

## Depp v. Heard: Reported Speech in Canadian Media Discourse

Marianne Laplante, York University

Yifan Wu, York University

This paper investigates the Canadian media coverage of the Depp v. Heard defamation trial in the US. Specifically, we are interested in the varied (and sometimes biased) discursive strategies that the media use to report upon what Depp and Heard said in the trial, particularly reported speech (RS). Our data shows that evaluation, particularly social gender ideologies, is inserted along the text trajectory (Blommaert, 2005) of the RS in the media (see also Ehrlich, 2012; Romaniuk, 2014). We anchor our definition of RS in footing theory (Goffman, 1979), which differentiates the animator (i.e. the entity physically producing the utterance) from the author (i.e. the entity selecting the form of the utterance to express sentiments and beliefs) and from the principal (i.e., the entity whose sentiments or beliefs are being expressed). RS occurs when there is a mismatch between the animator and the author/principal. Following Semino and Short (2004), we discuss three RS structures, namely direct RS (e.g., “*It seemed like pure hatred for me,*” Depp said.), indirect RS (e.g., *Sobbing Amber Heard testifies that Johnny Depp sexually assaulted her*), and verbs referring to the speech act (e.g., *Sobbing Amber Heard accuses Johnny Depp of sexual assault*). These three structures, in the order listed above, create progressively greater distance from a verbatim representation of the original speech and offer progressively more leeway to the animator (Semino & Short, 2004). We consider all instances of RS as marked, as they report information beyond the original text and consequentially convey evaluation from the entity reporting it (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986).

The data consisted of all 306 articles with a headline containing the words “Johnny Depp” or “Amber Heard” dating from the first day of the trial (Apr. 11, 2022) until the end of data collection (Dec. 31, 2023) in the top seven circulated anglophone newspapers in Canada. Our methodology combines quantitative and qualitative analyses. Firstly, we extracted every instance of RS that was uttered by Depp or Heard during their testimonies, coded them for RS structure and reporting verb type, and finally compared the RS to original utterances in the courtroom transcription. Contrary to previous literature which predicted women’s voices are less reported than men’s in the media (Caldas-Coulthard, 1993), we found more instances of RS from Heard (n=778) than from Depp (n=585). Our preliminary results for the distribution of the RS structures point to a significant pattern ( $p < 0.05$ ): Heard’s speech is less likely to be represented through direct RS structures than Depp’s. Moreover, our analysis of the reporting verbs shows a strong pattern of Heard’s speech being less likely to be reported with neutral verbs (i.e., *say*, *tell*) (Caldas-Coulthard, 1993; O’Keeffe & Breen, 2007) than Depp’s ( $p = 0.06$ ). Secondly, considering the entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) of courtroom discourse in the media through RS, we trace some accuracies and discrepancies in the RS representations of the courtroom discourse (Briggs & Bauman, 1992). For example, we found several newspaper articles in which the RS (e.g., *Heard’s claim that she was assaulted by Depp with a bottle*) did not originate from a simple sentence pronounced during the trial (e.g., *I was assaulted by Depp with a bottle*) but from a long and complex questioning between the witness and the interrogating attorney (see also Eades, 2012).

We argue that while RS may give an impression of accuracy and neutrality to the readers (Tannen, 2007), it leaves room for insertions of implicit evaluation that render the coverage of the Depp v. Heard case subjective. Importantly, both parties’ voices were not equitably represented. This study of gender-based differences in RS is yet another example of a well-established systemic tendency for the media to discredit women’s experiences and testimonies about gender violence (e.g., Ehrlich, 2019; Tranchese, 2023).

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