

The Weight of Obesity: A Critical Discourse Analysis on the Representation of Obesity in *Panorama* and *Dispatches*

Author: Gemma Thatcher

Supervisor: Dr Charlotte Taylor

Research Question: Is there a difference in the way that the BBC's *Panorama* and Channel 4's *Dispatches* use language to attribute blame towards obesity and obese people?

Hypothesis: There is no difference in the way that *Panorama* and *Dispatches* use language to attribute blame for obesity. Both programmes represent obesity as a matter of self-control and individual responsibility.

Background

The UK's Rising Rates of Obesity

- The United Kingdom is currently in the midst of a growing obesity "crisis".
- One in four British adults are now obese and the UK has the highest level (24.9%) of obesity in Western Europe (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2013).
- Treating obesity is estimated to cost the NHS £6.3 billion per year (Public Health England, 2016)

Who is to blame for this obesity "crisis"?

- The UK's rising rates of obesity have been blamed on modern lifestyles with easy access to calorific food, inactive jobs and a lack of education. However, many others blame the obese individuals for their dietary habits (Davies, 2015).



Current Affairs Programmes

- Form of investigative journalism which serves the purpose of increasing levels of knowledge and understanding amongst the audience (Hill, 2007).
- They place emphasis on analysing and discussing topical news stories such as obesity.

Channel 4 and BBC One

- BBC One is a public broadcaster which is completely funded by the state.
- Channel 4 is a quasi-commercial broadcaster which is partly funded by public funds but also by profitable activities e.g. advertisements.

- Therefore, the two broadcasters may report on the social issue of obesity differently in their current affairs programmes as a result of their different funding streams.

The Attribution of Blame in the News Media

- Inthorn and Boyce (2010) studied 28 prime time programmes that were solely dedicated to obesity broadcast between January and July 2007. They found that television programmes report that it isn't the state's role to accept responsibility for the individual's health and obesity is a matter of self-control and individual responsibility.
- Bonfiglioli et al (2007) analysed 50 television news and current affairs programmes about obesity in Australia broadcast in 2005 and also found that obesity is largely seen as the responsibility of the individual.

Methodology

Data Collection:

- Orthographic transcripts of the entire length of the episodes *Panorama: Tax the Fat* (BBC One, 2010) and *Dispatches: Britain's Big Fat Bill* (Channel 4, 2013).

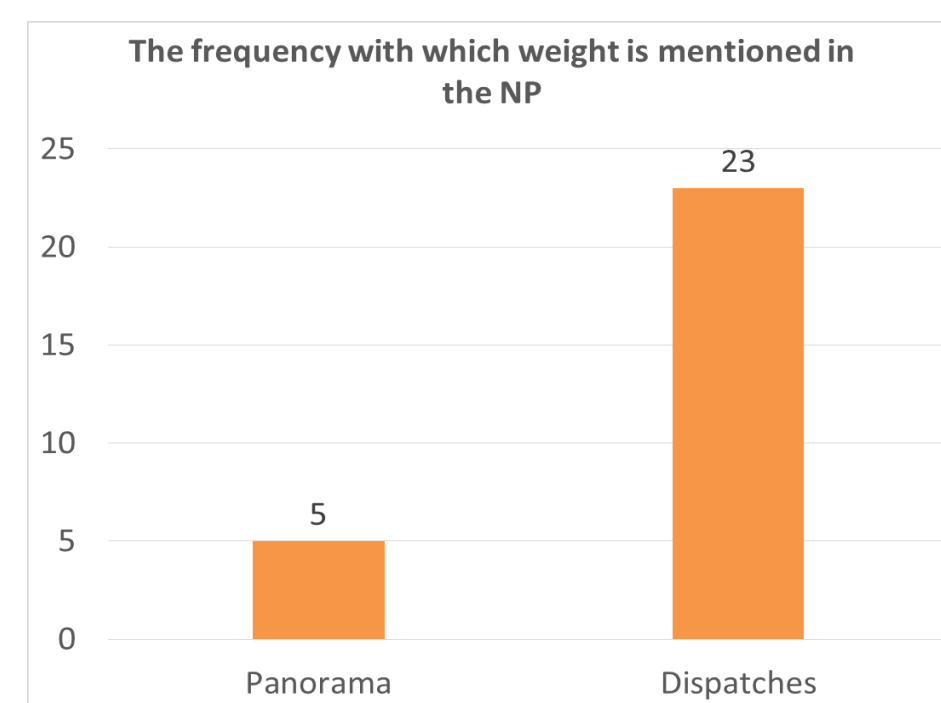
Data Processing:

- Social actors approach to critical discourse analysis**
 - Aims to explain the role of action to establish social structure
 - Assumes that representation is ultimately based on what social actors do (Wodak and Meyer, 2011)
- e-margin** (Kehoe and Gee, 2014) has been used to identify and code for:
 - Social actors in noun phrases according to Van Leeuwen's (1996) classification
 - Actor/goal relationship in material processes within the verb phrase (Halliday, 1985)
 - Metaphorical expressions

Analysis

Social Actors

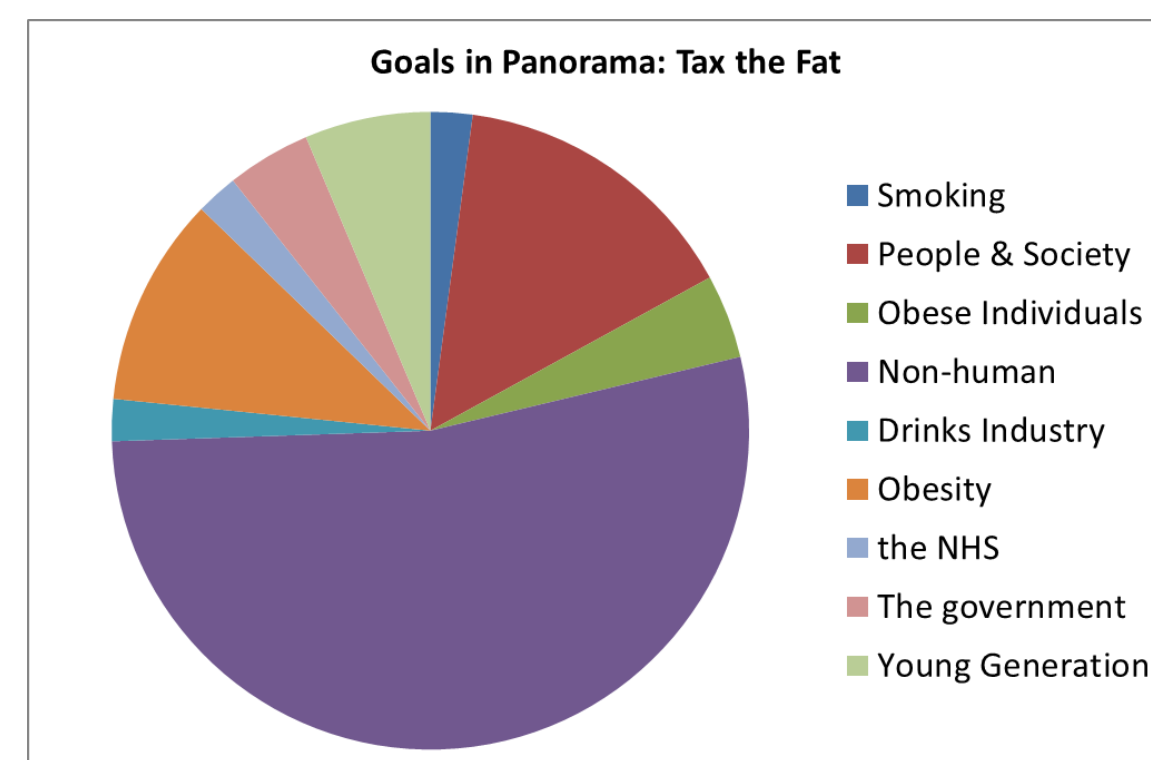
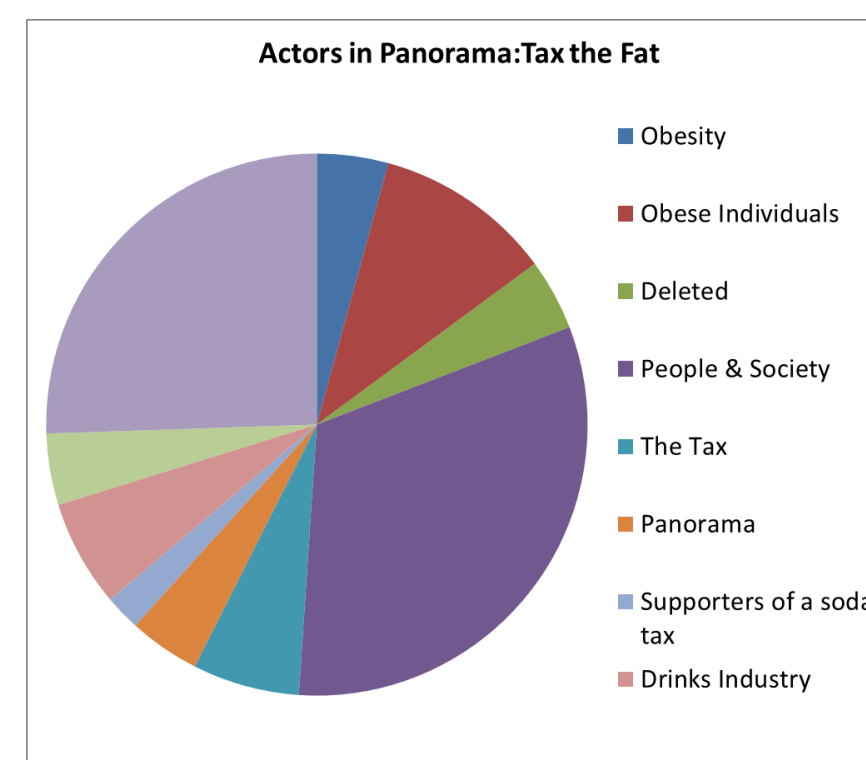
- Noun phrases are "able to "package up" ideas or information which are not fundamentally about entities but which are really a description of a process, action or event (Jeffries, 2010: 19).
- Social actors have been identified within the noun phrase.
- Organisations e.g. the NHS tend to be impersonalised whereas obese people tend to be individualised e.g. "24 stone John" and collectivised e.g. "Britain's morbidly obese".
- This study has identified how many times each programme makes reference to the weight of the social actors in the noun phrase.



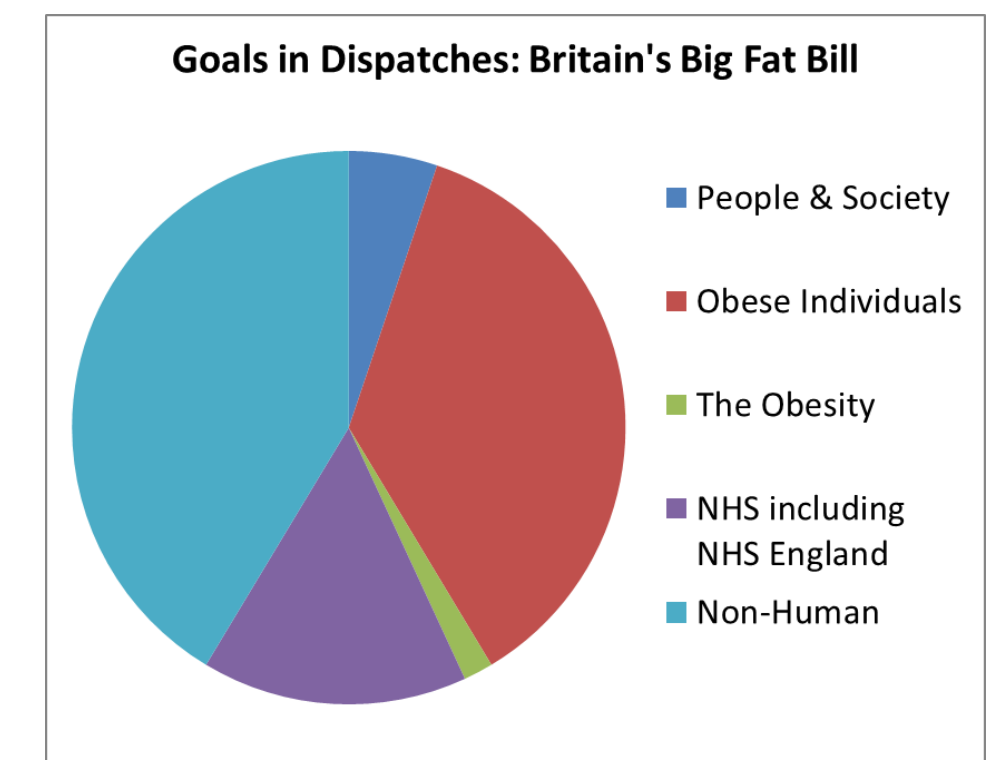
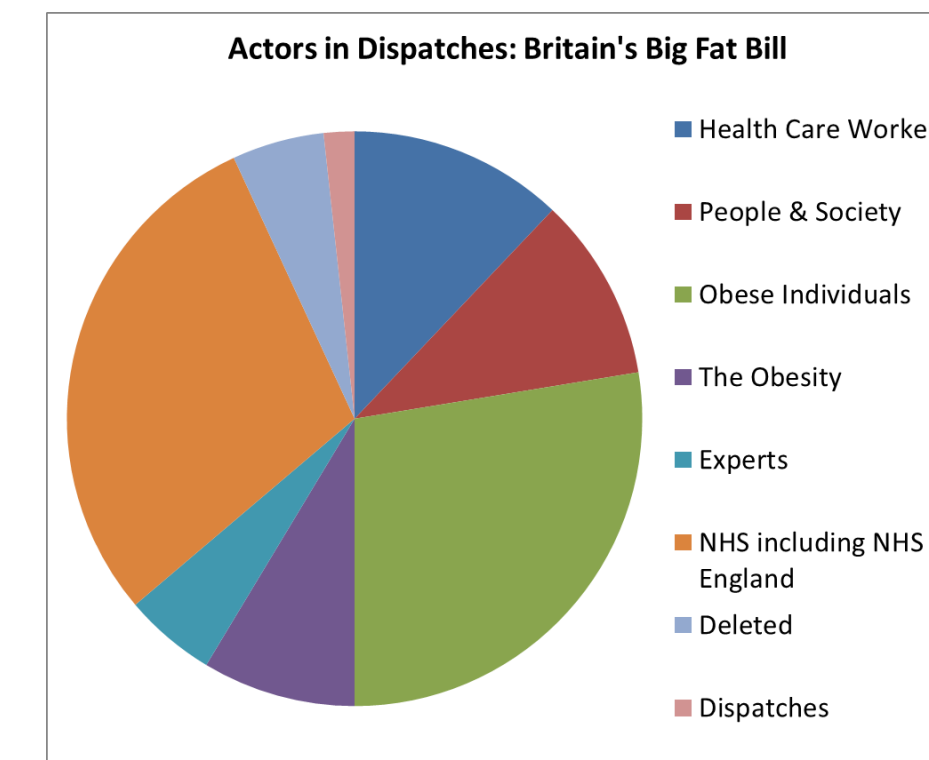
Dispatches frequently pre-modifies the noun with the individual's precise weight such as "20 stone Norma" whereas *Panorama* post-modifies the noun and rarely specifies the individual's weight such as "John's weight".

Social Action

- The way we perceive individuals can be shaped by how they are represented as acting or not acting (Machin and Meyr, 2012).
- Material processes describe concrete actions that have a material result. The two key participants in this process are the actor and the goal. The actor performs the action and the goal receives it (Machin and Meyr, 2011). They can be transactive (involve a goal) or non-transactive (one participant) (Van Leeuwen, 2008).



Analysis Continued



- Obese people are more passive in *Dispatches* than *Panorama*.**
- In *Panorama*, the wider society and the institutions are the most active social actors and they seem to be acting on people as a whole and the abstract concept of obesity.**
 - "Is it time for the food police (the government) to save us from ourselves?"
 - "If we don't stop eating so much"
- In *Dispatches*, the health care system and obese individuals are the most active social actors. There seems to be a 2 way relationship between the health care system and obese individuals as they impact on each other.**
 - "they (obese individuals) cost the NHS over five billion pounds a year"
 - "the NHS invested that kind of money in helping someone like me" (Wendy, an obese individual).

Metaphor

- Metaphor: "the practice of talking about one thing as if it were another, on the grounds that there are some notional similarities between the two entities" (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010:138).
- They underlie all of our perceptions of the world in the way we make sense of ourselves and the world we live in (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and can influence the overall ideological message of the programme.

In total, *Panorama: Tax the Fat* uses 59 metaphors whereas *Dispatches: Britain's Big Fat Bill* uses 27 metaphors.

Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980)

- Conceptual metaphors are cognitive structures.
- There are different types of conceptual metaphors: orientational, ontological and conduit.

Type of Metaphor	Dispatches	Panorama
Conduit (e.g. speakers put ideas into CONTAINERS and sends them on a path to the hearer)	11 (37.93%)	10 (16.95%)
Ontological (events, activities and emotions are entities and substances)	8 (27.59%)	45 (76.27%)
Orientalional (provides a concept with spatial orientation)	10 (34.48%)	4 (6.78%)

Dispatches uses conduit conceptual metaphors the most whereas *Panorama* uses ontological conceptual metaphors the most.

Examples of *Dispatches* conduit metaphors:

- Britain's Bulging Fat Bill
- A terrible position to be placed in
- These services fall between two camps
- People are falling through the cracks

Examples of *Panorama* ontological metaphors

- Tax is not a nudge, tax is a shove
- Trim its budget fat
- The key to making a fat tax work
- I will slip off the wagon soon

The ontological metaphors in *Panorama* attributes blame to abstract concepts whereas the conduit and orientational metaphors in *Dispatches* attributes blame to specific social actors.

Conclusions so far...

There is a difference in the way that *Panorama* and *Dispatches* use language to attribute blame for obesity



References

- BBC One (2010) "Tax the Fat" *Panorama*. Series 58, Episode 46, 15 November
- Bonfiglioli, C; Smith, B; King, L; Chapman, S and Holding, S (2007) Choice and Voice: Obesity debates in television news *Medical Journal of Australia* 187 (8) 442 – 445
- Channel 4 (2013) "Britain's Big Fat Bill" *Dispatches*. Series 27, Episode 34, 25 November
- Davies, S (2015) *Britain's Obesity Crisis: Why is the UK so fat?* <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2015/04/04/britains-obesity-crisis-why-is-the-uk-so-fat> (05/04/2016)
- Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2013) *The State of Food and Agriculture: The World of Food and Agriculture*. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3300n/i3300n.pdf> (19/11/2015)
- Halliday, M (1985) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold
- Hill, A (2007) *Restyling Factual Television: Audiences and News, Documentary and Reality Genres*. London: Routledge
- Inthorn, S and Boyce, T (2010) "It's disgusting how much salt you eat!" Television discourse of obesity, health and morality *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (12) 83 – 100
- Jeffries, L (2009) *Critical Stylistics: The Power of English*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Jeffries, L and McIntyre, D (2010) *Stylistics* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kehoe, A and Gee, M (2014) <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1080/10439862.2014.930000>
- Lakoff, H and Johnson, M (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Machin, D and Meyr, A (2011) *The Language of Crime and Deviance: An Introduction to Critical Linguistic Analysis in Media and Popular Culture*. London: Continuum
- Machin, D and Meyr, A (2012) *How to do critical discourse analysis* London: Sage
- Public Health England (2016) *Economic Impact* <https://www.nhs.org.uk/ia/impact/economic> (05/04/2016)
- Van Leeuwen, T (1996) The Representation of Social Actors in C.R. Caldas – Coulthard and M.Coulthard (eds) *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Taylor and Francis
- Van Leeuwen, T (2008) *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wodak, R and Meyer, M (2011) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* London: Sage

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Charlotte Taylor for her continued support and my peer group (Melanie, Georgia, Reece, Claire and Sarah) for their helpful feedback.