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Self-reference in press releases[☆]

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Abstract

This article looks at press releases. Drawing from corpus-based evidence on reflexive person, time and place deixis, I shall argue that self-reference in press releases is part of a point of view operation with the writers of press releases switching out of their own perspective towards that of the journalists, who will have to copy the press releases in their own news reporting. It is suggested that self-reference in press releases plays a complex ‘preformulating’ role: i.e. it helps writers of press releases meet the requirements of news reporting. While this data supports claims for a cooperation-oriented social-interactional view of the deictic field, it is shown that self-reference in press releases may also serve less harmonious purposes. More generally, since they are shown not only to fit into the ‘larger social agendas’, but also to actively manage them, it is argued that referential choices can make for interesting linguistic pragmatic research.

1. Introduction

The “total currency” of telling gossip stories “turns on their being tellable”, Harvey Sacks argues in one of his lectures on everyday conversation (1992a: 776). He goes on to say that, more generally,

“... people in interactions engage in attending what they do by reference to what it is that those others they’re with might tell some others who might tell some others. And this is not merely a negative constraint. It can be the sort of thing one counts on. And indeed, one can select a co-participant whom one feels assured will have occasion to tell somebody, when one warrants something broadcast.” (Sacks, 1992a: 779)

Curiously, a similar intertextuality is to be found in that peculiarly institutional business of issuing press releases, which – by their very nature – do not compete for journalists’ attention *per se*, but are meant to be retold by them as accurately as possible – preferably even verbatim – in their own news reporting.

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In this article I shall look at self-reference in press releases, i.e. how the organizations that issue the press releases are referred to, and I shall relate this to the issue of ‘tellability’. More particularly, I set out to present corpus-based evidence¹ on reflexive person, time and place deixis to demonstrate that press releases are ‘preformulated’, providing journalists with “written sources which are already prefabricated in an appropriate news style and therefore require the minimum of reworking” (Bell, 1991: 58). At the same time I shall argue that preformulation may not be so cooperative as it looks. All this serves to support Downing’s claim that referential choices constitute an interesting domain for linguistic pragmatic analysis in that they are far from self-evident and often prove to be intricately constrained by “the demands of the larger social agendas” (1996: 95).² Even more so, since the various forms of self-reference in my data will be shown to play an active role in encouraging journalists to copy press releases – instead of, for example, ignoring them or drastically rewriting them in their own words –, the present article provides evidence that such referential choices “are made not only to fit into, but also to manage and to transform conversational activities and participation structures” (Ford and Fox, 1996: 162; cf. also Gumperz, 1982).

2. Third-person self-reference

The first, rather general, observation from the corpus is that there are hardly any first-person pronouns to be found. This is unexpected, to say the least, since press releases – like other types of corporate disclosure discourse, including business organizations’ annual reports – can be considered ‘egocentric’: organizations invariably issue them because they want to say something about themselves. Still, hardly any traditional semantic mappings of the writers of the press releases onto ‘I’ or ‘we’ could be found in my corpus; instead, it is a characteristic feature of the production format of press releases that self-referencing is almost exclusively realized in the third person, in particular through the use of the organization’s proper name. Here are two extracts from headlines of press releases:

(1) (Alcatel Bell, Antwerp: 28 February 1994)

ALCATEL BELL LEVERT INTELLIGENTE NETWERKEN AAN ZUID-KOREA

[ALCATEL BELL SUPPLIES INTELLIGENT NETWORKS TO SOUTH KOREA]

¹ The corpus consists of over 600 press releases, most of them in Dutch, which were obtained from representatives of the media that receive press releases (i.e. the Belgian Dutch-language quality newspaper *De Standaard* and the Belgian press agency *Belga*) as well as from a number of organizations that issue them (including all BEL 20 companies, i.e. Belgium’s top 20 companies that are quoted on the stock exchange). See Jacobs (forthcoming a) for a full analysis of the press releases in this corpus. In this article the English translations of the extracts are my own, except for that in (25), which is an extract from the organization’s own English press release.

² It follows that what may be a preferred way of handling self-reference in one communicative genre may turn out to be dispreferred in another. Any consideration of the genre concept falls outside the scope of this article, though. For a survey of relevant categories in the analysis of ‘culturally patterned speaking (or writing) practices’ see Günthner and Knoblauch (1995).

(2) (Boelwerf Vlaanderen, Temse: 24 February 1994)
 BOELWERF VLAANDEREN DOOPT 2 KOELSCHEPEN
 [BOELWERF VLAANDEREN CHRISTENS TWO COOLING SHIPS]

Clearly, what happens in these examples is that the individual's (or individuals') personal identity is deleted, or at least disguised, in favour of that of the organization that issues the press release. For Lerman (1983, 1985) such third-person self-reference is a typical feature of institutional discourse, which she defines as "that broad category of language use in which the [speaker or writer] is a representative of an institution, [speaking or writing] not as 'I', the personal ego, but as a public identity or role" (1983: 77). Focusing on Nixon's presidential Watergate speeches and on the media coverage of them, she introduces the term 'institutional voice' to denote the dual role played by a sender who necessarily speaks or writes as an individual, but at the same time speaks or writes as (i.e. personifies) or for (i.e. represents) an institution. This is Nixon talking about his own role in the Watergate affair:

Many people assume that the tapes must incriminate the President, or that otherwise he would not insist on their privacy (Lerman, 1983: 83).

As far as writing is concerned, it is reported that Nixon used his initials 'RN' to refer to himself in memos to his aides (cf. also Brown and Levinson, 1987: 204 on the use of reference terms as 'I' avoidance in the English of kings and presidents). Rogers and Swales (1990) and Swales and Rogers (1995) look at business organizations' ethical codes and mission statements, and observe a pattern of third-person self-reference through proper names that looks similar to that of press releases, as in:

Honeywell manages its business in ways that are sensitive to the environment and that conserve natural resources" (Swales and Rogers, 1995: 235).

Thompson and Thetela (1995: 117), finally, provide comparable data from advertising:

And that's exactly why Lufthansa will never abandon its uncompromising commitment to the very highest standards of quality and service.³

In Goffman's terminology, it is not the 'animator' or 'author', but the 'principal' who is most noticeably present in my data, i.e. an individual or party "whose position is established by the words that are spoken" (1981: 144) and who is "active in some particular social identity or role, some special capacity as a member of a group, office category, relationship, association, or whatever, some socially based source of self-identification" (1981: 145), "an identity which may lead [the principal] to speak inclusively for an entity of which he is only a part" (1981: 226). As I have shown, in the case of a press release the principal usually is the organization that it is issued by.

³ On proper names see also, among others, Sanford et al. (1988), Allerton (1996) and Downing (1996).

Crucially, self-reference in press releases is not only to the organization's proper name, but also frequently to a definite description of it, or what Maes (1991) calls a 'nominal anaphor'. (3) and (4) are characteristic extracts combining initial self-reference through the proper name with a subsequent definite description as well as third-person pro-forms:

- (3) (R.J. Reynolds, Brussels: 23 February 1994)

Per 1 maart 1994 zal R.J. Reynolds Tobacco International haar sales- en marketingactiviteiten in België, Nederland en Luxemburg integreren in een nieuwe Benelux-organisatie. De onderneming wil hiermee onder andere een hechte samenwerking bereiken tussen de commerciële functies in Nederland (Hilversum) en België (Brussel).

[On 1 March 1994 R.J. Reynolds Tobacco International will integrate its sales and marketing activities in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in a new Benelux organization. This way the company aims, among others, at reaching a close cooperation between the commercial functions in the Netherlands (Hilversum) and Belgium (Brussels).]

- (4) (BASF, Brussels: 17 March 1994)

BASF: geen voorjaarsmoehheid

De onderneming zet haar structurele aanpassingen onverminderd voort

[BASF: no spring fatigue

The company continues its structural adjustments without abatement]

Another interesting feature of self-reference in press releases is the use of the impersonal pronoun ('men' in Dutch):

- (5) (ASQ, Houthalen: 23 February 1994)

Het softwarehuis ASQ maakt het zichzelf eerlijk gezegd niet gemakkelijk in zijn streven naar topkwaliteit. Heel wat energie gaat naar het selekteren van de beste producten en de betrouwbaarste partners, zodat men de klanten een optimale service kan garanderen.

[Honestly, the software house ASQ is not making things easy for itself in its striving for top quality. A lot of energy is geared towards selecting the best products and the most reliable partners, so that one can guarantee an optimal service to the customers.]

- (6) (Stork, Sint-Niklaas: 28 March 1994)

Het nettoresultaat van het Stork-concern over het boekjaar 1993 bedraagt 1,024 miljard BEF, dit betekent een stijging van 103 miljoen BEF of 11% ten overstaan van 1992. (...)

Gedurende 1993 kende men een stijging van de orderontvangsten met 4,8 miljard BEF (=7,5%) ten opzichte van 1992 (...).

[The net result of the Stork concern over the financial year 1993 amounts to 1.024 billion BEF, which means a rise of 103 million BEF or 11% compared with 1992. (...)]

During 1993 one knew a rise of the receipt of orders of 4.8 billion BEF (=7.5%) compared with 1992 (...).]

Alternatively, there is the use of passive or passive-like constructions, rendering any explicit self-reference altogether unnecessary.

(7) (CMB: 6 February 1995)

De geconsolideerde winst over het boekjaar 1994 wordt geraamd op 1050 miljoen BEF, tegenover 571 miljoen BEF in 1993.

[The consolidated profit for the financial year 1994 is estimated at 1,050 million BEF, compared with 571 million BEF in 1993.]

(8) (Kredietbank, Brussels: 15 November 1994)

De voorkeur van de Kredietbank voor Taiwan als vestigingsplaats voor een nieuwe branch is vooral het resultaat van de positieve ervaring die in zeer korte tijd werd opgedaan met (...).

[The preference of the Kredietbank for Taiwan as the location for a new branch is mainly the result of the positive experience that was gained in a very short time with (...).]

(9) (BBL, Brussels: 27 April 1995)

BBL TRAVEL: 1995 kondigt zich veelbelovend aan.

[BBL TRAVEL: 1995 looks very promising.]

Also note the following nominalizations:

(10) (Recticel, Brussels: 11 March 1994)

TERUGKEER NAAR WINST IN EEN MOEILIJKE ECONOMISCHE CONTEXT

[RETURN TO PROFIT IN A DIFFICULT ECONOMIC CONTEXT]

(11) (Electrabel, Brussels: 7 December 1994)

AANKONDIGING NOODPLANOEFENING DOEL 1994

[ANNOUNCEMENT EMERGENCY EXERCISE DOEL 1994]

(12) (ibens, Antwerp: 21 March 1994)

Oprichting dochterbedrijven in Hongarije en Polen

JUBILERENDE AANNEMINGEN J&E iBENS OP DE OOSTEUROPESE MARKT

[Foundation of subsidiaries in Hungary and Poland

JUBILEE CONTRACTORS J&E iBENS ON THE EASTERN EUROPEAN MARKET]

A final and even more drastic way of avoiding self-reference is to organize the contents of the news in such a way that the egocentric nature of the press release remains as much hidden from view as possible. In a number of press releases from the corpus, the German chemical multinational Bayer, for example, is parading its new products; but instead of emphasizing the company's central role as a manufacturer and supplier, as most press releases do, it is the customer's use of the product that is put in the limelight. This is the first paragraph from Bayer's press release about its new Bayblend® T 85 MN product:

(13) (Bayer, Antwerp: 29 September 1994)

Mobiele telefoons zijn in: deze minitelefoons zijn nauwelijks groter dan een brilletui, maar je kan ermee bellen naar om het even waar in Europa. Een van de nieuwste ontwikkelingen op de innovatieve markt is de “Teleport 9020” van AEG Mobile Communication GmbH in Ulm (Duitsland). Om aan de eisen van de gebruikers m.b.t. de stevigheid van de toestelletjes te voldoen, bestaan beide behuizingshelften van het nieuwe produkt uit Bayblend® 85 MN, een PC+ABS-blend van Bayer AG.

[Mobile telephones are in: these mini telephones are hardly bigger than a spectacle case, but you can use them to call anywhere in Europe. One of the latest developments on the innovative market is the “Teleport 9020” from AEG Mobile Communication GmbH in Ulm (Germany). To meet the users’ demands about the firmness of the devices, both outer halves of the new product are made of Bayblend® T 85 MN, a PC+ABS blend from Bayer AG.]

From this paragraph, it looks as if the press release is about mobile phones, and in particular about one of another company’s, viz. AEG’s, new models. Unsuspecting readers might even be led to assume that the press release was issued by AEG. Only at the end of this paragraph does it become clear that the press release is meant to focus on one of Bayer’s products that goes into mobile phones. The next paragraph provides a short description of the Bayer product. The third and final paragraph, however, is again completely devoted to AEG’s mobile phones:

(14) (Bayer, Antwerp: 29 September 1994)

De handige telefoon met een vermogen van 2 Watt meet 166 bij 57 bij 20 mm en functioneert met de “grote” standaardtelefoonkaart (SIM). Het toestel weegt slechts 140 g en de batterij afhankelijk van het type weegt ± 110 g: dat is goed voor 20 uur standby en 1 uur spreektijd.

[The handy telephone with a power of 2 Watt measures 166 by 57 by 20 mm and operates with the “big” standard telephone card (SIM). The device weighs only 140 g and the battery weighs ± 110 g, depending on the type: this guarantees 20 hours of standby and 1 hour of speaking time.]

Taken together, the wide range of examples quoted above shows that writers of press releases make every effort to avoid self-reference through the first person. The few first-person pronouns that I have found in my corpus are marked forms. Almost all occurrences are of the plural ‘we’, which has been shown to be popular as a solidarity-builder in other types of institutional writing (e.g. Rogers and Swales, 1990; Sacks, 1992b: 391; Lerner, 1993; Swales and Rogers, 1995; Schegloff, 1996). In my corpus compare one bank’s announcement of a rise in interest rates:

(15) (Argenta, Antwerp: 22 September 1994)

De marktsituatie is voor ons aanleiding tot het aanpassen van onze hypotheek-tarieven.

[The market situation is an occasion for us to adjust our mortgage rates.]

with the announcements of two other banks:

- (16) (BBL, Brussels: 6 April 1995)

De BBL zal vanaf vandaag de kasbonrente op 3 en 5 jaar evenals de achtergestelde BBL-certificaten op 6 en 8 jaar aanpassen.

[From today the BBL will adjust the bond interest rate for 3 and 5 years as well as the subordinated BBL certificates for 6 and 8 years.]

- (17) (Generale Bank, Brussels: 13 September 1994)

Wegens de evolutie van de rente op de obligatiemarkten, past de Generale Bank haar rentetarieven voor kasbons aan vanaf vrijdag 16 september 1994.

[Due to the evolution of the interest on the share market, the Generale Bank will adjust its interest rates for bonds starting 16 September 1994.]

In a small number of cases first-person and third-person self-reference have – rather awkwardly – been combined. Thompson and Thetela (1995) call this a ‘referential switch’, as in:

- (18) (Christelijke Vakbond van Communicatiemiddelen en Cultuur/ACOD, Brussels: 8 March 1994)

Indien dat werkelijk het geval is, zal het GEMEENSCHAPPELIJK VAKBONDSFRONT uiteraard onmiddellijk reageren. We zullen ons verzetten tegen maatregelen die verder zouden gaan dan wat in het ONDERNEMINGSPLAN voorzien is, en 2000 tot 3000 banen zouden kosten.

[If this is really the case, the JOINT TRADE UNION FRONT will of course react immediately. We will oppose measures that would go further than what is anticipated in the BUSINESS PLAN, and would cost 2,000 to 3,000 jobs.]

In two consecutive sentences the organization that issues the press release is first referred to in the third person and then in the first person.

3. Point of view operations

The question now is: why such complex self-reference in press releases? Why, basically, such ‘slippage’, in which the grammatical category of person (viz. the third-person form) does not match the interactional participant role (viz. that of writer of the press release)? And also: why this use of a proper name and of definite description, which clashes with the pre-emptive nature of a pure deictic word like ‘we’; after all, as Levinson argues, “it takes special conventions to make it appropriate for a speaker to refer to himself by name” (1983: 75).

In asking some of these questions, I am not the first to draw attention to the interest of deixis to the analysis of functionally specialized discourse. Levinson (1988: 203) suggests that “the potential vagueness of the participant role associated with the institutional role is of course an exploitable resource”. Similarly, Thomas (1989: 330) distinguishes between social roles (in this case PR officer for an organization,

for example, vs. journalist) and discourse roles (writer vs. reader) and concludes that the intersection of the two is “an area of pragmatic indeterminacy which interactants exploit in discourse”. Zupnik (1994: 330) looks at what she calls the speaker’s or writer’s “ability to shift in and out of various roles” and sees it as a resource for persuasion (cf. also De Fina, 1995). Most research so far has focused on the strategic use of personal pronouns to do so. Brown and Gilman (1960) is a classic work in this respect; subsequent research has dealt, among other topics, with the use of ‘he’ as the unmarked form (Cameron, 1985) and with solidarity-building ‘we’ (Rounds, 1987 on teaching settings; Myers, 1989 on scientific articles; Fairclough, 1989; Wilson, 1990; Zupnik, 1994 on political language; Rogers and Swales, 1990; Swales and Rogers, 1995 on business language). Goffman (1974), Lerman (1983, 1985) and Wilson (1990), to name only some ventures into the domain, have looked at third-person self-reference. Even earlier, it was the French scholar Emile Benveniste who, dealing with the narrative style of history textbooks, touched on the research question at the heart of my analysis of third-person self-reference in press releases.

Here is Benveniste’s definition of ‘histoire’ from his *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale*:

“Nous définirons le récit historique comme le mode d’énonciation qui exclut toute forme linguistique ‘autobiographique’. L’historien ne dira jamais *je ni tu, ni ici, ni maintenant (...)*. On ne constatera donc dans le récit historique strictement poursuivi que des formes de ‘3e personne’” (1966: 239).

[We shall define the historic narrative as a mode of utterance that excludes all ‘autobiographical’ linguistic forms. The historian will never say I, you, here or now (...). One will therefore only find ‘third-person’ forms in a strict historic narrative.]

In ‘histoire’ there is no reference whatsoever to the speaker. Here is an illustration from Adamson (1995):

Once upon a time, in a far distant country, there lived a king and the king had a daughter, who was famed for her beauty. One day, while she was walking in the garden in front of her father’s palace, she met an old woman whom she had never seen there before ...

As far as press releases are concerned, I have shown that first-person pronouns prove very rare in my corpus and I shall demonstrate later that the same is true of words like ‘here’ and ‘now’. As a result, press releases look very much like ‘histoire’.

At the same time, though, there can be no doubt that the third-person forms of press releases have first-person reference, and it follows that, even if they share some of the reference forms of history textbooks and fairy tales, press releases really are a type of egocentric discourse, which actually seems to be closer to Benveniste’s notion of ‘discours’, viz.:

“... toute énonciation supposant un locuteur et un auditeur, et chez le premier l’intention d’influencer l’autre en quelque manière” (Benveniste, 1966: 242).

[each utterance that presupposes a sender and a receiver and with the former the intention to influence the other in some way or another.]

Here is a typical example from a nature film, with words like ‘we’, ‘here’ and ‘now’ putting the speaker in the centre of attention:

We’re walking towards the head of the glen and we should soon catch our first glimpse of the eagle’s nest. Yes, there it is, up in front... One of the parent birds has already arrived... and here’s the other one coming in now. Oops! they’ve seen us ... (Adamson, 1995)

Again this is no perfect fit. Clearly, I have shown that, in terms of reference, press releases are very different from the example quoted above⁴ and it now seems as if they can be situated midway between Benveniste’s ‘histoire’ and ‘discours’. Although they look like ‘histoire’, they share the egocentric perspective of ‘discours’; in a way, they are ‘discours’ disguised as ‘histoire’. Interestingly, and this is the reason why I turned to *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale* in the first place, Benveniste seems to take the possibility of such a mixture into account when he introduces a third type called ‘discours indirect’:

“Indiquons par parenthèse que l’énonciation historique et celle de discours peuvent à l’occasion se rejoindre en un troisième type d’énonciation, où le discours est rapporté en termes d’événement et transposé sur le plan historique; c’est ce qui est communément appelé ‘discours indirect’.” (Benveniste, 1966: 242).

[Let’s mention in parentheses that the historic utterance and the discursive one may occasionally combine in a third type of utterance, in which the discourse is reported in terms of an event and transposed to the historic level; this is what is commonly called ‘indirect discourse’.]

Unfortunately, ‘discours indirect’ is no more than a footnote in Benveniste’s theory and he does not add a single word on the topic.

Returning to my research question, I would now like to suggest that – in line with Levinson’s (1988) and Thomas’s (1989) remarks quoted earlier about the strategic use of deixis – the various forms of third-person self-reference in my corpus can only be correctly interpreted if the ‘tellability’ of press releases is taken into account. In particular, I shall argue that they help to ‘take the other fellow’s point of view’ (Fillmore, 1975: 44), i.e. through third-person self-reference writers of press releases switch out of their own perspective and move some way to that of the journalists, who are expected to copy those press releases in their own news reporting. In other words, third-person self-reference is part of what Brown and Levinson (1987) call a ‘point of view operation’. Here is a simple example of a point of view operation from everyday oral interaction:

Mother talking to father, in the presence of little Billie: Can Billie have an ice-cream, Daddy? (Levinson, 1983: 82)

⁴ One explanation is that in film commentaries the basis of shared visual experience establishes a link between speaker (commentator) and hearer (viewer). No such common ground can be assumed with press releases (see Jacobs, forthcoming b, for a more thorough account of the notion of common ground in press releases).

In this extract the speaker addresses her husband as ‘daddy’ and, in doing so, she seems to adopt the language of the overhearing child.

In the next section I shall argue that point of view operations play a double ‘pre-formulating’ role in my corpus. First of all, by anticipating the journalists’ typical reference forms, they help writers of press releases meet the formal requirements of news reporting. Next, I shall demonstrate that preformulation in press releases is not just a question of meeting the formal requirements of news reporting. As Gandy (1982: 57) puts it, “content” too may be “structured in such a way as to flow in sync with the media system’s requirements” in order to have “a greater probability of gaining entry into the public-information environment”. Hence, there is a second way in which third-person self-reference serves a preformulating purpose, viz. by making press releases look more objective.

4. Preformulation

4.1. Meeting the formal requirements of news reporting

That third-person self-reference allows a speaker or writer to switch out of his or her own perspective was already noted by Goffman (1974: 519), who suggested that first-person pronouns usually refer to the speaker or writer from his or her own point of view, while third-person self-reference seems to suggest hearer- or reader-directedness.

The same reader-directedness can be found in press releases, but this time in its most concrete form since it allows the reader, i.e. the journalist, to simply copy the press release. I have already provided ample corpus-based evidence from person deixis. Therefore let us now briefly examine if references to time and place in my data work in the same direction.

Let us consider time first of all. (19) is a typical example:

(19) (Union Minière, Brussels: 23 February 1995)

De Raad van bestuur van Union Minière heeft op donderdag 23 februari het geconsolideerd Groepsresultaat onderzocht op basis van de beschikbare elementen.

[On Thursday 23 February the Board of Directors of Union Minière examined the consolidated Group result on the basis of the elements available.]

Clearly, the press release is not just deictically neutral as far as self-reference to Union Minière is concerned, but also in terms of time. The normal form would have been ‘Today the Board of Directors of Union Minière examined...’ Just like the use of the proper name, the use of the date (Thursday 23 February) clashes with the preemptive nature of pure deictic words. As Levinson says, “it would be strange to say *Do it at 10.36* instead of *Do it now*, when now is 10.36” (1983: 75). Still this is what actually happens in (19) and in most other press releases in my corpus.

It should be noted that there are a number of exceptions, where no point of view operations have taken place, like the mixed form in:

(20) (GB, Evere: 20 September 1994)

Vandaag dinsdag 20 september om 20.00 uur wordt de nieuwe Maxi GB van Kortrijk-Kuurne ingehuldigd.

[Today Tuesday 20 September at 20.00 h, the new Maxi GB at Kortrijk-Kuurne will be inaugurated.]

Or consider further:

(21) (Union Minière, Brussels: 27 October 1995)

De Directie van Union Minière heeft deze vrijdag aan de ondernemingsraden van de Groep haar nieuw industrieel plan toegelicht.

[This Friday the Direction of Union Minière explained its new industrial plan to the Group's works councils.]

I would argue that one reason why the point of view operation is overruled in these cases may have to do with what Sacks (1992b) analyzes as the preference for 'today' rather than 'Thursday', or '23 April 1998' in telling the news. He suggests that situating an event 'today', 'this morning', or 'now' is not simply "naming some day on which the reported event happened; it's doing a bunch of other things. For one, 'today' is not equivalent to the series of other days in the sense of being just some day. 'Today' in part constitutes the warrant for the report, i.e., to say it happened 'today' is to claim it as potential 'news'" (172). This would mean that in some of the above examples from the corpus point of view operations are subordinated to the requirements of newsworthiness.

Finally, press releases also tend to be deictically neutral as far as reference to place is concerned. Here is a typical example:

(22) (Kredietbank, Brussels: 22 November 1994)

Vorige zaterdag, 19 november 1994, had in Brussel de officiële ondertekening plaats van een kaderakkoord tussen de Kredietbank en de State Export-Import Bank of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

[Last Saturday, 19 November 1994, the official signing of a frame agreement between the Kredietbank and the State Export-Import Bank of the Republic of Kazakhstan took place in Brussels.]

Words like 'here' and 'there' are very rare indeed in my corpus of press releases.

It is not difficult to see how such point of view operations serve a reformulating purpose: they help writers of press releases meet the formal requirements of news reporting. Items like 'I', 'you', 'here' and 'now' are 'shifters' (cf. Jakobson, 1971; Silverstein, 1976): i.e. they constantly change in reference, depending on who is speaking or writing. The use of 'I' or 'we' in a press release, for example, refers to the organization that issues it; if it gets copied in a newspaper article, its reference will automatically shift to the journalist. Alternatively, third-person self-reference helps keep the reference constant: the proper name 'Union Minière' refers to that organization, whoever it is used by; in the act of retelling, it is only the writer who

shifts, and not the reference. It follows that, through third-person self-reference, writers of press releases seem to anticipate the typical reference forms of news reporting and that, in doing so, they allow journalists to simply copy the press releases.⁵

It is now also clear why in the following extract (23), for example, the proper name 'DOMO' is repeated several times where normally we could have expected other forms of (third-person) self-reference, including pro-forms or definite description.

(23) (Domo, Zwijnaarde: 17 March 1994)

DOMO GROUP NEEMT CAPROLACTAM-ACTIVITEITEN LEUNA WERKE AG OVER

Nadat de raad van beheer van de Treuhandanstalt op 17 december reeds de verkoop van de caprolactam-activiteiten van LEUNA-WERKE AG aan de DOMO GROUP goedgekeurde, heeft ook de Europese Commissie op 16 maart 1994 haar goedkeuring gegeven aan de transactie. De Treuhandanstalt verwelkomt het engagement van de DOMO GROUP in de 5 nieuwe bondsstaten. De DOMO GROUP garandeert gedurende minstens 5 jaar een tewerkstelling van 456 arbeidsplaatsen. (...)

Met de caprolactam-productie verzekert de DOMO GROUP zich van eigen grondstofleveringen voor zijn polyamide 6-polymerisering. Deze stap kadert ook in het streven van de DOMO GROUP naar verticale integratie en past in zijn kwaliteitsconcept.

De DOMO GROUP is met 1.400 mensen actief in de productie van geweven en getufte tapijten, naadvilt en cushion-floor.

De DOMO GROUP heeft produktievestigingen in België en Frankrijk (...).

[DOMO GROUP TAKES OVER CAPROLACTAM ACTIVITIES LEUNA WERKE AG

After the Treuhandanstalt's Board of Directors had already approved the sale of LEUNA-WERKE AG to the DOMO GROUP on 17 December, the European Commission also approved of the transaction on 16 March 1994. The Treuhandanstalt welcomes the DOMO GROUP's involvement in the 5 new federal states.

The DOMO GROUP guarantees an employment of 456 jobs for at least 5 years. (...)

Through the caprolactam production the DOMO GROUP secures its own supply of raw materials for its polyamid 6-polymerisation. This step is also part of the DOMO GROUP's move towards vertical integration and fits in its quality concept.

The DOMO GROUP employs over 1,400 people in the production of woven and tufted carpets, seam felt and cushion floor.

The DOMO GROUP has production facilities in Belgium and France (...).]

⁵ This is not to say that proper names are always semantically neutral. Business organizations in particular have been known to change their names during merger operations or in the wake of public crises.

I would argue that, apart from making sure that the reader cannot lose sight of the identity of the institutional sender (cf. Thompson and Thetela, 1995: 118, 126 on advertising), this repeated use of the (fully capitalised!) proper name – or what Wales (1996) calls this ‘over-topicalization’ (33) – also plays a preformulating role. At first sight, such explicitness appears to involve redundancy, flouting Grice’s quantity maxim stipulating economy of expression. In view of the ‘tellability’ of press releases, however, it is clear that the repetition of ‘DOMO’ in (23) serves a purpose of enhanced accessibility, i.e. it contributes to the ease with which journalists may copy extracts from the press release; in fact, they can pick any sentence and use it verbatim in their own reporting. Interestingly, Sanford et al. (1988) show that proper names increase referential availability: i.e. they play a major role in focus control since it means that the person or party under discussion is more likely to be used in continuations. As Downing argues about oral interaction, proper names guarantee “that current non-speakers will have maximum access to the implications of the current speaker’s talk, and thus the maximum warrant to participate when it is their turn”; in particular, they provide a preferred source for future reference (1996: 109, 110).

Preformulation is perhaps even clearer in the following extract:

- (24) (Bekaert, Kortrijk: 16 March 1995; embargo until 4.45 p.m.)
 RECORDWINST IN 1994 VOOR BEKAERT
 De Bekaertgroep maakte vandaag op een persconferentie te Brussel haar resultaten bekend voor het boekjaar 1994. (...)
 Bij de voorstelling van de resultaten op de persconferentie gaf Baron Velge, Voorzitter van de Raad van Bestuur, volgende commentaren. (...)
[RECORD PROFIT IN 1994 FOR BEKAERT
The Bekaert group announced its results for the financial year 1994 at a press conference in Brussels today. (...)
At the presentation of the results at the press conference Baron Velge, Chairman of the Board of Directors, gave the following comments. (...)]

Here the embargo, requesting the media not to publicize the news before 4.45 p.m. on the same day, indicates that the press release was almost certainly issued to journalists before the start of the press conference that is referred to in the press release. Hence we could normally have expected *Bekaert will announce this afternoon ...* and *Baron Velge will give the following comments ...*

Instead, (24) has a reference to the past, which, I would suggest, serves to anticipate the point of view of the journalist who will use the press release in writing up an article some time after the press conference. This can be related to what John Lyons calls ‘empathetic discourse’ (1977: 677), where the deictic anchorage is relocated in the reader or hearer (see Jacobs, 1996 for a more elaborate analysis of this tense shift).

All in all, press releases seem to belong to one of those domains where there are, as Allerton (1996: 624) suggests, conventions requiring that another person’s – in this case the journalist’s – point of view should be adopted. This appears to be in

sharp contrast with Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs's (1986) claim that, in oral interaction, speakers often bring hearers into the referential process by the very design of their utterance, but that this is very different from writing, where reference is assumed to be controlled by the writer only.⁶ My analysis of third-person self-reference in press releases suggests that writers and speakers are equally concerned about their readers and hearers. Indeed, since writers, unlike speakers, cannot normally rely on immediate feedback to check on the others' acceptance of the reference, it seems as if, to some extent at least, writers even have to put in a bigger effort than speakers.

4.2. *Content 'in sync'*

Preformulation in press releases is not just a question of meeting the formal requirements of news reporting. As I suggested earlier, with a view to "gaining entry into the public-information environment", content too can be made to "flow in sync with the media system's requirements" (Gandy, 1982: 57). I shall now explain what is meant by this.

I have argued that press releases are egocentric documents. In Hartley's words, they "present the case of whatever organization issues them" (1982: 111). As any short visit to a newsroom will confirm, journalists usually distrust this "suspect subjectivity" (Vanslyke Turk, 1986: 23). In turn, writers of press releases are themselves "indoctrinated to expect that attitude of distrust from journalists" (1986: 26–27) and they usually try hard to prove their credibility. In particular, as Gandy (1982: 61) argues, since information from interested sources tends to be seen as less credible than that from disinterested sources, writers of press releases "have an incentive to hide or disguise their relationship to the information they provide". I would suggest that this is where third-person self-reference comes in again: it performs a (supplementary) preformulating role in that it makes press releases look disinterested and neutral rather than self-interested, promotional. Brown and Levinson talk about 'point of view distancing' in this respect (1987: 204). In contrast, the use of 'we' to refer to a business organization has been called an advertising device (cf. also Fairclough, 1989 on 'synthetic personalization', 1994: 225). Compare the apparent matter-of-factness of extract (1) again:

- (1) (Alcatel Bell, Antwerp: 28 February 1994)
 ALCATEL BELL LEVERT INTELLIGENTE NETWERKEN AAN ZUID-
 KOREA
 [ALCATEL BELL SUPPLIES INTELLIGENT NETWORKS TO SOUTH
 KOREA]

with the 'axe to grind' feel in

⁶ Similarly, Maes (1991: 63) believes that writers and speakers employ "totally different" identification strategies.

WIJ LEVEREN INTELLIGENTE NETWERKEN AAN ZUID-KOREA
 [WE SUPPLY INTELLIGENT NETWORKS TO SOUTH KOREA]

Similarly, the use of the passive makes the estimate in (7) more authoritative.⁷

(7) (CMB: 6 February 1995)

De geconsolideerde winst over het boekjaar 1994 wordt geraamd op 1050 miljoen BEF, tegenover 571 miljoen BEF in 1993.

[*The consolidated profit for the financial year 1994 is estimated at 1,050 million BEF, compared with 571 million BEF in 1993.*]

And the announcement in (10) looks more objective because of the nominalization:

(10) (Recticel, Brussels: 11 March 1994)

TERUGKEER NAAR WINST IN EEN MOEILIJKE ECONOMISCHE CON-
 TEXT

[*RETURN TO PROFIT IN A DIFFICULT ECONOMIC CONTEXT*]

That writers of press releases indeed want to ‘hide their relationship to the information they provide’ is probably clearest in the extracts from the Bayer press release quoted above, where the organization’s own product is backgrounded by AEG mobile phones.

To conclude this section, it can be argued that third-person self-reference in press releases has been shown to play a double preformulating role, on the one hand of meeting the formal requirements of news reporting, by anticipating the journalists’ typical reference forms, on the other hand of getting ‘the content to flow in sync’, by making press releases look more objective.

Interestingly, Maes seems to agree with my suggestion to link the referential choices in my data to the ‘tellability’ of press releases when he looks at self-reference through definite description in civil court decisions and says that it requires “explanations in terms of non-identificational (i.e., semantic and pragmatic) functions and that these should be related to the peculiarly institutional nature of the discourse” (1991: 217). On closer scrutiny, Maes also arrives at very similar conclusions: first, he argues, the prototypically mixed form “wij, de rechtbank” [we, the court of law] serves to disambiguate the self-reference in case it gets read by others; at the same time, the use of definite description in court is said to be aimed at ‘disindividualizing’, creating “a mise en scène in which the interaction between conflicting parties is objectified” (1991: 240). This is almost exactly the same as the double preformulating role I have identified for self-reference in press releases.

Auer (1988), finally, introduces the notion of ‘displacedness’, as opposed to ‘situatedness’, in order to distinguish this ‘I’-less discourse that, like press releases,

⁷ Note that the use of the passive in Dutch is not very different from that in English in this respect (see Cornelis, 1997, for an analysis of the use of the passive in Dutch).

proves widely accessible and looks more objective.⁸ He even seems to suggest that such displaced discourse is a prototypical type of language use when he quotes Benveniste:

“Le caractère du langage est de procurer un substitut de l’expérience apte à être transmis sans fin dans le temps et l’espace, ce qui est le propre de notre symbolisme et le fondement de la tradition linguistique.” (Benveniste, 1966: 61)

[*The nature of language is to furnish a substitute for experience fit to be transmitted without end in time and space, which is specific to our symbolism and the foundation of the linguistic tradition.*]

Indeed, I would argue that press releases provide a perfect illustration of Auer’s claim that it is “possible to construe relatively self-contained and relatively de-contextualized texts on which the situational aspects of context are neutralized” (1995: 15; cf. also Van Leeuwen, 1996, on framing as decontextualization).

5. Cooperation and beyond

Some of the point of view operations described above clearly shed new light on the traditional conceptualization of deixis.

Typically, deixis is supposed to be organized in an egocentric way, with the unmarked anchorage point zero invariably located in the writer or speaker. Russell, for example, talks about deictic terms as ‘egocentric particulars’ (cf. Levinson, 1983: 57). Lyons (1977: 579), like Fillmore (1975), mentions the possibility of what he calls ‘deictic projection’ but fails to give more information about it, and Levinson (1983) admits that there may be ‘derivative usages’ that do not fit into the egocentric paradigm, but hastens to add that it is beyond the scope of his textbook. Moreover, the terminology used by both Lyons and Levinson serves to maintain the primacy of writer- or speaker-centred deixis.

More recently, Jones radically criticized this standard account of deixis for its “a-social, one-sided focus”, the first casualty of which is the reader or hearer, who is simply missing from the co-ordinate system (1995: 31). Instead of the egocentric system, Jones stresses the social-interactive nature of the deictic field. His is a cooperative view of interaction as a “joint, goal-directed activity (...) mediated by language” (1995: 41–42). Jones believes that the default situation is a harmonious order of orientation and that reader- or hearer-centred as well as egocentric, i.e. writer- or speaker-centred, deixis are departures from it. It is interesting to note that, in Jones’s view, such departures are conventionally required under certain circumstances, “determined by the concrete nature of the social activity (...) and by con-

⁸ Note that for Auer displacedness is a “matter of degree” (1988: 269), which allows for the fact that some occurrences of ‘we’, ‘today’, ‘here’, etc. can be found in my corpus of press releases after all.

One difference between displaced discourse and press releases is that displaced discourse is ‘empractic’, i.e. it has no purpose other than the discourse itself and it is responded to by more discourse only. As for press releases, since they are meant to be retold, it could be argued that it is their very purpose to be responded to by more (of the same) discourse.

ventionally established, and activity-related, discourse norms” (1995: 43).⁹ The following account of oral interaction could equally well be applied to press releases:

“(…) what the speaker says is “addressee-centred”, the viewpoint and expected response of the addressee is already, as it were, built into the utterance itself. The utterance consequently realizes a complex social dialectic in which the traditional categories of speaker and hearer, though indispensable as coarse empirical notions, do not capture the essence of the intersubjective communicative dynamic at work in any event of verbal communication”. (Jones, 1995: 47)

Crucially, through the point of view operations described above, in press releases this ‘intersubjective communicative dynamic’ seems to go in the opposite direction of what is commonly assumed: in line with Jones’s ideas on the subject, it is not (just) the readers who adapt to the writers¹⁰, but writers (too) go out of their way to take readers into account.

While some of the examples quoted above seem to serve as evidence for Jones’s somewhat naively cooperative account, surely a thorough analysis of my corpus of press releases does not support Brown and Levinson’s (1987: 9) claim that such “taking the perspective of others is indeed the heart of the Gricean account”. Instead, I would suggest that the type of preformulation described above should be seen as negotiation, not as cooperation. Surely, third-person self-reference cuts both ways: writers of press releases adapt to the standard set by news reporting, but, in doing so, they are setting a standard for news reporting to adapt to. It may look innocent to ‘take the other fellow’s point of view’, but there may always be some self-interest, as when telephone salespeople introduce themselves by ‘This is ...’ instead of ‘My name is ...’ in order to create the false impression of familiarity (Fillmore, 1975). I shall now give some examples from the data to support this claim. Before that, I shall distinguish between the referential and attributive functions of third-person self-reference.

Here is Wilson’s illustration of less-than-cooperative third-person self-reference in political discourse:

It was not the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who made the complaint but the Chairman of the Conservative Party. (1990: 78)

This is Norman Tebbit speaking to journalists in 1986 about his attack on the BBC’s coverage of the US bombing of Libya. At the time Tebbit happened to be the Chairman of the British Conservative Party as well as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Here the third-person self-reference serves a double purpose: in Donnellan’s (1971) terminology, it has a referential function, viz. to pick out one individual (Norman Tebbit), and an attributive function, viz. to describe one or other particular fea-

⁹ This seems to echo Allerton’s (1996) remarks referred to earlier in this article. Note also that Jones refers to Bakhtin’s and Voloshinov’s stress on genre and on the impact of the other.

¹⁰ Cf. Thompson’s (1995: 92–93) use of the term ‘space-time interpolation’ to describe how film audiences temporarily forget about their own lives and go on a mental journey to meet the people they see on the screen.

ture of that individual (Norman Tebbit as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Norman Tebbit as Chairman of the Conservative Party). Maes (1991) talks about the ‘identificational’ and ‘qualificational’ roles in this respect. As far as the attributive function is concerned, it is clear that Tebbit’s elevated self-references help to invest him with authority. Wilson calls this ‘role identification’. As for the referential function, surely it would have been much clearer for the speaker to refer to himself as ‘I’ or ‘me’ or as ‘Norman Tebbit’. Instead, Wilson argues, the two definite descriptions seem to have the effect of drawing the hearer’s attention away from Norman Tebbit as an individual towards a more generic role. He argues that speakers should normally only use definite descriptions when they can rely on their audience to retrieve the reference. Here this is not the case and the link between subject and speaker seems to be deliberately obscured as “a ploy to deflect, or delimit (...) ‘existential involvement’” (79).¹¹

Let’s now return to self-reference in press releases. First about the referential function.

(25) (Union Minière, Brussels: 27 October 1995)

Union Minière gelooft in de toekomst van haar raffinage-activiteiten in België. Het programma dat deze aanwezigheid wil versterken via investeringen en een reorganisatie van de Groep, is daarvan het beste bewijs. Het kan echter niet uitgevoerd worden zonder gevolgen voor het huidige tewerkstellingspeil.

De uitvoering van het industrieel plan zal globaal over een periode van twee jaar een vermindering meebrengen van 1.681 arbeidsplaatsen in België en 212 arbeidsplaatsen in Frankrijk.

(...) Voor werknemers die niet in aanmerking komen voor pensionering of brugpensioen zal er naar herklasseringsmogelijkheden gezocht worden.

(Union Minière, Brussels: 27 October 1995)

Union Minière firmly believes that its refining operations in Belgium have a future, as is demonstrated by the investment and reorganization programme designed to consolidate its presence on this market. However, it will not be possible to do this without affecting present staffing levels.

Overall, the implementation of the Industrial Plan will result in 1,681 job losses in Belgium and 212 in France over a period of two years.

(...) Alternative employment will be considered for those members of staff who do not qualify for retirement or early retirement.

In the first few sentences of extract (25), relatively good news is communicated and, strikingly, at this stage of the press release the active voice is used and the organization’s proper name features prominently in subject position. Later, when it comes to the bad news, passives and passive-like utterances are used: through the passive voice nothing is changed in the propositional content, but clearly a different degree

¹¹ Note that Lerman (1983, 1985) makes a similar suggestion when she associates such third-person self-reference with ‘dominant’ discourse.

of personal commitment on the part of the organization is expressed.¹² Here are some more examples:

- (26) (R.J. Reynolds, Brussels: 23 February 1994)
Deze integratie zal leiden tot een verlies van 7 arbeidsplaatsen.
[This integration will lead to a loss of 7 jobs.]
- (27) (Wagons-Lits, Brussels: 25 March 1994)
Wagons-Lits: Vermindering van 97,5 arbeidsplaatsen ingevolge het verlies van de spoorrestauratie
[Wagons-Lits: Decrease of 97.5 jobs due to loss of railway catering]

As I suggested above, self-reference through definite description does not just have a referential function. At the same time, it may serve to attribute some qualities. This may be relatively innocent, as in

- (28) (HBK, Antwerp: s.d.)
HBK-Spaarbank reikt voor de derde maal een prijs uit ter stimulering van de wetenschappelijke studie omtrent werknemersparticipatie in ondernemingen. Op die manier wil deze Belgische spaarbank het onderzoek naar de participatie van werknemers in hun onderneming steunen.
[For the third time HBK-Spaarbank is awarding a prize to stimulate the scientific research into employee participation in companies. In that way this Belgian savings bank aims to support the research into participation of employees in their companies.]

The reference to HBK-Spaarbank as a 'Belgian savings bank' is perfectly acceptable, even for the most sceptical of journalists. In the following example, the reference to BTR plc as an 'international group' may be said to attribute more outspokenly positive qualities to the organization:

- (29) (BTR: 8 September 1994)
Met ingang van 7 september 1994 werd Paul Buysse benoemd tot Executive Director van BTR plc.
Deze internationale groep stelt meer dan 125.000 mensen te werk (...).
*[Starting 7 September 1994 Paul Buysse has been appointed Executive Director of BTR plc.
This international group employs more than 125,000 people (...).]*

Since the reader can only make sense of the extract by inferring that 'this international group' is BTR plc, he or she is led to unquestioningly accept BTR's status as an international group. Donnellan (1971: 105–106) calls such use of definite description 'parasitic'. The following case is even clearer:

¹² Note that such patterns of agency have of course been elaborately investigated in the research tradition of critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis.

(30) (Europay, Waterloo: 5 May 1994)

EUROPAY DOET HET GOED IN TURKIJE

Grootste geldautomatennet van Turkije wordt voor het toeristische zomerseizoen uitgebreid

[*EUROPAY PERFORMS WELL IN TURKEY*

Biggest cash dispenser net in Turkey is expanded for the tourist summer season.]

Maes (1991) says that definite descriptions must be relevant to what he, rather awkwardly, calls ‘the intention of the text’. For example, it makes little sense to refer to President Clinton as the ‘saxophone enthusiast’ in a text on U.S. government legislation (cf. also de Fornel, 1987). As far as press releases are concerned, the question arises which text’s intention is taken into account: that of the press release or that of the subsequent newspaper article? In (30), it was part of Europay’s ‘intention’ to portray itself as the biggest in the trade, but we might wonder if that intention is shared by journalists.

No doubt, journalists are aware that the ‘intentions’ in press releases may be different from their own. Here is an extract from a press release issued by General Motors:

(31) (General Motors, Antwerp: 8 March 1994)

“Zowel de productievestigingen als de administratieve centra van het bedrijf zullen zo geassocieerd worden met de naam waarin miljoenen automobilisten en potentiële klanten hun vertrouwen stellen” [, zei voorzitter Louis Hughes van GM-Europa].

[*“Both the production sites and the administrative centres of the company will thus be associated with the name in which millions of drivers and potential customers have confidence”* (, said chairman Louis Hughes of GM Europe).]

In (31), GM is referred to as ‘the name in which millions of car drivers and potential customers have confidence’. Significantly, in a subsequent article in the Flemish quality newspaper *De Standaard* the next day, the euphoric definite description of the press release is substantially toned down:

“Wij willen dat zowel de productievestigingen als de verkoop- en administratieve centra in Europa geassocieerd worden met de merknaam van de auto die we produceren”, zei voorzitter Louis Hughes van GM-Europa.

[*“We would like both the production sites and the sales and administrative centres in Europe to be associated with the brand name of the car that we produce”*, said chairman Louis Hughes of GM Europe.]

I would like to add that there may be a similar problem with indefinite description, as in the following extract from a press release issued by Flanders’ extreme right-wing party Vlaams Blok:

(32) (Vlaams Blok, Antwerp: 28 September 1994)

Het Vlaams Blok vraagt zich af of het de taak is van universiteitsrectoren (...) om zich enkele dagen voor de gemeenteraadsverkiezingen met dergelijke demagogische en laag bij de grondse propaganda te keren tegen een bepaalde politieke partij.

Het Vlaams Blok klaagt het feit aan dat alhoewel het gebruik van alle affichage groter dan 4m² voor alle partijpolitieke verkiezingspropaganda verboden is, anti-propaganda tegen een partij blijkbaar wel kan.

[The Vlaams Blok wonders if it is the task of university Presidents (...) to turn themselves against a particular political party with such demagogic and vulgar propaganda a couple of days before the municipal elections.

The Vlaams Blok condemns the fact that, although the use of all posters larger than 4m² has been banned for all party-political election propaganda, anti-propaganda against a party proves to be allowed.]

The extract only makes sense of course if

Het Vlaams Blok klaagt het feit aan dat anti-propaganda tegen een partij blijkbaar wel kan.

[The Vlaams Blok condemns the fact that anti-propaganda against a party proves to be allowed.]

is taken to mean

Het Vlaams Blok klaagt het feit aan dat anti-propaganda tegen het Vlaams Blok blijkbaar wel kan.

[The Vlaams Blok condemns the fact that anti-propaganda against the Vlaams Blok proves to be allowed.]

The fact that the Vlaams Blok calls itself a political party, just like any other, is not as innocent as it may seem. It has been frequently suggested that it is rather more of an extremist group that tries to implement some of its undemocratic policies through the parliamentary institutions. Clearly, self-reference through indefinite description is a powerful mechanism: even if we do not believe that the Blok is just a party like any other, we accept the reference; the question if the reference matches the object designated within the world is evaded.

That the Vlaams Blok is preoccupied with its status of political party is also clear from other press releases:

(33) (Vlaams Blok, Antwerp: 14 September 1994)

Het Vlaams Blok drukt, ondanks de pogingen tot polarisatie van het AFF en co., de hoop uit dat alle partijen de kans zullen krijgen om op een eerlijke en open manier hun programma uit te dragen.

[In spite of the attempts at polarization from the AFF and Co, the Vlaams Blok hopes that all parties will get the chance to spread their programmes in an honest and open way.]

Here again the extract only makes sense if ‘*all parties*’ includes the Vlaams Blok. And clearly, if ‘*parties*’ may mean ‘sides in an argument’ here, the sense of ‘regular and respectable political organization that you can vote for in elections’ is never far away. In another press release (16 September 1994) ‘*de meeste partijen*’ [most parties] and ‘*zowat alle partijen*’ [almost all parties] are also meant to include the Vlaams Blok.¹³

6. Conclusions

In this article I have provided corpus-based evidence to demonstrate how self-reference in press releases may serve a double, so-called preformulating purpose: through a point of view operation, the special forms of reflexive person, time and place deixis I have analyzed help ‘structure both form and content’ of press releases to meet the journalist’s requirements. I have also suggested that such preformulation may serve less harmonious purposes. In doing so, I have shown that referential choice is far from self-evident and that it may be constrained by “the demands of the larger social agendas” (Downing, 1996: 95). Hence, it should be considered an interesting object for linguistic pragmatic analysis. What is more, it ought to be clear by now that no unidirectional, deterministic context-text view is intended here. After all, if the various forms of self-reference in press releases effectively encourage journalists to simply copy press releases, then text does not only ‘fit into’ context but also serves to ‘manage’ and ‘transform’ it (Ford and Fox, 1996: 162).

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¹³ In this context, the choice for ‘Vlaams Blok’ [Flemish Block] as the name of the organization may seem rather unfortunate, except of course that there is also a sense in which they want to radically distinguish themselves from the ‘traditionele partijen’ [the traditional parties] (16 September 1994).

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