

Comparative Rhetoric of the Discourse Structure of News Stories between News Articles Published in Thailand and in the U.S.A.

Chirawat Chana
Thammasat University
chanakong555@hotmail.com

Supong Tangkiengsirisin
Thammasat University
supong_tu@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article presents the results of a study which was conducted to investigate the differences in discourse structure between English news stories published in Thailand and those published in the U.S.A. Three news articles from *The Bangkok Post*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times* were analyzed. The news discourse structure model proposed by Bell (1996) was employed to conduct this analysis. The results of the study revealed that there are significant differences between news articles reported by different news agencies. *The New York Times* presents many more events than *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* when reporting the same story. In addition, source attribution and news actor are presented differently by each news agency.

Keywords: English news articles, discourse analysis, macrostructure of news discourse

1. Background

News has long been regarded as an important social institution which reports and analyses various aspects of culture, politics and everyday life. News discourse is crucial because it reveals much about society and represents its fundamental character. With respect to the field of linguistics, news tells us much about the power and evolution of language. Understanding how news reportage works is important to our understanding of the function of language in society (Bell, 1996). News is also classified as a discrete genre of writing. Genre analysis is a framework for analyzing the form and rhetorical function of non-literal discourse news (Swales, 1990). Incidents related to the political demonstrations of 2010 were reported by various newspapers published in Thailand as well as the rest of the world. In the United States of America, a number of news articles on Thailand's political conflict during the period of unrest were published in several newspapers. This study aims to identify differences in the discourse structure of news articles between English language newspapers published in Thailand and those published in the United States of America.

2. Review of the Literature

Van Dijk (1983) has defined news organization as the indirect representation of news discourse expressed by headlines and leads. The headline of a news report acts as its title. It usually presents the most essential part of the story in order to hook the readers' interest, and to signal a particular perspective or framework for interpreting what is to follow. The headline shows the most important general knowledge and beliefs which are interesting enough to be reported as news. The lead is regarded as an abstract and means of orientation in relation to a story. Regarding the news macrostructure and organization, a subsequent sentence reported shows the details of an event which is less important than what is reported in the previous sentences. In addition, the organization of news discourse is derived from the cognitive operations of journalists and readers. The understanding of a news discourse depends on text structures, cognitive information, the process of interpretation and representation. Bell (1996) also maintains that news stories conform to the basics of storytelling, represented most typically by the journalist's 'five Ws and an H': who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Several studies of news discourse have been conducted in Thailand. For example, Navarat (1989) studied a comparison of the business journalism styles in *The Nation*, an English language newspaper in Thailand, and *The Wall Street Journal*, an American English newspaper. One of the results of this study showed that *The Nation*'s business journalism style is more formal than that of *The Wall Street Journal*. In addition, Trakulkasemsuk (2007) made a comparative study on the analysis of linguistic aspects of English feature articles in magazines published in Thailand and in the U.K. The study found that sentences found in articles of English language magazines in Thailand are frequently complex sentences with a lot of descriptive information, while British English news articles tend to avoid such complicated structures.

The study of news discourse in relation to news structure was conducted first by Schokkenbroek (1999). This study examined the structural breakdown of news stories into elements such as composition, time structure, and evaluation. Regarding composition, the main difference between news structures and narrative structures concerns the use of verbs at the clause level. Regarding time and event structure, narratives usually present more than one event and order these events chronologically. Regarding evaluation, the narrator may insert some evaluative information into the narrative structure, but evaluative comments may come from the news writer or a third person.

3. Research Question

What are the differences in the macrostructure of news discourse between English news articles published in Thailand and in the United States of America?

4. Methodology

Three different news articles reporting the evacuation of patients from Chulalongkorn hospital were selected for this study. The news articles were published in *The Bangkok Post*, *The Nation*, and *The News York Times*. This study employs the analytical framework of discourse structure proposed by Bell (1991). This framework was developed from the notion of news discourse proposed by Van Dijk (1988). Bell (1991) puts forward his model of news discourse for analyzing news macrostructure (see figure 1).

Figure 1
Model discourse structure for news texts (Bell, 1991)

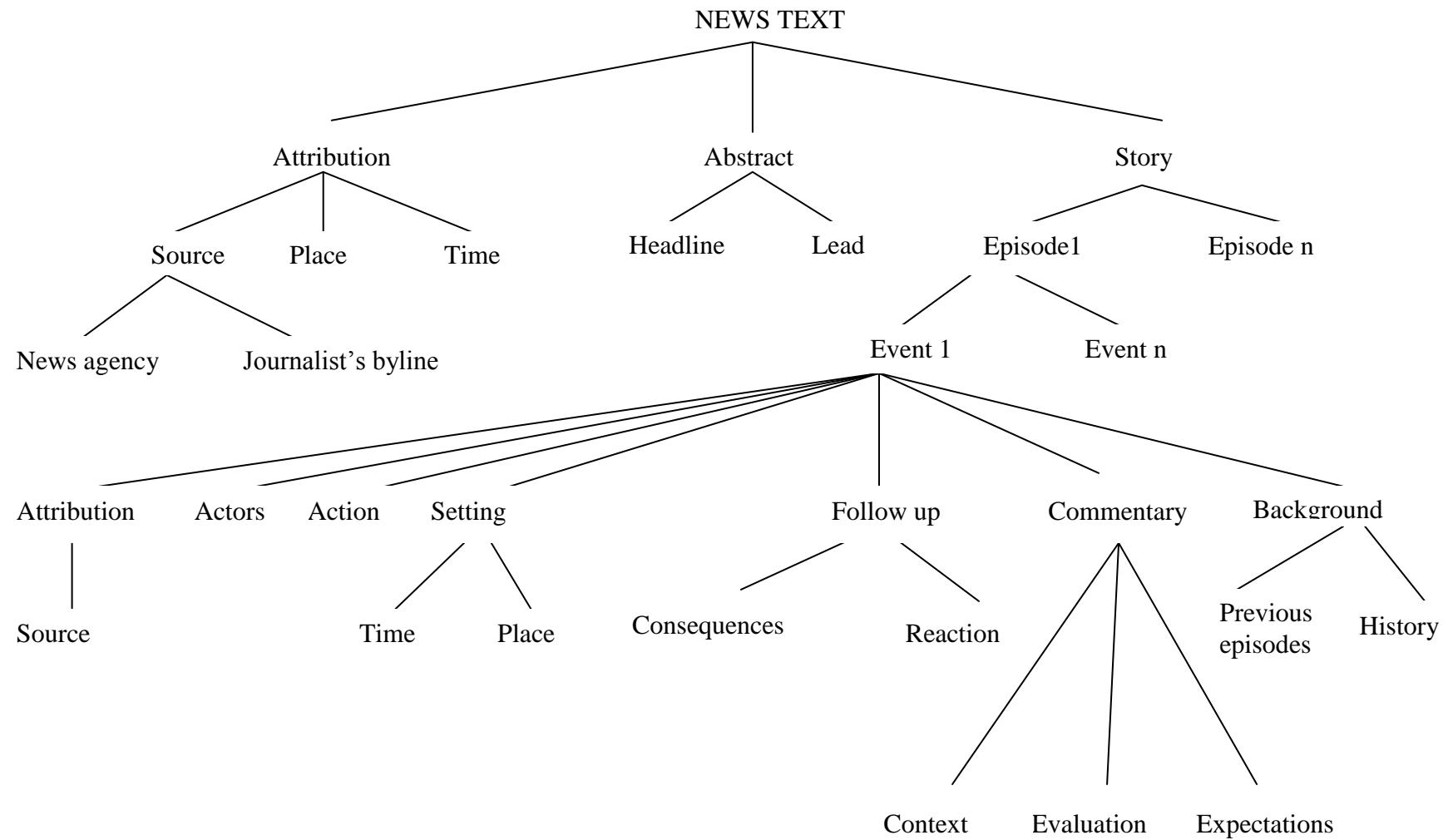


Figure 1 shows an analytical framework which can be used to understand the structure of a news story. Elements in the framework describe the discourse structure of news stories. In general, a story consists of attribution, abstract, and story. Attribution is not always made explicit. It can give credit to a news agency or a journalist's byline, and may also state place and time. An abstract consists of the lead sentence and a headline. The lead covers the central event of the story and consists of one or more secondary events. A news story comprises one or more episodes, which consists of one or more events. Events describe an actor and an action that expresses a setting of time and place, and may include explicit attribution to an information source. Episodes are clusters of events which share a common location or set of news actors.

There are three additional components of a news story: background, commentary and follow-up. These represent the past, present, and future of the events described in the main action of the story.

This study, therefore, attempts to find out whether there are any differences at the macrostructure level of news genre between English language newspapers published in Thailand and those published in the United States of America.

5. Results and Discussions

From the analysis of news texts which reported the evacuation of patients from Chulalongkorn hospital, the results can be shown as follows:

5.1 Story attribution structure

First, regarding the attribution structure of the news stories in question, each news agency is credited explicitly in the first line of the each news text. Journalists' bylines indicate the news writer is credited in *The Nation*, and *The New York Times*. For instance, Pongphon Sarnsamak, a journalist for *The Nation*, was given credit within the body of the article. Likewise, Seth Mydans, from *The New York Times*, was also given credit. Place attribution is only provided in *The New York Times*, the international newspaper. This is so its worldwide readership can understand the particular setting of the news situation being described. Bangkok, where the news incident occurred, was specified only in *The New York Times* article.

5.2 Abstract structure

With respect to the abstract structure, which consists of the headline and the lead, the events which take place in the headline and the lead must be considered. Moreover, the relationship between the headline and the lead should also be considered because most readers read the headline and then interpret the brief story regardless of the lead. The events depicted in the lead are reported more than the headline does. The lead elaborates on the details of the basic situation, such as time and setting, whereas the headline specifies only the news actors and the main action. For example in *The Bangkok Post* article, the lead section stated two events. The first event was that Chulalongkorn hospital began evacuating patients on Friday, and the

other event was that Red-shirts stormed the hospital on Thursday. However, the headline only mentioned the first event.

When considering the comparison of structure of headline and lead in three different agencies, *The News York Times* expands more on the details of the news event in its headline and lead than Thai news agencies do. *The News York Times* provides more particulars about the events itself and its background in the lead, while the Thai press focuses solely on the main event.

The relationship between the headline and the lead in the abstract structure is such that the headline covers an aspect of the event and some of the details presented in the lead. Events are presented in the lead within a single-sentence paragraph. This unique characteristic of news articles can be found in all three news agencies. Therefore, with regard to the headline and the lead structure of news discourse, there is a slightly different structural relationship between headlines and leads in reportage by Thai and American news agencies. American English news articles tend to elaborate more on the details of a particular news story in the headline and lead than their Thai counterparts.

5.3 Story structure

The story structure consists of one or more episodes in the body, and the episode consists of many events. Events explain news actors and actions, express setting of times and places, and may have explicit attribution to an information source. Episodes are clusters of events which share a common location or set of news actors. For example in *The Bangkok Post* articles, there are two episodes. The first episode provides the main news situation, whereas the second episode provides the subordinating news situation. Three events were presented in the first episode, and two minor events were presented in the second episode.

A comparison of story structure in three different agencies reveals that *The News York Times* presents many more news events than *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*. This demonstrates that American news writers tend to report more events than Thai news writers do. Using news text analysis of the hospital raid story, we can see that *The New York Times* presents thirteen events, while *The Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* present five and ten events, respectively. The dissimilarity lies in the fact that American news articles report news incidents that have happened around the world and that their readership is drawn from several countries. Events must therefore be reported in a manner that clarifies a particular news situation and helps to build more understanding. Conversely, Thai news agencies mainly report local news. Their readership is mostly Thai citizens or foreigners and expatriates living in Thailand. This kind of news reader is familiar with the local news situation and pursues news from other kinds of sources. This explains why some events are not reported: readers already have background information. Moreover, the number of words in an American news article is normally higher than that of Thai news agencies. It is possible that American news writers have more space to elaborate news by reporting many more news events than Thai news writers.

5.4 Source attribution structure

The source attribution is another required component of news discourse structure because a news writer often quotes details of a given situation from involved parties. The analysis of source attribution from news texts is likely to help identify the hidden ideology of the news writers or agencies producing the piece. The analysis of source attribution in this study of three news texts found that source attribution was derived from multiple parties: the government, especially the prime minister; the antigovernment demonstrators, especially the Red-shirt protest leaders; and the affected parties, especially the Chulalongkorn Hospital staff. Thai news reporters mostly used government sources in their source attribution, while American news reporters mostly used the protesters. It is possible that Thai news reporters can easily access government sources and that the Thai government tends to release information about news situations to home-based reporters. Thai news agencies may also function as a speaker for the government. In addition, the accessibility to government information is safer than access to the demonstration source. Conversely, it is probable that American news reporters are more familiar with sourcing information from dangerous places such as protest sites and war zones. Protesters tend to be more inclined to give information to international news agencies because they believe international news agencies are unbiased. Moreover, they can use such agencies to reach an international public.

5.5 News actor structure

News texts are usually governed by the journalist's 'five Ws and an H': *who, what, when, where, why*, and *how*. *Who* involves the news actors mentioned in the texts such as people, organization, nation, etc. In the three news texts being analysed for this study, different news actors are identified as involved parties, and in different frequencies. Most of the news actors that appear in *The Bangkok Post* are demonstrators, while *The Nation* mentions alternative news actors such as hospital staff and members of the public, for example Twitter users. *The New York Times* identifies its news actors as the affected party such as patients, an injured man, and hospital staff. Therefore, with regard to the selection of news actor, all three news agencies choose a different 'personal' focus, while identifying Chulalongkorn hospital and the general public as organization entities within their coverage.

5.6 Background structure

Background covers any events prior to the current situation. If background narrates beyond the recent past, it is classed as "history". The discourse structure analysis of the three texts in this study reveals that *The Bangkok Post* describes only one event as history background. *The Nation*, on the other hand, describes six events as background to the current event, ranging from events to those termed a history. *The New York Times* describes nine events as background. Therefore, it can be said that international news agencies tend to use many more events as background in news texts than local agencies. This is because international newspapers have a wider variety of readers who perhaps do not follow a localized news situation as closely or frequently as readers of local newspapers covering the same episode. For that reason, background events are used more often by the international news agencies than local ones.

5.7 Commentary structure

Commentary provides the news reporter's or news actor's present-time observations on the action, and thus allows for an interpretative framework of the event itself. Commentary can be stated by context, thereby assisting understanding of the events, by evaluation which comments on the action of the particular events, and by expectation of how the situation will develop. The comparative study demonstrates that American writers provide much more commentary than Thai writers do, particularly in relation to context and the inclusion of evaluative comments. Often American writers not only report a news situation but also comment, criticize, evaluate and make predictions based on the current situation which leads readers to follow the news situation and to be aware of its consequences.

5.8 Follow-up structure

Follow-up covers a story in future time. This refers to any situation subsequent to the main action of an event. Follow-up can be stated by the consequence subcategory that occurs as a result of the main action, or reaction subcategory (see figure 1). The results of this study reveal that three news agencies rarely use commentary in the text, though still observable.

The summary of distinctive features in the macrostructure of news reports derived from different news agencies is as follows:

Discourse Structure	The Bangkok Post	The Nation	The New York Times
Story attribution	News agency is credited, but journalist's byline is not.	Both news agency and journalist's byline are credited.	Both news agency and journalist's byline are credited.
Place attribution	Place attribution is not provided.	Place attribution is not provided.	Place attribution is provided.
Story structure	Two episodes with five events were presented.	Three episodes with ten events were presented.	Two episodes with thirteen events were presented.
Source attribution	Mostly came from the government.	Mostly came from the government.	Came from both the government and the protester side.
Background	Distinctively fewer events as background.	Distinctively fewer events as background.	Distinctively more events as background.

6. Conclusions

The study reveals the analysis of discourse structure of news genre. According to the model for discourse structure for news texts (Bell, 1991), this analysis shows that the structure of news discourse between English language news articles published

in Thailand and those published in the United States of America is different. Place attribution is credited only in international newspapers. Many events supporting a particular news story are reported in more depth in American newspapers than in Thai newspapers. As a means of illustration, events which are relevant to the main news incident are more frequently featured in support of the news in American newspapers. Such secondary events are regarded as background and either cover the history of an event or mention previous episodes relevant to the main story being discussed.

The study of news discourse structure also provides valuable insight into how news articles are composed and the meanings they convey. Some of those findings are as follows:

1. News discourse structure has an inverted pyramid structure, a distinctive feature of news stories. The essence of information is in the first sentence, and the less important information is reported in subsequent sentences. An event is introduced and often returned to in more detail further on in the article.

2. Another distinctive feature of news stories can be found when analyzing the lead structure. In a lot of news articles, stories consist of only a single sentence in the lead paragraph which commonly expresses little linkage between sentences (Bell, 1996). The single sentence in a lead paragraph is also an appropriate proxy for examining the structure of longer stories in general. A single sentence in the lead consists of many events and very complicated syntax.

3. The study reveals the differences in news discourse structure between English news articles published in Thailand and in the U.S.A. Readers should be aware of these different news discourse structures in order to have a better understanding of news reports. When reading similar news incidents from different agencies, readers can identify and interpret the news discourse and therefore begin to analyze the ideologies of different news agencies.

Reference

Bell, A. (1991). *The language of news media*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Bell, A. (1996). The discourse structure of news stories. *Discourse Studies*, 1(3), 58- 89.

Navarat, P. (1989). *Discourse analysis: A comparison of business journalism style of The Wall Street Journal and The Nation*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois.

Scokkenbroek, C. (1999). News stories: Structure, time and evaluation. *Time & Society*, 8(1), 59-98.

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

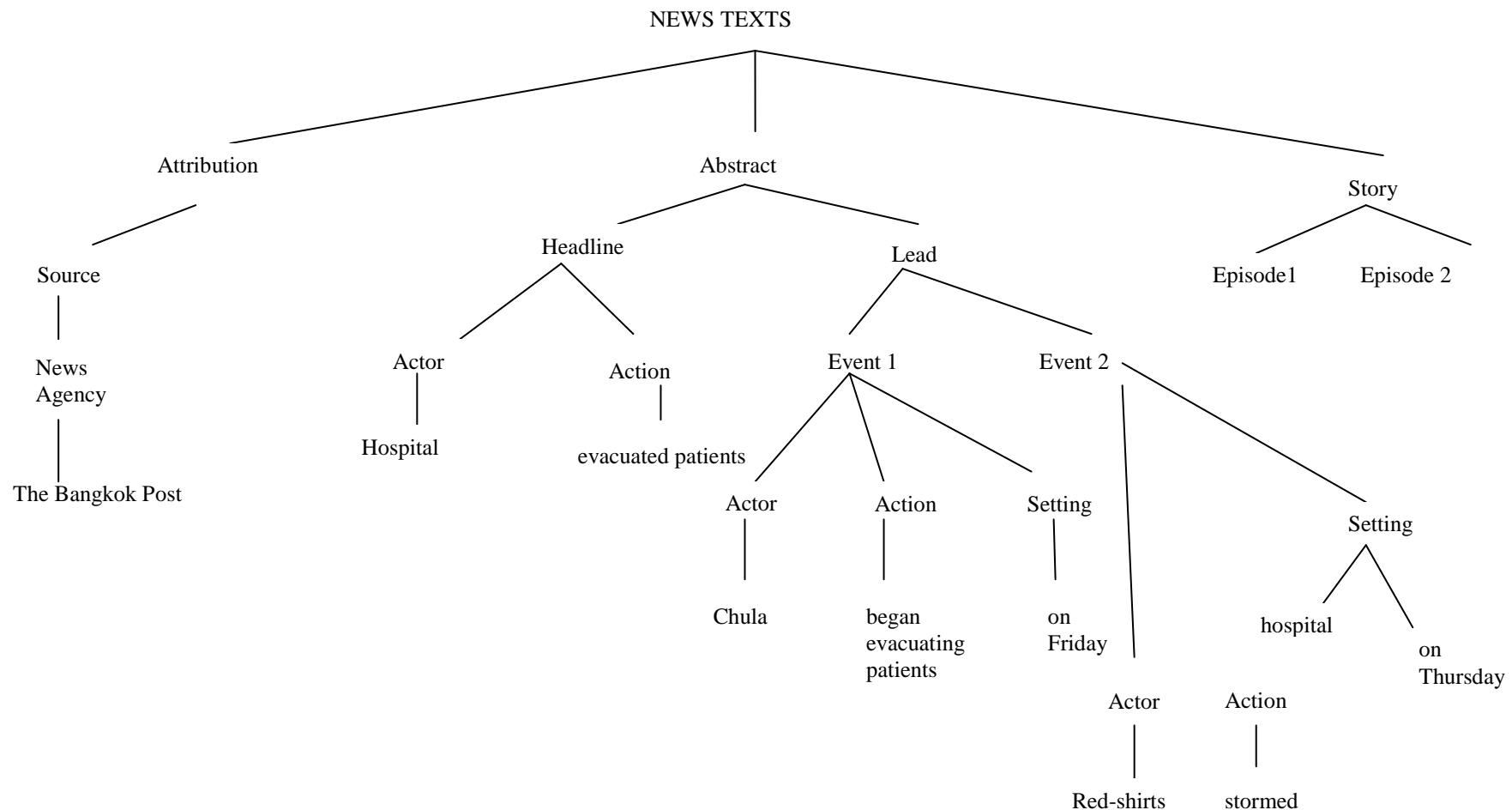
Trakulkasemsuk, W. (2007). *A comparative analysis of English feature articles in magazines published in Thailand and Britain: Linguistic aspects*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1983). Discourse analysis: Its development and application to the structure of news. *Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 20- 43.

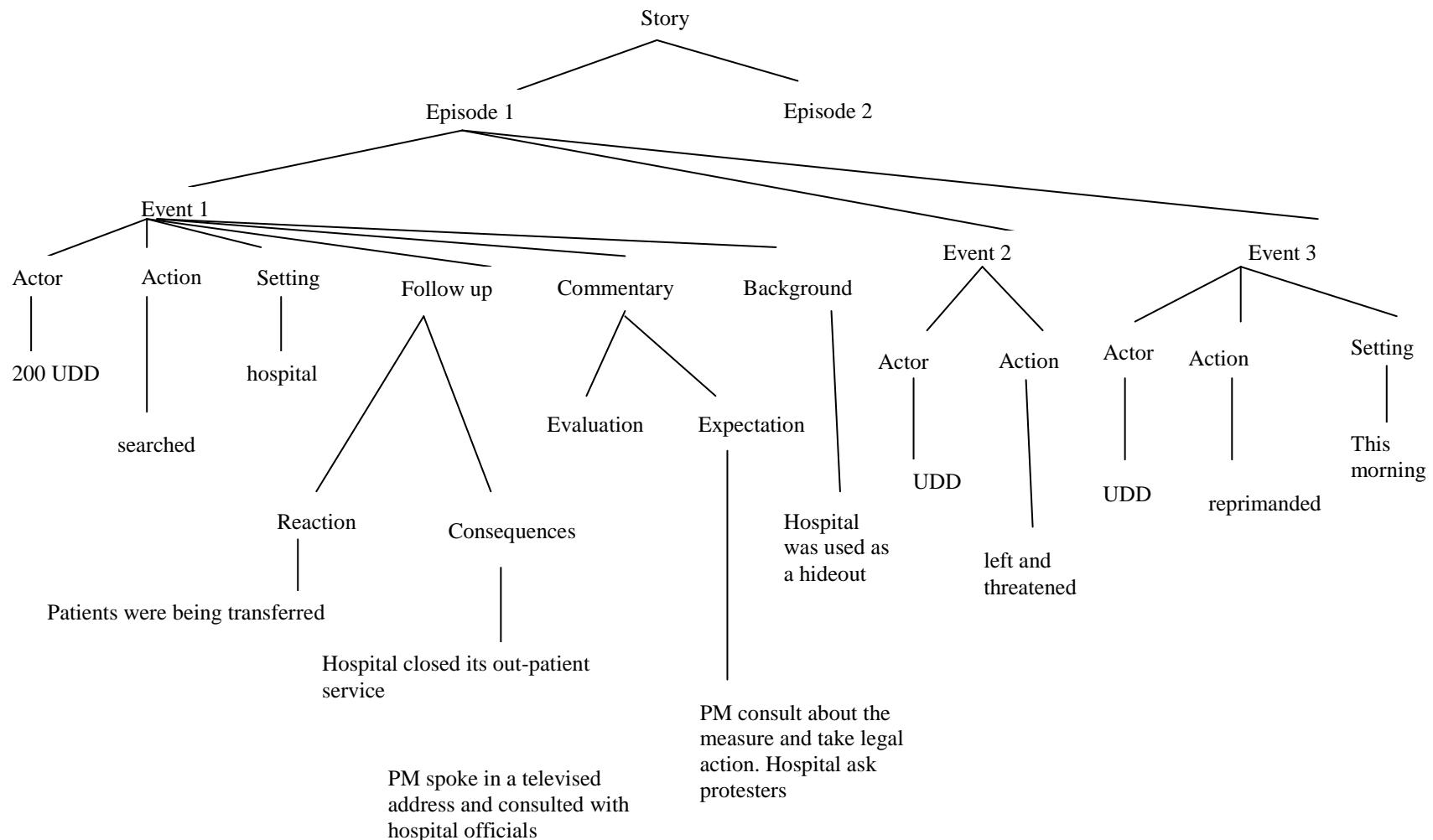
Van Dijk, T. A. (1988). *News as discourse*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Appendix

Model discourse structure for news texts: Chulalongkorn Hospital evacuates patients



(Continued)



(Continued)

