

SEM34. Crafting comfort: The rhetorical and linguistic representation(s) of well-being in late modern newspapers and magazines

12 September h. 16:30-19:00, TERR PN

Convenors

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Abstract

The Late Modern period witnessed an unprecedented surge in print media production in Britain and its colonies, catering to a growing readership eager for information, entertainment, and self-improvement (Brownlees, 2023; Finkelstein, 2020; King, Easley & Morton, 2016; Shattock, 2017). Newspapers and magazines of this era not only reflected societal values, but also actively shaped them, offering rhetorical and linguistic blueprints for navigating the complexities of modern life and human experience. Among those blueprints, themes of well-being, happiness, comfort, and leisure emerged prominently, encompassing as diverse domains as fashion, food and drink, travel, music, dance, sports, and games (Oishi et al., 2013; Glatzer, 2019; Mazzi, 2023). Those representations served as cultural touchstones, reflecting and constructing notions of individual and collective well-being.

This seminar seeks to explore how well-being and comfort were rhetorically and linguistically crafted in Late Modern newspapers and magazines published in Britain and its colonies. We invite contributions that examine those themes through a variety of methodological lenses, including corpus linguistics, historical sociopragmatics, and historical discourse analysis. By investigating the textual and contextual strategies employed in those representations, we aim to uncover the ways in which comfort and well-being were constructed, contested, and commodified during that pivotal historical moment. Papers might address questions such as:

- How were activities like food and drink consumption, travel, or sports linguistically framed as pathways to well-being?
- What rhetorical strategies were used to persuade readers of the benefits of leisure and self-care?
- How did representations of well-being intersect with issues of gender, class, or national identity?
- In what ways did Late Modern media contribute to the commodification of comfort and well-being?

By bringing together diverse perspectives, this seminar aims to foster a nuanced understanding of the cultural and linguistic underpinnings of well-being in the Late Modern period, shedding light on their lasting impact on contemporary discourses of health, comfort and leisure.

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SEM34. Papers

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- *The encoding of wellbeing in a corpus of British letters to the editor (1750-1800)* (Elisabetta Cecconi, Università degli Studi di Firenze)
- *Well-being and national identity. Secret societies and the construction of the Italian national state between facts and entertainment* (Isabella Martini, Università degli Studi di Firenze)
- *Journalism, empire and the promotion of sport, outdoor activities and well-being in an English-reading*

world. *A discourse-historical analysis of "The Review of Reviews" (1890-1908)* (Eleonora Natalia Ravizza, Università degli Studi di Milano)

- *Food and well-being in Charles Dickens's periodicals (1850-1870)* (Raffaella Sciarra, Università Mercatorum)
- *The language of well-being in 19th-century newspapers and magazines: A methodological framework* (Massimo Sturiale, Università degli Studi di Milano / Giulia Rovelli, Università degli Studi di Bergamo)

SEM34. Abstracts

The encoding of wellbeing in a corpus of British letters to the editor (1750-1800)

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In this paper, I shall examine how the concept of 'wellbeing' is linguistically represented in a specialised sub-corpus of 18th-century British Letters to the Editor (LTEs) from the period 1750 to 1800. The corpus comprises LTEs published in British newspapers, sourced from the *17th- and 18th-Century Burney Newspaper Collection*. The selected letters specifically address issues of male-female relationships and offer a valuable lens through which to explore the interplay between contemporary conceptualisations of wellbeing and the broader socio-discursive dynamics of gender inequality in the late modern period.

By applying principles of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington, 2009; Partington et al., 2013), I shall analyse both the collocational and colligational behaviour of the most frequent lexical items related to wellbeing (e.g., 'happiness', 'pleasure', 'peace of mind'). Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most frequent lexical items used to express the notion of wellbeing in late modern LTEs?
2. What does their usage in context reveal about contemporary conceptualisations and perceptions of wellbeing?

Preliminary findings indicate that 18th-century correspondents were eager to seek advice, articulate personal views, and engage in dialogic exchange on issues concerning male and female happiness. As Jones (1996: 45) observes, LTEs represented "the very health element in the English newspaper," serving as a crucial means of "feeling the national pulse." The editorial decision to publish –or in some cases, fabricate– letters addressing wellbeing in the context of gender relations reflects the cultural salience and reader interest surrounding these topics (Brownlees, 2025; Cecconi, forthcoming). As Bednarek (2006: 203) notes with regard to evaluative language in modern-day press, "newspapers will try to construct a text which is in line with what they think are the opinions, attitudes and feelings, hence the evaluative stance of (the majority of) their readers". In this light, LTEs appeared to function not merely as public forums, but as curated reflections of shared affective and ideological concerns, particularly in relation to gendered experiences of wellbeing or the perceived lack thereof.

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Well-being and national identity. Secret societies and the construction of the Italian national state between facts and entertainment

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My paper explores the representation of well-being at the intersection of audience entertainment and of issues of national identity, through a linguistic analysis of the representation, in the British press, of secret societies active in the 19th-century construction of Italy. Having attracted international travellers for centuries as one of the major destinations of the Grand Tour (Black, 1996) in view not only of its favourable climate, but also, and most importantly, because of its artistic and cultural heritage, Italy has been widely represented in the international news discourse over time. However, when the first national movements began to gain momentum in the 19th century, Italy was no longer seen as a destination for cultural enrichment, leisure, and for pursuing the travellers' own well-being only; rather, one prominent focus of the representation of Italy was its social well-being and its construction through the actualisation of an Italian national identity that would eventually correspond to the building of an independent state, liberating the Italians from a centuries-long rule that had fragmented their country (Davis, 2000) and promoting the social well-being of an entire population that was yet to obtain their independence. Despite considerable international press coverage of the key socio-political events and personalities that led to the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, and to the capture of Rome in 1870, and of the so-called secret societies that provided a fundamental contribution to the creation of the Italian national state and national identity in the first half of the 19th century (Bartholdy, 1821; Rath, 1964), the related news discourse has received marginal attention to its linguistic features so far.

The same idea of discussing secret societies in the press or making their rituals and symbols explicit – which, for the very constitution of those societies, ought to have remained concealed – leads to further considerations to be made on the aim of their representation in the press beyond social well-being. This paper debates whether making secret societies newsworthy was indeed part of a broader strategy to frame their representation not only within the socio-political considerations of their role in the socio-political scenario of the time, but also by stimulating the interest of readers for gossip and entertainment, tapping into the innate fascination of human minds for anything either mysterious or otherwise inaccessible with the disclosure of what should be inaccessible knowledge – the accuracy of which needs to be further problematised because it is frequently offered by anonymous writers in the news items under consideration. This contribution problematises the existing representation of secret societies in the news by examining the linguistic representation of Italian secret societies in the British press, i.e., in the news and in letters to the editors (LTEs), applying to a corpus specifically built for this study a quantitative and qualitative analytical framework that combines corpus linguistics, corpus-assisted discourse analysis and historical pragmatics (Claridge, 2010; Partington, Duguid, Taylor, 2015). Recurrent clusters, collocations and extended co-textual references in news articles and LTEs are examined to identify their evaluative connotation and ideological representation of some of the most prominent – although ideally hidden – actors in the construction of the Italian national identity between facts and entertainment aimed at the reading public.

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Journalism, empire and the promotion of sport, outdoor activities and well-being in an English-reading world. A discourse-historical analysis of *The Review of Reviews* (1890-1908)

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At the dawn of the twentieth century, the advent of industrialization, which facilitated motorized transportation and expanded leisure time, led to a growing number of individuals engaging in outdoor sports as a means of enhancing their psychological and physical well-being. The London-based monthly magazine *Review of Reviews* (1890-1908), a transnational publishing initiative which catered to audiences in North America, Australia, and beyond, often dealt with this new trend, and actively engaged in the promotion of sport, outdoor activities and health/ well-being related issues (Potter, 2017; Baylen, 1979). A champion of British foreign and imperial interests, the *Review of Reviews*, presented its readers with a selection of original and republished articles, illustrations and caricatures with the self-declared purpose to “democratize the best thought of the world” (1890, i.1, p. 14). Its engagement with the emerging interest in activities such as skiing, mountaineering, or cycling certainly reflected a broader ideological project.

This paper will employ a combination of discourse-historical and social-cognitive methodologies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; De Cillia, Wodak & Reisigl, 1999; Van Dijk, 2009; Koller, 2009) to analyze how the representation of sport and outdoor activities in the *Review of Reviews* contributed to the construction and reinforcement of national, gender, and class identities to be exported to all corners of the British Empire. The analysis will specifically examine the portrayal of social actors and actions within the articles dealing with the above-mentioned topics: how are various domains of experience, encompassing processes, participants, and circumstances, constructed through discourse? Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2007) will also be employed as a more fine-grained analytical framework to discuss what qualities and values are associated with well-being discourses, and how they contribute to specific socio-cognitive representations.

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Food and well-being in Charles Dickens’s periodicals (1850-1870)

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This paper, which combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches, investigates how the cultural debate that developed around the topics of food and nutrition was represented in the two magazines edited by Charles Dickens, *Household Words* (1850-1859) and *All the Year Round* (1859-70). Dickens’s journals provide a rich context for an exploration of the interactions between discourse on food and the periodical press, since they chronicled and participated in the transformation of English diet and dining customs during one of the liveliest and most important periods in English food history. Both *HW* and *AYR* dealt with many crucial aspects of contemporary food culture, such as the industrialization of food, the problem of adulteration, the influence of French over English cuisine, and the growing expansion of the British Empire, which also led to an interchange between different cultures and cuisines. Not least, they advocated awareness of the poor quality of British cooking and called for a change in English attitudes toward cookery, by claiming civilization through the “art of dining”. Accordingly, they played a critical role in spreading a new culture of food, aimed above all at improving the health of the less well-off classes, at a time when issues due to nutritional deficiencies were widespread, and even science was clarifying the methods to ameliorate the diet of both rich and poor, in

particular to fight hunger, a problem that still plagued a significant part of the English population. Their pioneering campaigns for the introduction of highly nutritious aliments into the British diet confirms that the two periodicals were quite progressive in nutritional, as well as social, matters. All these elements were of paramount importance for what can be considered a true gastronomic revolution that the two magazines witnessed and encouraged. The investigation will employ corpus linguistics in order to ascertain the extent to which the periodicals under scrutiny have contributed to the establishment of new nutritional habits and the dissemination of a novel and progressive gastronomic culture.

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The language of well-being in 19th-century newspapers and magazines: a methodological framework

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The concept of well-being is complex and multifaceted, encompassing physical, mental, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Because of this, well-being is also tightly linked to specific socio-historical contexts, which influence not only what well-being is perceived to be, but also how this concept is encoded, represented, discussed and promoted by society at large (Oishi et al., 2013). Since the periodical press both reflects and helps shape societal values, our paper explores how magazines and newspapers can be used to investigate the ways in which this pivotal concept was constructed and negotiated during the Late Modern period. The 18th and 19th centuries were, indeed, characterized by overarching social, political and cultural changes in both Britain and its colonies which certainly had an impact on evolving conceptions of well-being and comfort, and also witnessed an unprecedented surge in print media production, which catered to a growing readership eager for information, entertainment, and self-improvement (Brownlees 2023; Finkelstein 2020; King, Easley & Morton 2016; Shattock 2017). Drawing on materials from major digital archives – including *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/>), *Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals* (<https://www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/19th-century-uk-periodicals>), *The Times Digital Archive 1785–2019* (<https://www.gale.com/intl/c/the-times-digital-archive>), and *Canadiana* (<https://www.canadiana.ca/>) – this paper offers a methodological framework for analysing how well-being and comfort were constructed, contested, and commodified during this historically significant era. The approach integrates recent advances in corpus linguistics, historical sociopragmatics, and historical discourse analysis. Different magazine and newspaper sections, ranging from news reports to feature articles, opinion pieces and advertisements, whose distinctive characteristics emerged and consolidated precisely in this period, will be analysed paying particular attention to aspects of well-being related to comfort, leisure and entertainment which emerged prominently at the time and encompassed such diverse domains as fashion, food and drink, travel, music, dance, sports, and games (Glatzer, 2019; Mazzi, 2023).

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