NEWSPAPER HEADLINES:
A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH INTO REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDREN AT RISK

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to present the initial findings from an ongoing project which has been developed in the area of representations in the media named "Representations of Childhood - media discourses on children at risk"[1].

This multidisciplinary research project, which focuses on children at risk, is conducted under the auspices of the *Centre for Child Studies* at the University of Minho, in Braga, Portugal, and funded by the *Science and Technology Foundation* (PTDC/CCI/64130/2006). It examines how this issue is portrayed in the Portuguese media both in terms of coverage and type of language, and how they contribute towards the process of social construction (Searle 1998). The methodology adopted involves both quantitative and qualitative analysis of four daily newspapers: two popular and two quality newspapers, (*Correio da Manhã – CM*, *Jornal de Notícias – JN*, *Diário de Notícias – DN* and *Público* respectively) and the televised evening news from three free access channels, 1 public and 2 private. The project's first objective is to take a closer look at news about children published in these media during the calendar year 2008. The second phase of the project will focus on events of potential or actual child maltreatment – children at risk. At a later stage, the collated data will be subjected to different levels of analysis, namely content analysis, discursive and visual representation analysis and the analysis of the press coverage itself. A case study approach will then be used to illustrate the main trends.

The data presented in this paper are based on the discourse analysis of the headlines of four Portuguese newspapers published during the first quarter of 2008.

The concept of *interpretative repertoire*, introduced by J. Potter and M. Wetherell (1987), will be used to explore the ways in which newspapers make use of linguistic devices (clusters of terms, descriptions and other rhetoric strategies) to construct their understanding of children at risk.

The choice of headlines is supported by theoretical as well as empirical evidence. Headlines can be understood as "la titraille" (Charaudeau 1997, 223) or, as Adam refers, the "peritext" (1977, 5), which may well suggest that they are not specifically relevant or important in the social and interactive functioning of the press articles. However, they can be viewed as brief narratives, thus evoking the argumentative dimension which is associated to them (Revaz 1997), or the rhetoric they use to impose upon others their way of constructing the world. As Christine Develotte and Elizabeth Rechniewski (2001) stress, the headlines are likely to have a greater impact than the articles themselves, due to their formal and linguistic features. In addition, because of their cataphoric nature, headlines are powerful devices that guide the reader's interpretation of the "facts" they refer to. Finally, the way headlines are constructed and understood involves a particular cultural knowledge, a dimension which is particularly relevant to this study.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Two concepts are crucial to the analysis carried out in this study: the concept of "interpretative repertoire" and that of "frame".

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[1] Cf.: www.imagensdainfancia.iec.uminho.pt

The former, developed by social psychologists and adopted by the constructionist perspective, emphasises discourse as a "vehicle through which the self and the world are articulated" (Tuominen, Talja and Savolainen 2002, 273). It is opposed to the idea that language is an instrument which is detached from the individual or a mere product of labelling a reality which is alien to the speaker, and precedes them and their perception/construction of the world.

In linguistic terms, this idea is coincident with that of "linguistic constructivism" described by Halliday, who evokes the power of verbal language to shape the speaker's awareness and to offer each person the theory that underpins their interpretation and their manipulation of reality. Language is not neutral and does not reflect reality passively in that it allows humankind to deal with the world, thus creating its own reality:

"the categories and concepts of our material existence are not 'given' to us prior to their expression in language. Rather, they are construed by language, at the intersection of the material with the symbolic. Grammar, in the sense of the syntax and vocabulary of a natural language, is thus a theory of human experience. It is also a principle of social action. In both these functions, or metafunctions, grammar creates the potential within which we act and enact our cultural being" (2001, 179)

This reflection and the conceptual basis of the analysis undertaken in this paper make it necessary to call upon the notion of "frame." Although this term was initially mentioned by Bateson in the field of anthropology[2], it was Fillmore who used this concept in linguistics to describe "certain *schemata or frameworks of concepts or terms* which link together as a system, which impose structure or coherence on some aspects of human experience and which may contain elements which are simultaneously parts of other such frameworks" (Fillmore 1975, 123). Mário Vilela describes it as the designation of the semantic description of words relative to the extra linguistic universe that they carry within them[3] (Vilela 1994). He does however state that the frame encompasses the lexemes, grammatical rules and categories which may be associated with prototypical scenarios. These are clearly conceptualisations that acquire meaning within the boundaries of each specific culture and language, and which represent what the speakers perceive to be natural, possible, plausible, pertinent, as well as their rules, prohibitions, taboos and fears. A particular rhetoric is used so that the news achieves its objective in order for the discourse "to be noticed, understood, represented, memorized, and finally believed and integrated. If propositions are to be accepted as true or plausible, there must be special means to enhance their appearance of truth and plausibility" (van Dijk 1988, 84).

3. The choice of headlines

A headline draws attention to something other than itself; in the case of media headlines, they direct the reader to another text and in this way can be referred to as a metatext.

Headlines have a particular discursive functioning, under the control of a collective enunciative event: the newspaper. In fact, usually the author of the article is not the author of the headline, the task being left to an editor or subeditor, who will produce it, taking into account the newspaper rules and policy and the content of the article itself. So, headlines are the first interpretation of media events, which are themselves interpretations of plain facts. Headlines are simultaneously autonomous verbal products (because they are separate from the remaining texts) and dependent products (because they communicate closely with those texts and refer to them explicitly), as well as being part of the textual cohesion and coherence, since they are condensed and have a

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[2] Cf.: Bateson, G. 1972.

[3] "The concept of frame has been introduced into linguistics in a certain context: frames were primarily seen as representational tools by means of which purely linguistic knowledge could be connected with relevant non-linguistic common-sense knowledge. On the more concrete level, explicitly or implicitly, in linguistics frames are used as conceptual tools of lexical semantics as means of including into the semantic description of words also relevant types of common sense knowledge about objects or situations referred to by the corresponding word" (Oim and Saluveer 1985, 296-297).

cataphoric nature. Autonomy and dependence are the two main characteristics that make this text type a challenge for researchers (Coimbra-e-Silva 1999).

From a semiotic point of view, and as the heading of a journalistic piece, headlines attract reader's attention and initiate the communicative process. It is systematically highlighted in a larger font than the body of the article and therefore the most incisive textual feature to stimulate the reading of the text.

At the content level, the headline has a basic cognitive function and a projective role in the decoding of the text. As it is normally elliptical, it encourages the reader to create the first ties of explicit participation, inviting them, through the use of their knowledge, to complete the news construction, recognise implicitness, identify common places, accept metaphoric games, and so on.

The headline defines the issue, or at least the relevant field of social life it writes about, and corresponds to a preliminary semantic contextualisation: through its reading, the readers' expectations are guided by their understanding of the world. All of these give importance to the discursive workings of the headlines, and by consequence to the rhetorical mechanisms which result in these articles being perceived as true, plausible or wise.

4. *Corpus* and methodology

As previously mentioned, the *corpus* under analysis comprises data from four daily Portuguese newspapers of high circulation: *Público*, *Diário de Notícias (DN)*, *Jornal de Notícias (JN)* and *Correio da Manhã (CM)*[4]. The period of time established for the collation of these data corresponds to the first quarter of 2008.

The first step was to use lexical criteria to identify particular articles in the newspapers within that time period. Thus, all texts which included the Portuguese versions of the words *child, boy, baby, minor, newborn, youth, son, pupil, student, childhood, children's, paediatrics, paediatrician, baby products/infant development, neonatology, neonatal* were identified (including their respective feminine and plural forms where possible). Any pieces which referred exclusively to over 18s were automatically excluded.

After the initial analysis, the *corpus* was narrowed down according to more rigid thematic criteria to identify texts which dealt with the issue of "risk." The texts refer to situations, events or behaviour which bring about an identifiable threat, both established or potential, to the physical and/or psychological integrity of children and/or youths (under 18s), their growth, psychological development or social integration.

From this analysis, a total of 964 newspaper articles addressing the problem of children at risk were collected, with their headlines being analysed (one text was devoid of a headline, so for the purpose of this paper only a total of 963 headlines were considered).

5. Findings

5.1. Child at risk - A recurring issue

The analysis of this table allows us to conclude that the issue of children at risk is highly frequent during the defined period (1st quarter of 2008). During the three months of editions of each newspaper[5] there was a total of 361 daily publications, within which 963 articles on this subject (approximately an average of 2.7 articles on child at risk per newspaper, with an average of 3.5 articles per day for the tabloid newspaper *Correio da Manhã*.

Table 1 shows the distribution of headlines by newspaper:

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[4] All magazines, guides, special pull-outs or any other newspaper or advertising documents which were not deemed to be "newspaper" material was excluded.

[5] *Público*, *DN* and *CM* did not publish editions on 1st January, 2008.

Table 1 – Headlines by newspaper

	Newspapers	Frequency	Percentage
Valid values	*Público*	142	14,7%
	Jornal de Notícias	207	21,5%
	Diário de Notícias	295	30,6%
	Correio da Manhã	319	33,1%
Total		963	100%

The distribution of risk related news within the period of time during which this study was developed is irregular, with a significantly different proportion of headlines from one newspaper to another ($\chi2$=82,894, p= 0.000). The newspaper which is closest to a tabloid format contains the largest number of articles on the theme of risk, in this case is more than double the number in the more renowned "quality" newspaper *Público*. These findings may lead to the idea that the issue of children at risk is a "popular" subject, able to serve the biased sensationalist objectives of the tabloid press.

5.2. The construction of the concept of childhood

When taking into account the total number of headlines analysed, a little over half (51.1%) uses a range of lexemes to refer to an individual who is under 18. That range is summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2 – Synonyms of child

Designation	Frequency
criança / child	122
jovem / youth	75
menina / girl	51
menino / boy	15
menor / minor	45
bebé / baby	44
filho / son	40
filha / daughter	20
aluno / student (m)	26
aluna / student (f)	18
rapaz / boy	13
adolescente / adolescent	10
miúdo / kid	6
outros / others	14
sem referência / no reference	469

It is worthwhile to note that some of these lexemes can be associated with different age groups or relational reference contexts for children.

If a significant part of the headlines is characterised by ambiguity and economy, with no reference to children or to the context in which the action occurs, the street, others' property, family and the school are the most frequently identified circumstances in which children are at risk.

Table 3 shows not only the most frequent alluded contexts of risk for children, but also, to some degree, typical children's spaces. These findings contribute to understand the role those places play in society, the frameworks in which relevant facts occur and the expected relationships developed. The discourse produced, even in textual segments as brief as article headlines, illustrates the social understanding underlying the frameworks built and reproduced by discourse.

Nevertheless, a reasonable number of headlines cannot be classified using these criteria as it is not evident that they are referring to children (see "n/a"). The economy of the headlines often prevents the adequate contextualisation, not allowing to identify the circumstances of risk involved in the event (see "no data").

Table 3 – Risk contexts

Designation	Frequency/Percentage
Street / public place / space of others	84 (26,9%)
Family	80 (25,6%)
School	66 (21,1%)
Hospital or other health care service	19 (6,01%)
Others	64 (20,4%)
Sub-total	313 (100,0%)
No data	280
n/a	370
Total	963

5.3. The *ethos* of the journalist and the rhetoric of evidence

5.3.1. To enable the construction of these frames, and in order for the discourse to be read and accepted as true or plausible, the journalist must construct an image of themselves and their discourse which is dominated by an *ethos* of trust, seriousness and rigor. This explains the relatively linear and factual descripto-representational character of headlines, with no signs of evaluative modality but characterised by the rhetoric of evidence.

Headlines often present an elliptical structure, as it is natural in this type of journalistic piece. However, some contain noteworthy characteristics, such as those which contain "*consonant* grammar" (Goatly 2001, 205). Goatly distinguishes "grammatical metaphor" and "congruent discourse" as two mutually exclusive concepts. The congruent relationships only occur when the syntactic and semantic categories coincide, as in the following headlines:

1. "Menores ilibam colega de agressões a Gisberta" ("Minors exonerate classmate of attack on Gisberta") (*Público*, 8/2/2008).

What can be identified in the collated *corpus* is the frequent omission of one of the participants of the event, as in the following example:

2. "Menores apanhados em assalto em Aveiro" ("Minors caught in Aveiro robbery") (*Público*, 7/2/2008).

In this case, the agent of "catch" is not explicitly named, despite there being selection restrictions which limit the possibilities of inferring their identity considerably.

This does not violate the reader's expectations as these types of cases are very common in this kind of journalistic piece. However, it is important to note that this allows reality to be moulded by exposing or hiding agents or facets of the event.

Even more interesting from the point of view of the relationship between the discursive options and the ability to mould what is being constructed is illustrated in the following headlines:

3. "Testes revelam que filho de Clara Rojas está em Bogotá" ("Tests reveal that Clara Roja's son is in Bogotá") (*Público*, 5/1/2008).

4. "Tiroteio mata dois jovens e reaviva críticas sobre falta de polícia em Rio de Mouro" ("Shooting kills two youths and renews criticism about lack of police in Rio de Mouro") (*Público*, 29/1/2008).

5. "Estradas mataram duas crianças por mês em 2007" ("Roads killed two children a month in 2007") (*JN*, 21/2/2008).

In these cases, instruments (see example 3), the result of human action (see example 4) or physical circumstances (see example 5) can be identified as the subject, which removes the responsibility of an undisclosed human agent. These constructions seem to essentially show the "final product" of a specific process, omitting the intermediate processes or steps which culminated in the event.

This "final product" has the ability to shock individuals due to its extraordinary, bizarre or tragic nature, among others. It is therefore at the service of a rhetoric of emotions which is frequently present in these texts.

5.3.2. As previously mentioned, there are no clear indications of subjectivity. Not only is the "I" absent in the headlines as is the evaluative modality of the journalist hidden under the illusion of an absolute objectivity. This affirmation coincides with the description which van Dijk makes of news style:

"the institutional voice of the newswriter is impersonal only according to the everyday routines and their underlying ideologies. That is, impersonality is a normative accomplishment, not a descriptive one. The signals displayed merely suggest impersonality and impartiality. Clearly, underlying beliefs and attitudes are not so easily suppressed, and they may appear in the text in many ways" (van Dijk 1988, 75).

In fact, it is almost impossible to find an adjective or an adverb with evaluative functions, there is no evident display of the journalist's thoughts and the headlines are constructed under an obvious rhetoric of factuality. Even the (few) evaluations which are clear in the headlines are immediately justified as if they were self-evident and unquestionable, as can be seen in the following examples:

6. "Alarme: Mil crianças desapareceram em Itália durante 2007" ("Alarm: A thousand children disappeared in Italy during 2007") (*DN*, 27-1-2008).

7. "Tragédia: Pai tentou matar a filha de 10 anos e suicidou-se. Criança encontrada golpeada nos pulsos e no pescoço" ("Tragedy: Father tried to kill 10-year-old daughter and committed suicide. Child found with wrists and neck slashed") (*JN*, 11-2-2008).

The suggestion of factuality occurs to a great extent from the apparent absence of the writer's evaluative assertions in the text.

5.3.3. The previous examples also serve to illustrate another rhetorical mechanism used by newspapers which is used to create the suggestion of truthfulness: the use of precise quantitative data. Data frequently appear (in 51 cases) to indicate the precise age of the children in question, in years (or months in the case of very young children), as in the following examples:

8. "Cão Rottwieler ataca menina de 20 meses" ("Rotweiler attacks 20-month-old baby girl") (*DN*, 15-2-2008)

9. "Pitbull ataca rapaz de 12 anos no Algarve" ("Pitbull attacks 12-year-old boy in the Algarve") (*Público*, 23-2-2008).

These statistics appear to create a number of situations in absolute terms, either in percentages or proportions:

10. "Acolhimento de crianças: Mais de 40 por cento dos lares sobrelotados" ("Children's homes: More than 40% of homes over capacity") (*Público*, 21-1-2008).

11. "Portugal: Pobreza ameaça uma em cada quatro crianças" ("Portugal: Poverty threatens one in four children") (*Público*, 25-2-2008).

12. "80 tiros em Huelva à porta do tribunal" ("80 gunshots in Huelva in front of the courthouse") (*DN*, 28-3-2008).

In a number of cases, the statistics of these events indicate extreme values, linking a suggestion of truthfulness to a rhetoric of emotions:

13. "Filme de Maddie dá dez milhões" ("Film about Maddie produces ten million") (*DN*, 9-1-2008).

14. "Morrem por dia 26 mil crianças no mundo" ("26 thousand children a day die in the world") (*DN*, 23-1-2008).

15. "McCann só vão à Oprah por 1,3 milhões" ("The McCanns will only go on Oprah for 1.3 million") (*DN*, 26-1-2008).

16. "1 em 5 crianças em risco de pobreza" ("1 in 5 children at risk of poverty") (*DN*, 25-2-2008).

17. "600 crianças fazem exames por abusos. Em 2007, o Instituto de Medicina Legal observou mais de duas crianças por dia por suspeitas de abusos sexuais" ("600 children are tested for abuse. In 2007, the Institute of Forensic Medicine saw more than two children suspected of sexual abuse a day") (*DN*, 28-2-2008).

van Dijk designates this strategy as "number games" (1988, 88) which "forcefully suggests truthfulness by the implied exactness of precise numbers" (idem, 87). However, different research[6] has shown that there is a "number paradox" (Koetsenruijter 2008, 194): in general, "people do not remember numbers in news articles; using additional numbers does not help them to evaluate the news. (…) They function as arguments to stress the fact that the source is a reliable one. They say: 'I did not make this up. I did my research. It's not guess-work, it's been counted'" (idem, 194-195).

5.3.4. At the same time, the constructed realities which are taken to extremes appeal to the darker and more hidden side of human nature, the attraction to blood, the unusual, the tragic and the macabre, leading to the so-called rhetoric of emotions. The following examples illustrate these extremes, the counter-expectations and the dichotomies created, without the journalist explicitly assuming an evaluative modality.

18. "Aluna foge com professor de Moral" ("Student runs away with teacher from Moral") (*CM*, 5-2-2008).

19. "Mãe afoga dois filhos na banheira na Alemanha" ("Mother drowns her two children in the bathtub in Germany") (*CM*, 9-2-2008).

20. "Matou filho à fome e fica em liberdade" ("Starved son to death and goes free") (*CM*, 9-2-2008).

21. "Cigana de seis anos casa com rapaz de 17" ("Six year old gypsy girl marries 17 year old boy") (*DN*, 16-2-2008).

22. "Professor esfaqueia jovem com faca que levava dentro da bíblia" ("Teacher stabs youth with a knife he carried in his bible") (*DN*, 21-2-2008).

23. "R. Unido: Homicídio por causa de chocolate" ("UK: Homicide over chocolate") (*CM*, 5-3-2008).

These examples present the paradigmatic cases of modality used by newspapers to emphasise extreme, contrasting and unexpected scenarios, whilst the headlines maintain a rhetoric of factuality, trying to describe the world as it is, free of any interpretative action by the journalist.

6. Final remarks

To conclude, the issue of children at risk as a recurrent theme in the Portuguese press within the study period is confirmed if one is to assume that the newspapers chosen are representative of all the daily written media (see Table 1). The average number of articles on this issue indicates that it is approached by all of the daily newspapers chosen for this study (although unequal). This is surely associated with the visibility and relevance gained by this issue in the Portuguese society, either mirrored or boosted by media. Naturally, this social issue, with all the complexity it encompasses, occurs to a large extent from the discourse stemming from it as well as the language used, which is the primary modal system and which exposes and constructs those events.

The analysis of newspaper headlines, however short they may be, allowed the identification of a group of lexemes that functions as "child" synonyms and through which children are identified (see Table 2). In addition, it is possible to recognise the mechanism through which they are present in a social space thus enabling the identification of the relevant contexts of risk (see Table 3). Furthermore, these findings offer a relevant contribution to the development of prototypical scenarios of children's lives and risks and, by implicit opposition, the boundaries of "normality." The difference of the ways this issue is dealt within newspapers, despite being targeted at very different socio-cultural levels, is not seen as significant.

This vision of the world constitutes a clear (discursive) construction of the newspaper and the journalist and is a highly contested cultural product. Despite this, these pieces present fewer overt signs of modality than would normally be expected. The writer hides behind a recognisable rhetoric of evidence, allowing the facts to speak for themselves, trying to hide their subjectivity through the use of various rhetorical mechanisms which give evidential strength and the suggestion of truthfulness to their discourse. Referencing or the creation of high risk contexts to

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[6] Cf.: Koetsenruijter 2008, where there are a number of pertinent references.

children do not seem to be interpreted by the newspaper, but emerge directly from real events and are unequivocal and irrefutable. It is ultimately language and discourse at work in the construction of the world.

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