. Maar ik was bang om te blijven steken.”

N-VA-voorzitter Bart De Wever haalt herinneringen op aan één jaar onderhandelen.

“When I found the cameras waiting for me inside the men’s room the other day, I seriously considered escaping the journalists by way of the toilet window. But I was afraid I would get stuck.”

N-VA chairman Bart De Wever looks back on a year of negotiations.

11. “Het diner na het college wordt geschrapt. Niet omdat ik mijn eetgewoonten wil opdringen, wel omdat het te duur is.”

Bart De Wever bespaart in Antwerpen.

“The dinner following each city council will be cut. Not because I want to force my eating habits onto others, but because it is too expensive.”

In Antwerp, Bart De Wever [the city’s mayor] is pinching pennies.

The running gag about his girth is part of De Wever’s biographical illusion. As are references to then Belgian Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo’s vanity and homosexuality (12), and to Flemish Minister-President Kris Peeters’ yearning for the spotlights (13, 14).

12. “Ik ben een gelukkige vrijgezel.”

Premier Elio Di Rupo (PS) gaat deze week in Dag Allemaal geen enkele vraag over zijn privéleven uit de weg. Zo geeft hij toe op dit moment geen relatie te hebben en wuift hij kritiek op uitstapjes in homoclubs weg. “Niet iedereen kan dat wellicht appreciëren, maar er zijn ook mensen die niet appreciëren dat ik nu eerste minister ben, of gewoon dat ik socialist ben. Dat is nu eenmaal zo.”

“I’m a happy single.”

This week in ‘Dag Allemaal’, Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo (PS) didn’t mince words about his private life. He admits that he is not currently in a relationship and shrugs off criticisms of his visits to gay clubs. “That may not be to everyone’s liking, but some people don’t like that I’m prime minister now, or simply that I’m a socialist. Well, that’s just how it is.”

13. “Het is niet zo dat ik altijd overal de eerste wil zijn.”

Kris Peeters verrast.

“It’s not as if I want to be the leader of the pack all the time.”

Kris Peeters reveals an unknown side.

14. “Elio Di Rupo houdt bewust afstand van de media. Vlaamse politici zouden dat beter ook wat meer doen.”

Aldus minister-president Kris Peeters in één van zijn interviews die week.

'Kris Peeters' en 'discretie' blijven synoniemen.

“[Belgian Prime Minister] Elio di Rupo tries to keep the media at bay. Flemish politicians should follow suit.”

Minister-President Kris Peeters during one of his press interviews this week.

'Kris Peeters' and 'discretion' remain synonymous.

Presenting politicians as flat characters and highlighting their interactions with each other not only enhances the soapy character of political reporting within the discursive space of the *Ongehoord* column, but it also shows “politicians in a less authoritative light and (...) journalists in a more potent light” (Esser 2008: 405).

A relatively rare, but positively newsworthy event in the spin cycle of political news coverage is the misfire, the blunder, or the blooper. Indeed, such *performances of faultiness* (Silverstein 2011a: 170) are breaches of scripted message, revealing to the audience the politician’s “true” private face behind the public mask.

15. “En ik kan u verzekeren: vanavond voert de politie geen alcoholcontroles uit. Geniet van uw drankje.”

De afsluiter van de nieuwjaarspeech van de burgemeester van Ninove, Michel Casteur, was meteen het begin van een hele controverse.

“And I can assure you: there will be no alcoholic beverage controls tonight. Enjoy your drink.”

Ninove Mayor Michel Casteur's bombshell new year's speech started a controversy.

16. “Vraag me niet te reageren op een individuele feed, eh friet, eh tweet.”

Karel De Gucht wil (in Reyers Laat op Eén) wel de Europese Commissie verdedigen en de aanpak van de bankencrisis. Maar op de kritiek van mensen als Egbert Lachaert reageren, dat is niet zijn bedoeling.

“Don't ask me to respond to an individual feed, ehm freed, ehm tweet.”

Karel De Gucht is willing (in Reyers Laat) to defend the EU's handling of the banking crisis, but responding to the criticisms of someone like Egbert Lachaert is not an option.

17. “Papa sait faire tant de choses.”

Michel Daerden spreekt zichzelf moed in nadat de PS-federatie hem aan de kant geschoven heeft.

‘Papa sait faire tant de choses.’ (Eng. *Daddy has more than one trick up his sleeve*)

Michel Daerden utters words of self-encouragement after being sidetracked by the PS.

The metapragmatic assessments in the examples above reveal something about the speaker’s worldviews and intentions (Hill 2009: 88). The presumably unintentional incitement to imbibe in example (15) bespeak the mayor’s ideas about alcohol consumption; the verbal clumsiness in (16) is revelatory of the speaker’s inexperience with social media technologies; and in (17), the speaker’s ‘words of self-encouragement’, reproduced in French for added comic relief, betray a lack of self-knowledge and a rather large ego. The politician in question, Michel Daerden, nicknamed ‘papa’ (Eng. *daddy*), and widely regarded as the laughing stock of Belgian politics, was notorious for his drunken behavior and self-aggrandizing statements.

4.4 Moral categories

In the *Ongehoord* corpus, we discern two broad categories of politician's public performance that are subject to journalistic evaluation: moral and verbal behavior. *Ongehoord* chastises politicians for morally transgressive behavior, and highlights their stylistic - or, in a broader sense, rhetorical - shortcomings and achievements. *Ongehoord*'s moral evaluations focus on self-reference. Journalists seem to prefer politicians who project a distinct personality, but the *Ongehoord* editors seem to appreciate those who cut themselves down to size with self-deprecatory humor. In contrast, those who brag about their political successes and sexual conquests are taken down a peg. The following text bites contain self-deprecation and are all, we feel, presented as worthy of praise.

18. "Met dit percentage kom ik in de slipstream van Mobutu."
Bart De Wever wordt met 99,35 procent van de stemmen herkozen tot voorzitter van N-VA.
"This percentage puts me in Mobutu's slipstream."
With a 99.35 percent majority, Bart De Wever is re-elected N-VA chairman.
19. "Light-producten, daar ken ik ondertussen alles van, maar dat is politiek voor mij nooit aan de orde geweest."
N-VA-voorzitter Bart De Wever maakt (op VTM) duidelijk dat zijn partij niet zal inbinden op communautair vlak.
"There is nothing I don't know about light products, but in politics this has never been an issue for me."
N-VA leader Bart De Wever (on VTM) makes it clear that his party is not prepared to fold his communitarian demands.

In (18), Bart De Wever compares his election result to that of a former military dictator. In example (19), he refers to his own highly mediatized history of weight loss. The opposite of self-deprecatory humor, blowing your own horn, is invariably frowned upon. Although Berlusconi's and Putin's braggadocio is part of their biographical illusion, it adds to their status as the villains of the play.

20. "Op een bepaalde avond stonden er elf dames in de rij te wachten voor mijn slaapkamerdeur. Nadat ik er acht had afgewerkt, ben ik ermee opgehouden."
Italiaanse premier Silvio Berlusconi had pech dat zijn telefoon werd afgetapt toen hij tegen een vriend opschepte over zijn veroveringen.
"One particular night eleven ladies queued in front of my bedroom. Having serviced eight, I gave up."
Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi had the misfortune that his phone was hacked as he was bragging to a friend about his conquests.
21. "Ik kan me geen Sovjetleiders van na de Tweede Wereldoorlog herinneren die even hard werkten."
Russische premier Vladimir Poetin vindt zichzelf de hardst werkende Russische leider in jaren.
"I cannot recall a post World War 2 Soviet leader who worked as hard as I do."
Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin considers himself to be the hardest working Russian leader in ages.

4.5 Verbal qualities

The *Ongehoord* text bites we examined display a clear preference for plain language, but the editors also value successful displays of rhetorical dexterity. Idiosyncratic language use is policed. Thus, stylistic brilliance, in this sample, emerges as a mixture of plain language and rhetorical skill.

A politician's language should not be *too* plain. We categorized the following text bites as instances of *bathos*: an unexpected register lapse; colloquial or vulgar language that is not in accordance with the situation or the speaker's position as a member of parliament or a minister.

22. "Ik krijg heus geen stijve bij de Vlaamse onafhankelijkheid."
Siegfried Bracke laat (in De Tijd) in zijn, eh, kaarten kijken.
"Seriously, Flemish independence does not give me a hard-on."
Siegfried Bracke (in De Tijd) shows his, ehm, hand.
23. "Een nieuwe staatshervorming is pure masturbatie."
Open VLD-voorzitster Gwendolyn Rutten vindt (in Humo) dat de politiek te veel met zichzelf bezig is.
"Renewed state reform is pure masturbation."
Open VLD president Gwendolyn Rutten (in Humo) thinks politics is too self-involved.

References to sex are also taken up when they come in the form of unintentional double entendres. Rather than critique the politician, the authorial retort plays up the sexual innuendo of an otherwise innocuous utterance about a politician's private life.

24. "Thuis kan ik mij volledig blootgeven."
Wouter Beke vertelt in het CD&V-ledenblad dingen die, zo vermoeden we, letterlijk en figuurlijk waar zijn.
"When I'm at home, I can reveal myself completely." [Taken (too) literally, Dutch *blootgeven* means 'to disrobe']
In the CD&V magazine, Wouter Beke reveals something that is, we suspect, true in the literal and figurative sense.

Apart from language that is - intentionally or unintentionally - overly plain, the *Ongehoord* text bites single out failed attempts at rhetoric, such as metaphors gone awry. In example (25), the literal meaning (bargees) stands in the way of the figurative meaning of the phrase ('up to their necks in water'). In (26), a Dutch proverb is extended, triggering a metapragmatic comment about a politician's evaluation of a political decision-making process.

25. "Het water staat de binnenschippers letterlijk aan de lippen."
Minister Crevits kent zowat alles van beeldspraak.
'The bargees are literally up to their necks in water.'
Minister Crevits knows just about everything about metaphors.
26. "Men schuift de hete appel door, maar wie heeft de appel op het vuur gelegd?"
Eurocommissaris Karel De Gucht goochelt (in het Eén programma) 'De Zevende Dag' met spreekwoorden om Vlaanderen terecht te wijzen in het dossier van de Oosterweelverbinding.

“You can pass the hot potato, but who put the potato on the fire?”
EU Commissioner Karel De Gucht (in the Eén show) ‘De Zevende Dag’ juggles proverbs as he castigates Flanders in the Oosterweel dossier.

Implicit praise is reserved for politicians who know how to turn a phrase. Concise, witty formulations are acknowledged, such as this ready-made soundbite:

27. “Laten we ideeën najagen, geen normen voor de douchekoppen.”
Martin Schulz, de voorzitter van het Europees Parlement, vindt (in NRC) dat de Europese Commissie best wat ambitieuzer mag zijn.
“Let’s pursue ideas, not industry norms for showerheads.”
Chairman of the European Parliament Martin Schulz (in NRC) thinks the European Commission should show a little more ambition.

In example (28), prime minister Di Rupo alludes to a well-known Winston Churchill quotation, humorously juxtaposing the budget agreement and a minor accident that befell him in the Foreign Office with Britain’s plight during the war:

28. “Het heeft mij persoonlijk een beetje bloed, veel zweet en veel koffie gekost.”
Premier Elio Di Rupo viel vrijdag van de trap in het Egmontpaleis en opende de persconferentie over het begrotingsakkoord daardoor met enkele plakkers op het voorhoofd.
“It has taken me a little blood, a lot of sweat, and lots of coffee.”
Prime minister Elio Di Rupo fell down the stairs of the Egmontpaleis on Friday and as a consequence opened the press conference about the budget deal with a number of band-aids on his forehead.

Although probably neither the politicians nor the *Ongehoord* editors are familiar with classical taxonomies of the figures of speech, many quotes that receive implicit or explicit praise can be categorized as such, for instance

Polyptoton (repeating words of the same root):

29. “De Vlaamse regering moet keuzes maken, daarvoor is ze gekozen.”
Open VLD-fractie leider Sas Van Rouveroij legt de Vlaamse regering uit hoe het politiek systeem werkt.
“The Flemish government needs to make choices, that is what it was elected for.”
Open VLD group chairman Sas Van Rouveroij explains the basics of the political system to the Flemish government.

Antimetabole (reversing repeated words):

30. “Wat een verrassing. De president-kandidaat is nu kandidaat-president!”
Uitdager François Hollande is niet onder de indruk van de kandidatuur van Nicolas Sarkozy.
“What a surprise. The presidential candidate is now a candidate for president!”
Nicolas Sarkozy’s candidature leaves challenger François Hollande unfazed.

The next example of antimetabole refers to a scandal involving the town mayor of Aalst, who was caught on camera having sex on a tower in Greece.

31. “De burgemeester van Aalst verwarde public relations met relations in public.”
Lode Vereeck solliciteerde met een bij wijlen humoristische tussenkomst in het Vlaams Parlement naar een eindejaarsconference op de VRT.
“The town mayor of Aalst confused public relations with relations in public.”
With an at times humorous intervention in the Flemish Parliament, Lode Vereeck seemed to apply for a New Year’s Eve one-man show on VRT.

These craftily and economically formulated observations index a journalistic appreciation of *parler-vrai* (talking straight) while at the same time pointing to successful performances of message, both in relation to their own and to their political rivals’ biographical illusion.

5. Conclusions and future research

The normative assumptions projected in the sample we studied comprise a language ideological component and a media ideological component, both of which are part and parcel of a media logic. With regards to ideas about correct and responsible language use (Cameron 1995, Cotter 2010), plain language use, interspersed with colorful metaphors and self-deprecatory analogies, elicits praise. Language indexing stylistic as well as morally transgressive behavior is policed. Journalists’ ideas about media disqualify politicians’ references to shoddy or otherwise unsuccessful journalism. Such statements trigger boundary work, drawing a line between two interdependent but nevertheless separate fields, each with their own logic. Underlying these ideological imperatives is a media logic that journalists impose on political actors seeking media attention or whose public discourse triggers media coverage.

On the whole, the re-reported quotes are quite mundane: these are not iconic soundbites (Lee, 2012) or memorable bloopers (Silverstein 2011a), nor have any of them caused talk scandals (Ekström & Johansson, 2008). Instead, these text bites are put together by sifting through the week’s media output and extracting quotes that might otherwise have gone unnoticed and that allow journalists to showcase their own wit. This is one way journalists curate and “soften” content already in circulation to keep attention-scarce publics with the news (Nguyen 2012). They are “remarkable” within the bounds of political correctness. What they do exemplify, however, is the continuously negotiated relationship between journalists and politicians. Although the question “who leads the tango?” (Gans 1980: 116) is a matter of ongoing scholarly debate (see Van Aelst & Vliegenthart 2014, Domingo & Le Cam 2014), *Ongehoord* shows journalists trying to control the moral and verbal range of politicians’ public use of language; its form, not its content. In this project, politicians are both their allies and their rivals. Allies, because their public performance is geared towards the demands of media logic. Rivals, because they resent journalists encroaching on their territory.

This article has been a first attempt to describe a metapragmatic space that has so far gone unnoticed in media linguistics. While vernacular responses to news discourse in the form of memes or otherwise remixed representations (cf. Coleman 2010, Shifman 2013) have received attention, studies of journalistic responses to news discourse are still few and far between. This exploratory study has a number of limitations we intend to address in the future. In the first place, trying to unpack the *Ongehoord* text bites, we restricted our analysis to the quotes and lines of evaluation as they were published on the *De Standaard* website, in order to tease out the unspoken criteria reflecting the selection and appraisal of politicians’ quotes. A follow-up study should take a more inclusive look at the text bites’ trajectories, comparing the end product to the quote’s previous context(s), including their uptake across news media and formats. In the second place, we intend to interview the editors in charge of the *Ongehoord* column at *De Standaard* to hear their considerations about the choice and evaluation of quotes. The analysis of the politicians’ quotes from the *Ongehoord* column could further be expanded by taking into consideration the column’s other celebrities from the worlds of sports and

entertainment. Finally, digitized newspapers and magazines could be examined for precursors to the *Ongehoord* format. We are aware of at least one similar column, “Parlementaria”, a collection of Dutch MP’s and ministers’ gaffes and malapropisms, collected by Dutch political reporter Henry Faas during the nineteen sixties. Such a corpus would make a fitting historical point of comparison for the present one.

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Tom Van Hout

Tom Van Hout is assistant professor and academic director of the Institute for Professional and Academic Communication at the University of Antwerp. He is also affiliated with the Centre for Linguistics at Leiden University. He studies journalism, workplace discourse, and other forms of professional communication from the perspective of linguistic ethnography. Recent work has appeared in journals such as *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, *Discourse, Context & Media*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, and in various edited volumes. Address for correspondence: Institute for Professional and Academic Communication, University of Antwerp, Prinsstraat 13, B-2000 Antwerp, Belgium. Email: tom.vanhout@uantwerpen.be

Peter Burger

Peter Burger is an assistant professor in the Centre for Linguistics at Leiden University. He applies rhetorical perspectives to journalism, narrative folklore, and social media discourse. His recent publications include the chapter 'Mediatization and the language of journalism' in the *Oxford Handbook of Language and Society* (with Tom Van Hout, 2016). Address for correspondence: Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, Leiden University, Postbus 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands. Email: p.burger@hum.leidenuniv.nl