Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The current study examines visual communication on the home pages of three online newspapers: the Bangkok Post, the People’s Daily, and the Sydney Morning Herald. This section describes the data, and explains the data collection methods, and the data analysis.

4.2 Data

The data for this study come from three online newspapers, each published in a different nation state: Australia (Sydney Morning Herald), China (People’s Daily), and Thailand (Bangkok Post) (see Table 2.10). The Bangkok Post and the Sydney Morning Herald are both public businesses and therefore in the private sector; the People’s Daily is run by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and therefore governmental. The Bangkok Post and the Sydney Morning Herald are both written in English; the People’s Daily is an English translation of a Chinese-language newspaper. The Bangkok Post and the People’s Daily are both published in nations where English is not the official language, not commonly spoken, and has no history of institutionalisation: what Kachru & Nelson (2001, p. 12) term expanding circle countries. The Sydney Morning Herald is published in an inner circle country, one of “the old-variety English-using countries, where English is the first or dominant language” (Kachru & Nelson, 2001, p. 12). Each newspaper is, therefore, distinct from the others in a number of ways (cf. Chapter 1), and the data collected provide a
means to examine the extent to which such differences and similarities are realised in the visual discourse of each newspaper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Inner circle</th>
<th>Expanding circle</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Translated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sydney Morning Herald</strong></td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bangkok Post</strong></td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>People's Daily</strong></td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4.1: Comparative features of the Sydney Morning Herald, the Bangkok Post, and the People's Daily*

These newspapers were selected according to the following criteria. First, they needed to be located in the Asia-Pacific region. As discussed in section 1.3.2.4, the reason for this was to position the study in the social and geographical region of the researcher, and outside the trans-Atlantic focus so common in mass media research. Second, each newspaper needed to be an established newspaper, both in terms of its institutional history as a print newspaper, and (in relative terms) as an online newspaper. Third (and closely related to the second criterion), each newspaper needed to have some degree of international name recognition, and to be seen internationally as a representative of the news media in its nation state. Fourth, each newspaper needed to be widely viewed as a ‘serious’ (i.e. not tabloid) newspaper. Fifth, each needed to come from a different nation state in order to give an international perspective. While other newspapers met these criteria (e.g. *The Australian*, *The Jakarta Post*, *The Straits Times*, and the *South China Morning Post*), the three newspapers chosen were selected also on the basis of potential access to news rooms.
(the researcher’s location in Sydney, and personal history as a guest writer for the *BKP*), and for contrasting aspects of each newspaper as set out above.

The data can be divided into three parts: home pages, other pages, and interviews. A total of 45 home pages, 15 from each newspaper, were collected over the data collection period (see section 4.3 following). On each collection date, the main domestic news page (i.e. the home page of the ‘domestic’ news section of each newspaper: the *News* page in the *BKP*; the *China* page in the *PD*; the *National* page in the *SMH*) was also collected (another 45 web pages in total).

One each home page, a number of newsbites were ‘followed’ to ‘story pages’, and these pages (carrying longer versions of the ‘same’ story) were also downloaded. The same process was followed on the domestic news pages. The number of story pages downloaded varied depending on the number of stories on each page, on download speeds on given days, and on the changing focus of the research project (section 4.3 following), so fewer story pages were collected in the second and third data collections. A total of 513 story pages were collected. Table 4.2 summarises the web pages collected in this way. A representative sample of pages in the corpus is provided in Appendix A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th><em>Bangkok Post</em></th>
<th><em>People’s Daily</em></th>
<th><em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Pages</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Home Pages</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Pages</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>603</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4.2: Web pages in the corpus*
Later in the study, as part of the analysis of the thumbnail images on the home page of the *SMH*, story pages that were not in the corpus, but that were linked to newsbites carrying hard news stories with thumbnail images were also retrospectively searched and accessed on the web. The urls of these pages were recorded, but the pages were not downloaded.

In 2007, interviews were conducted with senior editors from the *Bangkok Post* (in January in Bangkok) and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (in July in Sydney). The transcripts of these two interviews are included as Appendices B and C.

In summary, the data for this study consists of 45 home pages, 45 domestic news pages, 513 story pages, and two interviews.

### 4.3 Data collection

The corpus of web pages used in this study was collected using the ‘constructed week method’. Bell (1991) explains that the data collection method of a ‘constructed week’ involves the collection of media texts on one day per week for a period of seven weeks (in a seven-day constructed week: Monday to Sunday) or a period of six weeks (in a six-day constructed week: Monday to Saturday). The reason for constructing a six-day week is that the content of Sunday newspapers can differ significantly from their weekday counterparts (Bell, 1991, p.19). Though Bell specifies Sunday newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* is not published on a Sunday, and the Saturday edition is titled the ‘weekend’ edition. For this reason, both Saturday and
Sunday newspapers were excluded from this study, and a five-day constructed week was used.

The first collection of web pages was made from February 14 to April 8, 2002. As initially conceived, the first data collection was the complete data set of the study. But in late 2005, all three newspapers had changed the design of their home pages. It was apparent that a single data collection was not going to be representative of the home pages of the three newspapers, and that a thesis published on 2002 home pages would be a historical document (this issue is explored further in Chapter 9). As a result second round of data collection was made from September 2 to November 2 in 2005.

At the end of 2005, the BKP and SMH again changed the designs of their home pages. This suggested the documentation and explanation of design change over time as a research focus, and so a third data collection was made immediately. As a concession to my supervisor, whose concern was growing as a factor of the rate of growth of the corpus multiplied by the length of the candidature, I stopped collecting data at this point. In all then, the data consist of three constructed 5-day weeks for each newspaper. Figure 4.1 provides a visual summary of the data collection periods.

In all three data collections, logistical constraints in downloading the data meant that data was not always collected in running weeks, something which ‘stretched’ each data collection period longer than the five weeks that would typically be expected to compile a constructed five-day week. Normally, it is reasonable to assume that a constructed week is representative of the content of each newspaper for
a 6-month period (Bell, 1991; Riffe, Aust & Lacy, 1993). However, the current study is of visual design, and not content. Online newspapers change their content daily and their design periodically. Over the data collection period of this study, the BKP had four different home page designs, the SMH four, and the PD had two different designs. It is possible to consider the pages collected during each design period as representative of the visual design of the pages from each newspaper over that entire period.

![Timeline of data collection](image)

*Figure 4.1: Timeline of data collection*

As stated above, interviews were conducted in January and July of 2007. Prior to these interviews, ethics approval was sought and gained from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.24 The interviewees gave informed consent before the interviews. Each interview was transcribed and edited for readability, and each interviewee was supplied with a transcript of their interview. Neither interviewee suggested any amendments nor made any objection to their interview transcript. The ethics consent form and information form for participants are

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24 The texts in the corpus, in contrast, were freely available texts in the public domain, and therefore their collection required no ethics approval.
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Included as Appendix D of this thesis, and as stated above, the interview transcripts are included as Appendices B and C.

4.4 Data analysis

The online newspaper home pages in the corpus were analysed as multi-semiotic, visual signs.

4.4.1 Pages

As stated in section 2.4 above, the language of news has been studied in detail from a variety of perspectives, over a long period of time. While news is often refashioned online (see Chapter 6), it is also true that much of the language of online newspapers is ‘shovelware’, indistinguishable lexicographically from stories published in print editions.

The initial intention of this study was to analyse both language and visual design, and in the early part of the study comprehensive linguistic analysis was conducted on a large number of texts. Over time, though, the visual analysis was both more productive and more interesting, and linguistic analysis was not pursued further. Therefore, the study developed into a ‘mapping’ of the visual design of news on the home pages of the online newspapers studied, and questions of news content (what stories, topics, and events the newspapers covered) and news flows (across media, organisations, and within newsrooms) were superfluous to the focus of the research.
Kress & van Leeuwen’s (1996) framework was applied to the home pages as visual texts. Some of the tools developed by them (e.g. visual-verbal taxonomies) were very useful and explanatory, with relatively little adaptation required in accounting for the data. Other aspects of their ‘visual grammar’ (e.g. the Ideal-Real and Given-New oppositions) required fundamental re-working (Chapter 6).

4.4.2 Newsbites

The earliest analysis conducted in this research was the linguistic analysis of newsbites from the home pages in the corpus, and this led to the identification of newsbites as a distinct news genre. The second and third data collections led to problems for the early description of newsbites, however, particularly the texts collected from the SMH. The rapid expansion in the diversity of newsbites led to a relatively large number of structural descriptions, and raised the issue of how this variation could be accounted for theoretically.

The paradigmatic perspective, privileged in SF theory, was brought into service to account for this variation, and the structural differences between newsbites, differences which expanded over time, were modelled as realisations of paradigmatic meanings at the stratum of genre. This made it possible to map the development of the meaning potential of newsbites over time (Chapter 7).

4.4.3 Rank

The analyses of home pages and newsbites raised questions concerning their relation to one another, and how these could be accounted for theoretically. Djonov’s (2005, 2007) work on logico-semantic relations in websites was relevant, but the decision
was made to pursue the complementary perspective of rank, due to its importance in
the development of Systemic Functional Linguistics, and the fundamental questions
still posed with regard to rank in relation to SF-MDA (section 3.5 above). Class-
function cycles were identified in the data set, and (potential) systems at each rank
were also identified.

4.4.4 Images

A study of the images on the home pages was not intended as part of this study, but as
the researched progressed it became increasingly clear that an account of visual
communication on these home pages could not avoid the question of images on the
page. Viewed collectively, the two most remarkable features of the images in the
corpus were, firstly, that there were so few of them in the BKP and the PD, and
secondly, that there were very large numbers of thumbnail images (and most of these
close-up shots of faces) in the SMH.

The analytical tools developed by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) were again
applied, together with other SF-based work such as Caple’s (2009) account of
Stenglin’s (2004) work on interpersonal meaning in three-dimensional space was also
important in accounting for the functions of thumbnail images on the home page of
the SMH.
4.4.5 Interviews

In order to inform interpretations made on the basis of the visual discourse analysis, and to relate the analyses to ‘insider’ perspectives, interviews were conducted with editorial staff of the *BKP* and the *SMH*.

In the case of the *BKP*, a senior editor of one of the sections of the newspaper (published in print and online) with whom the current author is familiar was contacted. This editor agreed to be interviewed, and also supplied the name of the person with primary editorial responsibility for the online version of the *BKP*. Emails to the online editor, and a personal visit to that editor’s office drew no response. In the case of the *SMH*, a senior editor with responsibility for the online version of the newspaper was first contacted by email. After contact was established, an interview was agreed to and set up. The *PD* did not respond to a number of attempts to make contact by email.

The interviews were semi-structured, and aimed in part to collect information about the decision making processes in news design. This kind of information was not successfully gathered in the interviews (see transcripts in Appendices B and C). The interview data were not subjected to discourse analysis or qualitative analysis, but the were used to test and inform a number of interpretations made on the basis of the discourse analysis and the literature, and provided very helpful background in developing explanations and in considering implications.
4.5 Methodology: Conclusion

This thesis uses SF-MDA to analyse three constructed weeks of data from three online newspapers collected over a four-year period. Interviews with editorial staff from the two of the newspapers were used to triangulate the findings.

The following chapters use the theory set out in Chapter 3, and the methodological approach set out in this chapter to examine the three newspapers from different perspectives: a focus on the whole website using the tool of rank in Chapter 5; analysing the visual structure of home pages in Chapter 6; analysing the structure of news stories in the SMH (newsbites in particular) in Chapter 7; and focussing on the use of images (thumbnail images in the SMH in particular) in Chapter 8.