Captions in TV News: Title or Comment?

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INTRODUCTION

It is common practice nowadays to have short written phrases, usually, placed on the top right-hand corner of the screen in most news bulletins on Greek television channels. One cannot be certain when exactly this practice began or how long it took before it became established, but we could try at least to think of possible reasons for it. One explanation could be that news editors may have thought that there was such a great deal of visual coverage for every news item, that there should be a kind of constant ‘headline’ on the top just to remind viewers of what they are watching. Or, perhaps, news copy editors may have found in these little phrases a convenient way to add a personal comment on the presentation of the news item. Yet, whatever the primary reason for the use of these captions (as I will be calling them from now on) was, they constitute an object of study and they deserve closer attention.

In Greece, there are two state nationwide television channels: ET1 and NET and at least six private ones: MEGA, ANT1, STAR, ALPHA, ALTER and TEMPO. For convenience, I decided to include in this paper data from one of the two state channels, not because I consider them to be alike, but simply because their news coverage is on the same basic lines and they usually have the same reportages. Additionally, it was made clear, when NET was launched, that it was primarily going to be a news channel, while ET1 would retain a more entertaining and varied programme; so, the obvious choice for me was to gather data from NET. As far as the private channels are concerned, I initially wanted to exclude a couple of them, but then such a decision would have been arbitrary, since there could be no objective way to determine which to retain or exclude for my data. Therefore, I recorded the main news bulletin of all seven channels on the same day for seven non-consecutive days over a period of two weeks. These seven random days correspond to a constructed week of video recording, a sampling technique that is commonly used in similar researches (Bell: 1991).

Transcribing the data proved an even more formidable task, since the length of Greek main news bulletins ranges from about 40 minutes (NET) to an hour and a half (STAR, MEGA, ANT1, ALPHA), making a total of eight and a half hours of broadcast time each day. A final point that I would like to make is the number of news items covered in the news bulletins: NET presents the fewest news items with an average of 14 items, while ANT1 and MEGA cover an average of 28 news items in any main
news bulletin. Consequently, the longer the news bulletin is and the larger the number of news items presented in it, the greater the number of captions is.

CONVENTIONS AND CHOICES
I should introduce both some of the conventions of caption usage and news presentation as well as explain the choices and the decisions I made in coping with my data.

Only one of the seven channels, namely ALTER, opts for a less wide use of captions. News on ALTER is only occasionally supplemented by captions on the screen and in case this happens, captions appear in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen, when there is a series of three or four short news items with a voice over by the same reporter and belonging to the same special-topic. For instance, the reporter may present a sequence of news items from the court of law or a sequence of foreign news items.

MEGA often uses a specific convention concerning the use of captions. After a brief introductory presentation of the news item by the newscaster, two separate phrases, which resemble headlines rather than captions, appear simultaneously on the screen, accompanied by appropriate music. One phrase (A) is set at the usual top right-hand corner and the other (B) is positioned at the bottom left-hand corner of the screen. When this opening shot is succeeded by the extensive following report, it is always the second phrase (B) that becomes the caption occupying the usual top right-hand corner of the screen while the first one (A) is withdrawn.

ANT1 and STAR also make use of an initial phrase as a kind of introductory title often placed over the newscaster’s shoulder. STAR channel usually presents a different phrase as a caption during the reportage. Conversely, ANT1 uses the same phrase both as an introductory title to the report and as a caption during the report.

In some news bulletins a news item is organized into chapters, whereby at the beginning of each chapter there is a general title accompanied by appropriate music (ALPHA). Occasionally, there is a general title that signals the beginning and the end of a sequence of news items with a common theme (TEMPO, ANT1, NET).

It soon becomes evident that quite a lot of text appears on television screen during a news bulletin. A necessary step was then to discard all unwanted, redundant and technical information on the screen, which has a metalinguistic function as it concerns the organization of the news items. So, the following words and phrases were considered irrelevant for our purposes here and were excluded from the discussion: ΑΠΟΚΛΕΙΣΤΙΚΟ (=exclusive), ΑΠΕΥΘΕΙΑΣ ΣΥΝΔΕΣΗ (=live), ΤΗΛΕΦΩΝΙΚΗ ΕΠΙΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ (=telephone link), ΠΛΑΝΑ ΑΡΧΕΙΟΥ
(archive shots), as well as place-names, reporters' names and other purely technical terminology. As is clear, my concern here is with the content of the news as evidenced in textual form. Finally, it is important to stress that I was concerned purely with captions and not with the news headlines appearing at the beginning or in the course of the news bulletin.

DISCUSSION
A close examination of the captions I have collected reveals some very interesting results. In this paper, however, I will concentrate on two major points, those of 'intertextuality' and the use of quotation marks, as an exhaustive analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Intertextuality
The first observation in this paper is that intertextuality (Fairclough 1992 - originally Kristeva) plays an important role in the linguistic choices made in the captions. Instances of captions that manifestly incorporate other texts are surprisingly numerous. The following examples are only some of the clearest cases of intertextuality one can find in the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAPTION</th>
<th>INTERTEXTUAL ELEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) ΑΥΤΗ Η ΝΥΧΤΑ...ΜΕΝΕΙ [ANTI 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>A well-known song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) ΤΗΣ ΣΚΟΤΙΣΕ ΓΙΑΙ ΤΗΝ ΑΓΑΠΟΥΣΕ... [ANTI 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>A well-known song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Ο...ΝΕΡΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΜΥΚΟΝΟΥ [ANTI 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>The Roman arsonist emperor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Η ΟΔΥΣΣΕΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΝΤΙΝΟΥ [ANTI 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>The long journey of Ulysses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) ΤΟ ΚΟΜΜΑ, ΤΟ ΔΑΝΕΙΟ ΚΑΙ Η ΕΘΝΙΚΗ [MEGA 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>A parallel structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) ΑΜΑΡΤΙΕΣ...ΠΑΙΔΙΩΝ! [MEGA 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>A Greek proverb in inverted form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) ΕΠΙΚΙΝΔΥΝΕΣ...ΥΠΟΨΕΙΣ [STAR 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>A well-known romantic novel and film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) ΜΠΟΥΡΑΤΙΕΡΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΜΥΚΟΝΟΥ [STAR 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>The well-known captain of a fire ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) ΟΙ ΓΕΦΥΡΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΣΗΜΙΤΗ [TEMPO 15/3/2001]</td>
<td>The film &quot;The Bridges of Madison&quot;???</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) ΤΟ...ΜΕΓΑΛΟ ΣΤΗΣΙΜΟ [ANTI 19/3/2001]</td>
<td>Paraphrase of title of a film???</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12) ΟΙ ΧΟΡΟΙ ΚΑΛΑ ΚΡΑΤΟΥΝ! [ANTI 19/3/2001]</td>
<td>A frequently used collocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13) Η ΩΡΑ ΤΗΣ ΚΡΙΣΗΣ ΓΙΑ ΓΕΡΑΝΥΜΑΚΗ [ALPHA 20/3/2001]</td>
<td>Religious collocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14) ΚΙΤΡΙΝΗ ΚΑΡΤΑ ΑΠΟ ΤΗΝ FIFA [ANTI 20/3/2001]</td>
<td>Football terminology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidently, captions in Greek main news bulletins overtly draw upon a great variety of other texts that belong to different genres and styles of discourse, a
procedure extensively discussed by Fairclough (Fairclough 1992, 1995b). Intertextuality, thus, constitutes a powerful tool that enables us to transfer meanings and connotations from one text to another. The aim here is to produce new yet familiar discourse, which the viewer-reader will assimilate effortlessly since it will appeal to cultural knowledge he/she already possesses. Captions which point directly to a popular song (1,2), captions that are built on a folk proverb (6, 17, 19, 23, 34, 36), captions that embody well-known lexical items from military (25), medical (15), political (24) or religious (9, 13, 18, 29) discourses, captions that echo literary texts (7, 16, 26, 32, 35, 37), film titles (10, 11, 21, 28, 30) or historical (3, 4, 8,) and toponymic (31) vocabulary, all manage to refer or allude to familiar texts which already mean something to the audience. Full perception of the event presented in the news programme does not seem to rely solely on the visual footage and the voice over; a short title is always present on the screen to remind viewers of the incident being presented and, perhaps, to direct them to a favoured interpretation. The claims made so far can be vividly illustrated if we compare captions that are taken from the presentation of the same news item on different TV channels:

A. News item: People visit the new airport in Athens.

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<tr>
<td>ΠΑΝΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΟ [ALPHA 21/3/2001]</td>
<td>pandemonium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΠΑΤΕΙΣ ΜΕ ΠΑΤΩ ΣΕ! [ΑΝΤ] 21/3/2001)</td>
<td>full house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΚΟΣΜΟΣΥΡΡΟΗ ΣΤΑ ΣΙΑΤΑ [ALPHA 20/3/2001], [MEGA 21/3/2001]</td>
<td>crowds in Spata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΜΕ ΤΙΣ ΚΑΛΥΤΕΡΕΣ ΕΝΤΥΠΩΣΕΙΣ [NET 21/3/2001]</td>
<td>best impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΣΙΓΑ, ΜΗ...ΣΠΙΡΩΝΕΣΤΕ [STAR 21/3/2001]</td>
<td>Watch out!...Don’t push!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΧΩΛΙΑΔΕΣ ΕΠΙΣΚΕΠΤΕΣ [TEMPO 21/3/2001]</td>
<td>thousands of visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΕΠΙΒΑΤΕΣ...ΕΔΑΦΟΥΣ-ΕΔΑΦΟΥΣ [TEMPO 21/3/2001]</td>
<td>ground to ground ... passengers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Captions (2), (5) and (7) clearly draw upon other texts. In caption (2) a familiar popular saying is used virtually intact; likewise in (5), an everyday expression with a humorous effect is used. Caption (7) finally, ‘compares’ passengers to ground-to-ground missiles. It is obvious that the intertextual choices of (2), (5) and (7) manage to convey the message more dramatically, while (3), (4) and (6), used by the state channel and TEMPO respectively, are rather neutral, presenting the events in a more objective way.
B. News item: A well-known businessman sets fires in competitors’ establishments.

(8) ΕΠΙΧΕΙΡΗΜΑΤΙΣ ΕΜΠΡΗΣΤΗΣ [ALPHA 15/3/2001]
(9) Ο...ΝΕΡΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΜΥΚΟΝΟΥ [ANT1 15/3/2001]
(10) ΕΜΠΡΗΣΤΗΣ ΜΕ...ΟΝΟΜΑΤΕΠΩΝΥΜΟ [MEGA 15/3/2001]
(11) Ο ΜΠΟΥΡΛΟΤΙΕΡΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΜΥΚΟΝΟΥ [STAR 15/3/2001]

Captions (9) and (11) from ANT1 and STAR have historical overtones that try to go beyond other more or less descriptive phrases like captions (8) and (10). Caption (9) tries to compare the arsonist to the Roman Emperor Nero, while caption (11) refers the viewers to Kanaris, the famous captain of a fire ship during the Greek rebellion of 1821. One can now possibly form a picture of a pyromaniac person equal to Nero or Kanaris. It is noteworthy that all these captions consist of Noun Phrases (NPs) only and are devoid of predicates. In (8) the Noun (εμπρηστής) is the predicator of another Noun (επιχειρηματίς) in a near-equative sentence, while in all the others the only reference made to the referent (the businessman) is in descriptive phrases alluding to his arsenal activities.

At present, I wish to just pinpoint intertextual elements present in these captions without exploring any repercussions as concerns ideological complexes they might generate and their significance as regards state and private channels. This is, certainly, an issue I will have to examine in detail in further research.

Quotation marks
Another issue I would just like to touch upon is the ample use of quotation marks in captions taken from news bulletins on MEGA and STAR. I am not referring either to the quotations used to report what someone else has said in direct speech, or to quotations we use to enclose a title. Extensive use is made here of quotation marks around words and phrases and the question that is raised is related to the anticipated effect. A quick look into a contemporary Greek dictionary (Μπαζιωτίδης 1998) will render two distinct uses of quotations except those mentioned above: a) In a metalinguistic context, which is obviously not the case in TV captions and b) When the speaker or writer wishes to give a different meaning to a word or to comment on meanings and ideas. Apparently, it is the latter interpretation of quotation marks that will concern us here. Let us first cite a few instances from my data:

1) «ΕΜΠΡΗΣΤΙΚΟ» ΠΕΙΡΑΜΑ [MEGA 15/3/2001]
2) «ΤΟΥΡΚΙΚΑ» ΧΤΥΠΟΚΑΡΔΙΑ! [MEGA 15/3/2001]
3) «ΑΝΑΚΙΝΗΣΗ» [STAR 15/3/2001]
4) «ΜΠΟΛΟΚΟ» ΣΤΑ ΜΥΔΙΑ [STAR 15/3/2001]
5) ΕΡΩΤΗΜΑΤΙΚΑ «ΑΠΟΓΡΑΦΗΣ» [STAR 15/3/2001]
Clearly, the aim here is to construct metaphors; and metaphors construct ideology (Kittis & Milapides 1997). The extensive use of quotation marks demonstrates, in my opinion, exactly how metaphors pervade this kind of texts. We may consider that the word in quotation marks assigns a metaphorical attribute to the rest of the phrase. In actual fact, what we have here is mostly an attributive mini-clause with the theme being backgrounded and the attribute (mostly metaphorical) being focalized as in (1,11,16,27). In some other cases we have a deverbal noun and an agentic genitive as in (8,14,17,19,21) or a prepositional phrase (4, 9, 13, 18, 20, 24, 26, 32).

Let us pay a closer attention to some of the above instances of captions. Thus, the experiment becomes “incendiary” owing to its secret conduct by a student (1). The heartbeat is “Turkish” because it is in the Turkish language (2). “Truce” (3) is in quotation marks revealing the channel’s doubts on the desired prospect of fewer quarrels within the leading political party. The mussels are banned and therefore “blocked” (4). The word “census” in quotations indicates the degree of its success (5).
immobilization of vehicles due to a strike is signaled by the metonymic “handbrake”, which causes discomfort (6). The “cost” of human life points to the ‘fiscal’ value of life and the way it is sometimes “measured” (7). Men belonging to the clergy are not expected to fight with each other, so their “duels” is in quotation marks (8). The “road” to Spata new international airport comments both on the new motorway that leads to Spata (9) but also has a metaphorical finger alluding to the way. The “blood” on Virgin Mary’s icon is in quotations betraying the channel’s attitude to either discredit or dissociate from a potential miracle (15, 17, 22). Death is often described as a final “journey” (25) (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). A positive development in economy is referred to as a “breath” (26). People “drown” in problems, when they are overwhelmed by problems (28). The news about an actress photographed as Jesus in His Passion Week and criticized for these photographs is accompanied by a caption about the “passions” of photography (29). Petrol is presented as a “refuge” for a man who tried to protest (31). Finally, the “face” of Christ is in quotations because it is not a true picture of Him but a virtual representation constructed by researchers (33).

Having singled out and presented the phenomenon does not exhaust the issue. I intend to categorize it in types and examine its consequences in terms of how these types may affect and negotiate the derived meaning. But this has to await further research.

CONCLUSIONS
There are, unquestionably, many other aspects that need to be studied with respect to captions. In the present paper, I only presented some preliminary observations, which, I think, deserve further research. It becomes, nevertheless, clear that captions are not merely objective titles of the news item presented. We have briefly looked into two major paths that news copy editors follow in order to convey their preferred reading of a caption and, consequently, of the event itself: intertextuality and metaphor-creating words in quotation marks.

Intertextuality works at the level of the speakers’ common cultural background. The linguistic choices in captions create links between the caption-title of the news item and a great variety of previous texts most people are expected to be familiar with. The audience is invited to exploit the meaning as well as the pragmatic implications of the embedded text and transfer it onto the new text of captions and to the event itself in negotiating and constructing meaning.

The abundance of quotation marks enclosing lexical items in our data serves as a ‘facilitator’ towards comprehending these items as metaphors. And as Fowler (1987, 1991) and Fairclough (1995a) note,
ideology is articulated through language, while, at the same time, language shapes ideology and constructs meanings based on selective incorporation of preferred stereotypes in the making of news.

The above discussion can be seen as an initial and tentative approach towards an understanding of captions and their role in the comprehension of a news bulletin. Of course, not all captions are ideologically laden; captions from the state channel news appear to be more descriptive in the light of the above discussion. Further study of captions that will approach the subject more thoroughly is needed, before we can reach safer conclusions.

REFERENCES