Every picture tells a story: the language and function of French newspaper captions[1]

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1. Introduction

> 'Taking photographs out of the boxes at random, he tried
> to look into the faces without seeking either signs or
> secrets…To keep himself from getting pulled into these
> faces' stories, he avoided reading the captions …'
> Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book* (2006: 282-3)

This paper explores the relationship between image and text, more specifically between press photographs and their captions in the French written press. The theory of image-text relationships has been shaped primarily by the writings of Roland Barthes, but there has been little in-depth corpus-based analysis of press photographs and captions. This study will analyse the function and language of captions in relation to the image, and also in relation to the headline and article. It is hoped to show that each of these elements has a very specific and complementary role to play in contributing to the intertextuality of the newspaper.

2. Theoretical background – approaches to text / image relations

There have been many studies of newspaper language, often with reference to particular features such as genres, and of course to newspaper headlines. Studies of genre in French, include *faits divers* (Monville-Burston & Waugh 1985), sports reports (Engel & Labeau 2005), and obituaries (Simonin 1984). Newspaper headlines are discussed, with detailed references to previous studies, in Engel (2000).

With respect to picture captions, there has been research into the use of captions for the hearing-impaired, and their use as a teaching tool. In the first case, interest is more or less exclusively in television or film captions; in the second case, work has also focused on newspaper captions as in for example: Savino (1999). Photo captions have also attracted the interest of researchers in natural language processing, in particular, matching captions with photos from large online collections – see for example: Berg et al (n.d.), Elworthy et al (2001). And of course, newspaper captions are discussed in the field of journalism education by Furet (1995), Irby (1997) and Oglesbee (1998).

Turning to more theoretical studies of the relationship between pictures and their captions or titles, our starting point will be the seminal work of Roland Barthes. Barthes considered the function of the media photograph in three highly influential essays in particular: 'Photos-choc' (in *Mythologies*, 1957), 'Le message photographique' (1961), and 'Rhétorique de l'image' (1964)[2]. 'Photos-choc' (1957) is a critique of an exhibition of news photographs in Paris. Barthes's main point is that these photographs, which are designed to shock the audience, do not in fact do so: by choosing to capture a particular moment or scene, the photographer has taken away our choice or interpretation:

'on a frémi pour nous, on a jugé pour nous, le photographe ne nous a rien laissé qu'un simple droit d'acquiescement intellectuel' (1957: 106).

However, he finds some of the agency photos more successful because the photographer is more distant from the image:

'le fait surpris éclate dans son entêtement, dans sa littéralité, dans l'évidence même de sa nature obtuse…ces images étonnent parce qu'elles paraissent à la première vue étrangères, calmes presque, inférieures à leurs légendes…le *naturel* de ces images oblige le spectateur à une interrogation violente, l'engage dans la voie d'un jugement qu'il élabore lui-même sans être encombré par la présence démiurgique du photographe' (1957: 107).

Barthes does not refer to captions here, nor to any journalistic text, since the photographs are removed from their original journalistic context. The reference to the relationship with the caption is a point which is developed more fully in subsequent essays.

In 'Le message photographique', Barthes points out that the newspaper photo is not an isolated structure:

'elle communique au moins avec une autre structure, qui est le texte (titre, légende ou article) dont toute photographie de presse est accompagnée' (1982: 10).

There is always some sort of written commentary associated with the photo, although this is not always a caption. For Barthes, the accompanying text is a parasitical message which illustrates the picture, rather than vice versa – or at least it had become so in the period in which he was writing:

' autrefois l'image illustrait le texte (le rendait plus clair); aujourd'hui, le texte alourdit l'image, la grève d'une culture, d'une morale, d'une imagination' (1982: 19).

Vis-à-vis the image, captions, headlines and articles have differing roles of connotation and denotation: the caption has a lesser degree of connotation and a greater degree of denotation (1982: 19). Often, the accompanying text does no more than amplify the connotations already present in the picture; however it can gain a new signification, an 'after the event' interpretation of the photo (1982: 20).

In 'Rhétorique de l'image', Barthes concentrates on the semiology of an advertising poster, but makes some important general comments on the relationship between image and text, which he traces back to the development of the book. It has however become more widespread in the era of mass communication:

'il semble bien que le message linguistique soit présent dans toutes les images: comme titre, comme légende, comme article de presse, comme dialogue de film,…on voit par là qu'il n'est pas très juste de parler d'une civilisation de l'image: nous sommes encore et plus que jamais une civilisation de l'écriture' (1982: 30).

He distinguishes two functions for the accompanying text: 'ancrage' (anchorage) and 'relais' (intermediary) (1982: 31). The text anchors the image by naming it:

> 'la légende…permet d'accommoder non seulement mon regard, mais encore mon intellection…le message linguistique guide non plus l'identification, mais l'interprétation…le texte *dirige* le lecteur' (1982: 31-32).

This anchoring function is the most common one, found both in news photos and advertising. The intermediary function is rarer, and used where there is complementarity between the text and image, where the text helps to move the action forward, as in cartoons and films. Savino (1999) uses these terms slightly differently from Barthes in her tutorial on press captions: 'les textes jouent un role d'ancrage (exemple: la photographie atteste les faits rapportés dans la légende), et de relais (la photo précise et complète les faits rapportés)'. Barthes' definitions are the most widely used, but Savino's serve to differentiate functions of newspaper captions, which can be useful.

Regarding the more specific text form of titles, Bosredon (1997) presents an analysis of the pragmatics of identification in the titles of paintings. The linguistic process of 'étiquetage' (labelling) identifies an object via a contiguous linguistic sequence, the title (1997: 14). The nature of this labelling can result in:

> 'des légendes tantôt sous la forme de textes courts ayant une fonction d'explication ou de commentaire, tantôt sous la forme de SN[3] désignatifs. C'est sous cette forme pour l'essentiel que se développe l'intitulation picturale' (1997: 57)[4].

For Bosredon, captions have one sole function:

> 'servir d'interprétation linguistique…les vraies limites de la légende sont imposés par l'image ou plus exactement par le rôle explicatif de la légende en relation avec l'image. En d'autres termes, les légendes ne peuvent designer, commenter ou expliquer autre chose que les figurations auxquelles elles s'attachent' (1997: 94).

In other words, the caption is subsidiary to and determined in some way by the image. This one function is similar to Barthes's 'ancrage'. The focus on the primacy of the picture rather than the text echoes Barthes's idea of the parasitical message in his 1961 essay (1982: 18-19, op.cit.), rather than that of the text directing the reader as presented in his 1964 essay (1982: 31-32, op.cit.). Of course, Bosredon's prime interest is in the titles of paintings, rather than press photographs.

Returning to the written press, Stuart Hall (1972) analyses the different levels of meaning of newspaper photos, and their role in the production of news and the articulation of ideological themes. News photos often contain potential news elements, which are emphasized by the editor via a caption, and link to an article: it is this link that can turn a non-news photo into a news photo (1972: 54). Following Barthes, he sees the primary function of the caption as one of anchorage:

> 'Anchorage has the function of 'selective elucidation' – it exerts a repressive force over the relative freedom of the signifieds of the photo. It is therefore (together with the headline, which frames both photo and text and embraces them) *par excellence* the level of ideological signification. Here, the connotive power of the image is most openly specified, cashed and closed' (1972: 60).

Burgin (1983: 226) notes that photography is not a 'purely visual' medium:

> 'I am not simply alluding to the fact that we rarely see a photograph *in use* which is not accompanied by writing (though this is highly significant); even the uncaptioned 'art' photograph , framed and isolated on the gallery wall, is invaded by language in the very moment it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually alternate and intermingle' (1983: 226).

Photographs therefore represent a narrated world, a world of cause and effect, of activities and consequences. This world is not achieved in a linear manner as with language, but: 'in a repetition of 'vertical' readings, in stillness, in a-temporality' (1983: 243).

Narrowing down relationship of word and image, Tétu (1990) discusses the development of the use of illustrations in newspapers, from early nineteenth century engravings to modern photographs. The link – and the nature of the link – between photo and text is crucial:

> 'la photographie ne montre pas l'action, mais les acteurs, et c'est l'article qui comporte le récit de l'action; le texte définit le "syntagme" narratif, et la photographie tendra d'abord à présenter le "paradigme" des rôles' (1990: 137).

Another dimension of the nature of the link is examined in the same collection, by Mouillaud (1990) who reminds us of the importance of layout in the newspaper[5]: the use of borders, edges, columns, typefaces, and the juxtaposition of stories:

> 'le texte du journal se présente, d'emblée, comme un "inter-texte"' (1990: 143).

Press photographs are of course another element which contributes to this intertextuality. For Mouillaud, the only unifying meta-textual factor is the headline. He uses the same term as Bosredon (1997) to refer to headlines as labelling devices (1990: 149).

Scott (1999) devotes a whole chapter of his book on the relationship between photography and language to the functions of captions in the press. He uses a corpus of 10 British daily newspapers from 13th July 1993 as a source of observations (although he does not present any quantitative, statistical analysis of his corpus). He points out that photographs become photojournalism only by the process of being selected for the newspaper out of a whole range of potential photos (1999: 99-103). The function of the accompanying caption is to elicit a particular response in the reader (1999: 103). This is reminiscent of Hall's analysis.

Images are part of the intertextuality of the newspaper; the very nature of newspaper coverage of the news means that we are given a snapshot of events day by day:

> 'The newspaper is, in effect, a time-lapse camera that presents the non-sequential as sequential, that slows reality down from the second-by-second to the day-by-day' (1999: 107).

Furthermore:

> 'We can read the sequence of photographs in a newspaper as a shorthand or *aide-mémoire* for the current state of the news…even if the available photos can only show us the prelude or the aftermath of a particular event,

they have one advantage over the column: they preserve the present by assimilating it in their own 'thereness' ' (1999: 114-5).

Reading the photographic sequence is another example of the intertextuality of newspapers discussed by Mouillaud, and the question of 'thereness' echoes Barthes on the text as an 'after the event' interpretation(1982: 20, op.cit.).

Hall (1972) argues that the ideological message of the news photo is counterbalanced by its actualisation, i.e. the move from historical context to news. This is reflected in the tense usage in captions (and headlines):

'The characteristic tense of the news photo is the historic instantaneous. All history is converted into 'today', cashable and explicable in terms of the immediate' (1972: 84).

Scott (1999) also singles out the present tense, including the present participle (1999: 113)[6]. This is a multifunctional present tense:

'it participates not only in the omnitemporal present of the fictional/painted image, but also in the instantaneous present of the commentary…And thanks to the possibility of a temporal modifier of past time…it participates also in the historic present. The present tense of the photographic caption is thus a 'compound' and fairly complex tense' (1999: 116-7).

In a more direct (semantic) way than through use of tenses, the caption defines the photograph when imbued with an editorial function:

'photographs are linguistically dominated by their captions, the language of the editor governs the actions of those in the news' (1999: 124)[7].

We can illustrate how captions reflect this editorial function by considering two recent stories where captions caused a stir.

The first case refers to photos taken at the time of the New Orleans hurricane in 2005. One photo from Agence France Presse shows two white hurricane survivors wading through flood water, carrying food. The key phrase in the caption is: 'after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store'. The second photo, from Associated Press, shows a black man wading through flood water carrying food: 'after looting a grocery store'. After complaints of racism , AFP asked for their photo to be pulled from databases[8].

Secondly, in February 2008, at the time of a controversial Japanese whale-hunt, the Australian ABC News website ran a story and photo with the caption: 'The body of a minke whale and its calf are dragged onto the whaling ship'. The Japanese authorities issued a statement saying that the two whales were not a mother and calf[9].

The point is that for the general reading public, in both cases, we only know in any depth what we are seeing when we read the caption. With respect to the whale story, Durrer (2008) comments:

'Since the words that accompany pictures are of such importance, one might well wonder whether it is pictures or whether it is words that make us see' (2008: 2)

A fitting conclusion to this general discussion of newspaper photos and captions,

before we show how the above notions of anchorage, intertextuality, layout, place and time markers and editorialisation of captions can be applied analytically to a corpus of press images.

3. Examining captions in a French newspaper corpus

3.1 The corpus

Our corpus consisted of 5 daily newspapers from 14th May 2008: *Aujourd'hui en France (Auj), Le Figaro (Fig), France-Soir (FSoir), Libération (Libé)* and *Le Monde (Mond).* [10] These general 'news' papers comprise a range of political views and stylistic approaches, while covering more or less the same stories. The sample concentrates therefore primarily on news photographs[11].

3.2 Analysis

The analysis consisted firstly of a quantitative analysis, considering each photograph in relation to its text. Does it have a caption? Is it associated with a headline? Is it linked to an article? These questions link to discussions of anchorage, intertextuality and layout, as discussed in section 2.

Then more qualitative questions were asked. Which tenses do we find in the captions? What is the function of place and time markers in captions? Finally, how do different newspapers approach the same story in terms of photos chosen and captions used? These questions echo the comments of researchers discussed in section 2 re. the functions of anchorage and actuality.

3.2.1 Quantitative analysis

Table 1 Newspaper caption corpus: quantitative analysis

Newspaper	FSoir	Libé	Fig	Mond	Auj
Av. no photos per page	2.34	0.95	1.63	0.57	1.70
% photos with caption	58.67	55.26	96.15	82.35	89.71
% photos with headline	97.33	71.05	88.46	88.24	73.53
% photos with article	92.00	68.42	76.92	82.35	77.94
% photos direct link with text	94.67	65.79	69.23	64.71	98.53
%	40.91	19.05	72.00	28.57	34.43

Table 1 shows that the average number of photos per page varies enormously, from 0.57 in *Le Monde* to 2.34 in *France-Soir*. The two papers at each end of the scale should not surprise us: *Le Monde* prides itself on its seriousness, whereas *France-Soir* is known for its sensationalism, making it close in content and style to the British tabloid press. *Libération*, is close to its fellow left-wing paper, *Le Monde* on the scale, while in the middle we find the right of centre *Le Figaro* and the mid-market *Aujourd'hui en France*.

The results for percentage of photos with caption place *Le Figaro* at the top, closely followed by *Le Monde* and *Aujourd'hui en France*, with much lower percentages for *France-Soir* and *Libération*. This reflects different editorial policy on the use of photos: *Libération* has the feature 'En Image', where a photo is placed with a headline and article, but no caption; also in both *Libération* and

France-Soir, there are lots of small items which just give a headline and article and dispense with captions.

Headlines seem to be more vital than captions: all percentages here are over 70%, and are particularly high for *France-Soir*, which scored low on the captions, but this reversal is not repeated as dramatically for *Libération.*

A similar pattern of relative frequency emerges in the figures for photos with articles. The low percentages for *Libération* and *Aujourd'hui en France* for this and the previous category are explained by the high frequency in these two publications of one article accompanied by more than one photo, which occurs much more in these two papers than the other three.

Regarding the anchorage function, the direct link between photo and text is highest in *Aujourd'hui en France* and *France-Soir*, i.e. the two more tabloid-like publications. Bearing in mind their more down market appeal, there is perhaps a tendency to be more literal and direct in the use of photos to accompany articles. These were also the two highest scoring publications on average number of photos per page, which would suggest an importance given to image relative to text, linking perhaps to a desire to avoid off-putting, dense columns of text which may impact on their attractiveness to their target audience.

This particular category is rather a subjective one, and it might be useful to consider some contrasting examples. Indirect links can be seen in *Le Figaro,* where an article about the founder of the Cirque du Soleil is accompanied by a photo of one of the Cirque's performances in Philadelphia earlier in the month, as well as a more direct link through a photo of the founder himself. In the same paper, a headline and article about foreign aid workers coming to help in the aftermath of the Chinese earthquake is accompanied by a photo showing Chinese rescuers at work (of course, the foreign aid workers have not yet arrived). In contrast, in *Le Monde*, a similar photo (in fact the same scene from a different angle), has a caption starting: 'Des sauveteurs chinois s'affairent autour d'une jeune fille'. Another direct link, this time in *France-Soir*. The subtitle reads: 'Nicolas Sarkozy a défendu hier dans l'Isère le projet "LME", destiné à faire baisser les prix'. The picture shows the president in mid-speech, surrounded by factory workers, and the caption reads: '"C'est pas foutu", a déclaré Nicolas Sarkozy, hier, à Vienne'.

These examples show how anchorage can vary, from the extremely literal to the tangential.

The final column in our table provides preliminary data for our discussion of tense usage, quantifying the use of present tense in the captions.

Table 2 Newspaper caption corpus: tense usage

Newspaper	present	no finite verb
Le Figaro	72.00%	4.00%
France-Soir	40.91%	27.27%
Aujourd'hui	34.43%	31.15%
Le Monde	28.57%	50.00%
Libération	19.05%	66.67%

Use of present tense ranges from 72% in *Le Figaro* to just over 19% in *Libération*. In the latter, most captions contain no finite verb, which is also common in *Le Monde,* and *France-Soir*. In *Aujourd'hui en France* however, there are quite a range of tenses used. These results put into question the various comments noted in section 2 on the prevalence of the present tense in the language of captions. Although it is by far the most commonly found tense, in most cases there is no finite verb present. This reflects findings on tenses in a corpus of French newspaper headlines (Engel 2000 - below). However, whereas a similar pattern emerged across the different newspapers for headlines (table 3), for the captions, there is a more varied picture (table 2):

Table 3 Newspaper headline corpus (Engel 2000) : tense usage

Newspaper	present	no finite verb
Le Monde	31.7%	61.4%
Aujourd'hui	26.9%	60.6%
France-Soir	20.6%	73.8%
Le Figaro	18.2%	78.6%

We will explore this feature in more depth in the section below.

To summarise, our quantitative analysis has shown much variation between the five newspapers in terms of frequency of photos, captions and headlines, also in terms of direct links between tense and text, and use of the present tense. These variations reflect differences in ideological stance, editorial policy, newspaper design and layout, and target audience. The differences also serve to illustrate that some of the generalisations made about captions in terms of function and linguistic features need perhaps to be modified. Our qualitative analysis of three specific aspects of captions on our corpus will serve to reinforce this perspective.

3.2.2 Qualitative analysis

Tense usage in captions

'A photograph captures a moment in time. Whenever possible, use present tense. This will create a sense of immediacy and impact' (Irby, 1997: 1)

Despite the comments of Irby and others, many French captions in our corpus seem not to favour the present tense, avoiding finite verbs, or using other tenses, the exception being *Le Figaro.* Where it is used, as with newspaper headlines, the present tense tends to refer to the recent past: a photo by definition is something that has already taken place. Here are some examples from the corpus:

> 1. Hier Jean-Paul Mouren (à gauche) et Laurent Pellecuer (à droite) <u>fêtent</u> leur victoire à bord de leur monocoque, à Saint-Barthélemy (*Le Figaro* 14.05.08)

> 2. Juan Carlos d'Espagne <u>épouse</u> Sofia de Grèce (Headline: Ce jour-là…le 14 mai 1962, *Le Figaro* 14.05.08)

3. Paris (IVe), hier, Jacques et Bernadette Chirac <u>arrivent</u> au Centre Pompidou (*Aujourd'hui en France* 14.05.08)

These examples illustrate clearly the importance of temporal markers in the caption or associated headline which situate the event in the past, despite the use of present tense.

In other cases, the present is used as a general form, for a universal truth (example 4), or to describe a current situation (examples 5, 6):

4. Grâce à l'autopostage, utilisation n'<u>est</u> pas synonyme de possession! *(France-Soir* 14.05.08)

5. La messagerie instantanée MSN <u>est</u> utilisée par 70% des jeunes internautes français (*Aujourd'hui en France* 14.05.08)

6. Cet hôtel social de Montpellier <u>sert</u> de lieu de transit aux jeunes homosexuels rejetés par leur famille et n'ayant pas de place au Refuge (*Libération* 14.05.08)

We also find a range of other tenses in the captions:

7. Nicolas Sarkozy, qui <u>a visité</u> hier l'usine Yoplait dans la banlieue de Vienne, <u>a développé</u> ses arguments en faveur de la concurrence (*Le Figaro* 14.05.08)

8. Kalistra <u>a été trompée</u> par un homme qui <u>se faisait</u> passer pour une adolescente sur un forum de discussion (*Aujourd'hui en France* 14.05.08)

9. Hier les secours <u>arrivaient</u> à l'épicentre du séisme dans le province du Sichuan (*France-Soir* 14.05.08)

10. L'équipe parisienne <u>devra</u> être sacrément unie pour sortir du match piégeux à Sochaux (*France-Soir* 14.05.08)

11. Abdeslam Ouaddou <u>avait reçu</u> le soutien du ministre des Sports, Bernard Laporte (*France-Soir* 14.05.08)

12. "Le Chant des Oiseaux" du Catalan Albert Serra, qui <u>fut révélé</u> à la Quinzaine 2006 avec "Honor de Cavalleria" (*Libération* 14.05.08)

The effect of these captions is primarily to pick up the narrative in the text (examples 7-9), to pass comment (example 10), or to fill in background (examples 11-12). All serve to give the reader a 'taster' of the story in the article, and thus contribute along with the headline and photo, to draw the reader in. The photo can often be the first thing that captures the reader's attention: the accompanying text (headline, caption) provides a context for the photo and helps the reader decide whether it is worth reading the whole article (see Oglesbee 1998:2, cited below). These tensed examples illustrate Hall's concept of 'selective elucidation'(1972: 60, op.cit.) : the very specific captions limit potential interpretations, in marked contrast to the following, where there is no finite verb in the caption:

13. A Beyrouth, une affiche du général Michel Sleimane, commandant en chef de l'armée et candidat à la présidence de la République (*Le Monde* 14.05.08)

14. De gauche à droite: Ryszard Ronczewski (l'ancien détenu) et Alexandre Fehling (Sven) (*Le Monde* 14.05.08)

15. Pique-nique sans OGM à Paris, hier, quelques heures avant l'examen du projet de loi sur les organismes génétiquement modifiés (*Libération* 14.05.08)

16. Ségolène Royal, le 4 juin 2007, à Nantes (*Libération* 14.05.08)

These are prime examples of the labelling function of captions, relying heavily on noun phrases, and time and place markers: they do not offer readers a taster of the story to the same degree as many of the tensed examples we have examined, rather they classify the picture, designating its function on the page, allowing for a more open interpretation.

Place and time markers in captions

'La légende, le texte d'accompagnement précisant et orientant une lecture parfois trop flottante de l'image' (Savino, 1999: 1)

We have already noted the importance of place and time markers in captions, particularly when the present tense refers to past time (examples 1-3), or where there is no finite verb (examples 13-16). Indeed, there is a general tendency in caption writing to supply the place and time. This is not surprising: many people annotate their photo albums (or the backs of photos) with similar information. In the press, it is even more important to give such details on news photographs, emphasising the vital function of anchorage.

This is particularly noticeable in *Aujourd'hui en France*:

17. Esplanade des Invalides (Paris VIIe) hier…Vienne (Isère), hier…

Beyrouth (Liban), hier après-midi…Beichuan (Chine), hier…Kalagyisu (Birmanie), hier…

Each photo is categorised in time and space, in varying degrees of precision: for Parisian photos, the *arrondissement* is given in brackets, for elsewhere in France, the *département*, and for outside France, the country.

Photo and caption choices for the same story

'We almost always look at the photos first. The caption is a natural extension of this curiosity. For this reason, great captions can hook readers and keep them interested long enough to read the related material' (Oglesbee, 1998:2)

In this section, we consider treatments of one particular news story in the five newspapers: the devastating earthquake in China. We will start by summarizing the coverage in each paper in terms of headlines, photos and captions used:

18. *Le Monde*

Page 1

Headline: Chine. Dans le sud-ouest du pays, le plus violent séisme depuis 1976

Photo: (colour) Girl on stretcher surrounded by rescue workers.

Caption: Des sauveteurs chinois s'affairent autour d'une jeune fille. Elle vient d'être extraite, mardi 13 mai, à Juyuan, province du Sichuan,

des décombres d'un établissement scolaire…(5 more lines) NO ARTICLE: 'Lire page 4'

Page 4

Surtitle: Chine. Un bilan provisoire fait état d'une dizaine de milliers de morts et de disparus

Headline: Le pouvoir chinois confronté au séisme du Sichuan

Photo: (black and white) A man walking past a collapsed building.

Caption: Mardi 13 mai, un immeuble effondré situé à Dujiangyan, une ville située non loin de l'épicentre, au sud-ouest de la Chine. Le tremblement de terre a atteint une amplitude de 7,8 sur l'échelle de Richter

PLUS ARTICLE, MAP, LIST OF WORST EARTHQUAKES

19. *Le Figaro*

Page 1

Headline: Après le séisme, la Chine laisse entrer l'aide internationale

Photo: (colour) Girl on a stretcher surrounded by Chinese rescue workers (same scene as 18, but from a different angle)

Caption: none.

PLUS SHORT ARTICLE, THEN: 'Pages 5 et 15'

Page 5

Headline: Séisme: Pékin prompt à envoyer du secours

Subtitle: Extrême-Orient. Le bilan du tremblement de terre du lundi faisait état hier soir de 20 000 morts et plusieurs milliers de personnes encore sous les décombres

Photo: (colour) Same girl as on page 1, on a stretcher, but still under rubble (i.e. taken before page 1 picture).

Caption: Des sauveteurs tentent de dégager une jeune fille des décombres d'une école de Juyuan, hier dans la province du Sichuan, au lendemain d'un séisme mesuré à 7,9 sur l'échelle de Richter

PLUS ARTICLE

(Page 15 is an editorial on the earthquake, with no photos)

20*. Libération*

Page 8

Surtitle: Chine. Les secouristes, aidés par la population, peinent à rejoindre la zone la plus dévastée

Headline: Mobilisation générale au Sichuan

Photo: (colour) A couple embrace next to the covered corpse of their child.

Caption: A Dujiangyan, des victimes du séisme aux côtés du corps de leur enfant, tué par l'effondrement de son école

PLUS ARTICLE, MAP

21. *Aujourd'hui en France*

Page 1

Headline: Séisme en Chine

Photo: (colour) Young child in arms of rescuer.

Caption: L'angoisse des survivants

NO ARTICLE : 'Page 9'

Page 9

Surtitle: Chine

Headline: Les survivants vivent dans la peur des répliques

Photo: (colour) A young man trapped in the ruins.

Caption: Beichuan (Chine), hier. Ce garçon sous perfusion, prisonnier des ruines d'un bâtiment qui s'est effondré après le tremblement de terre de lundi, attend d'être dégagé

PLUS ARTICLE, MAP, and 2 associated articles on same page (concerns for nuclear facilities in China)

22. *France-Soir*

Page 17

Surtitle: Chine. Un dernier bilan d'environ 12.000 morts, selon les autorités

Headline: Le Sichuan dans la crainte de nouvelles secousses

Subtitle: Dans cette importante region économique du pays, les survivants cherchent à se protéger des répliques annoncées, suite au terrible tremblement de terre de lundi. Une catastrophe écologique pourrait également survenir

Photo: (colour) A hand juts out of the ruins; two rescuers attend.

Caption: Hier, les secours arrivaient à l'épicentre du séisme dans la province du Sichuan

PLUS ARTICLE, and 1 associated article on same page (on missing foreign tourists)

What points of interest emerge from the treatment of this news story in five different papers? Firstly, we are examining here the 'hooks'; the elements which draw the reader in, rather than the detail of the articles. Therefore position in the paper is worth noting. In 18 (*Le Monde*), 19 (*Le Figaro*), and 21(*Aujourd'hui en France*), we are offered a taster on the front page, and a direction to the inside pages. In 20 (*Libération*), the article appears on page 8 out of 40, therefore fairly near the front; in 22 (*France-Soir*), it appears on page 17 of 32, so in the middle. The largest page 1 photo is in 18 (*Le Monde*).

Four newspapers use a photo of a person being rescued (18,19,21,22), others show survivors (20) or damage (18). All the colour photos are emotionally laden,

showing people in distress, the colour adding to the drama. This recalls Tétu's point (1990: 137) that photos show the actors rather than the action.

There are variations in the approach as expressed in the headlines and captions: some emphasise the rescue efforts (18,19,20), others the fear of aftershocks among survivors (21,22), or the ecological effects (22)[12].

There is not always a direct link between the photo and the accompanying text: for example, in 19 (page 1 text), the headline refers to international aid, but the photo shows Chinese rescuers; in 20 the surtitle and headline refer to the rescue effort, but the photo highlights an individual family's tragedy; in 21 (page 9), the headline refers to fear of aftershocks, and the photo shows a young man trapped in ruins; there is a similar combination in 22.

Finally, the linguistic structure of the captions further illustrate our points on the use of tenses, place and time markers, from the specificity of 22, where the *imparfait* draws the reader into the narrative, to the generality of 20, where the lack of finite verb lifts the individual tragedy up to a universal level.

In summary, we can note the importance of place and time markers in captions, particularly when present tense is used to refer to past time, or no finite verb is present. Although these are the two most frequent types of tense usage, other tenses can transform the caption into a mini-narrative, or supply background detail. In the case of varying treatments of the Chinese earthquake story, it seems that the key to photo selection is emotional power, even when the photo may not relate directly to the headline and subsequent article.

4. Conclusion

Newspaper photo captions are an excellent example of the image-text relationship. This mini-study suggests that newspaper photos are the most salient hooks which draw the reader into a story; their captions anchor these photos in relation to the story. Captions feed the reader with information on people, time and places, tantalising snippets of detail which make the reader want to read more. Captions transform a photo into a 'news photo'. Furthermore, they place a particular interpretation on the image, shaping the reader's understanding of that image.

In our small corpus of French newspaper captions, we have shown the variations across the five newspapers in their general use of captions, and in their approaches to specific stories. The use of tense appears to be more varied than suggested by many commentators. Furthermore, in terms of degree of anchorage, a more complex picture emerges. It is not uncommon for there to be minimal links between the photo and the accompanying text, and captions themselves range from general labels to detailed narratives. These points tend to support the idea that the text (caption), rather than the picture, directs the reader.

Above all, this paper has provided an insight into a rather neglected area of newspaper language. It would be particularly useful to follow on from this study with a cross-linguistic comparison. Comparative studies of newspaper headlines have highlighted both similarities and differences across languages, and I would suggest the same would be true for newspaper captions.

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Notes

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[2] For these latter two articles, page references will be to the 1982 essay collection, *L'obvie et l'obtus.*
[3] SN = Syntagme Nominal (Noun Phrase, NP)
[4] Often a distinction is made between the term 'title' (titre), which is merely indexical, and 'caption' (légende), which is editorial.
[5] On how to interpret newspaper layout, see also Peytard (1975).
[6] See also Irby (1997), Oglesbee (1998).
[7] The idea of linguistic domination contrasts with Bosredon (1997: 94) discussed above, on the limitation of the caption by the image. On the editorial function in caption writing, see also Furet (1995: 108-116), Oglesbee (1998).
[8] Story filed online by *Raw Story*, 09/02/05.
[9] Story reported in Durrer (2008).
[10] For the purposes of this study, additional supplements to the main papers were not analysed. This concerned three of our five titles: *Le Figaro, France-Soir* and *Le Monde.*
[11] Not included: byline photos, advertisements, photos in TV listings, maps, diagrams, cartoons or drawings.
[12] There is also a variation of fact: was the earthquake 7.8 (*Le Monde*) or 7.9 (*Le Figaro*) on the Richter scale?