Free indirect discourse in newspaper reports

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0. Introduction

It has recently been noted (Onrust 1994) that two journalists at the Dutch daily newspaper NRC Handelsblad have introduced a new style of reporting on soccer and other ball games.¹ Their articles present a mix of factual reporting of events, background information, interviews and commentary, employing a variety of literary techniques. Most notably, reactions and opinions are often reported in the form of free indirect discourse (henceforth FID), as exemplified by the italicized sentences in (1) and (2) (from Onrust 1994:196,199; translation mine—GR):

(1) [NRC Handelsblad, 31 January 1994]
“Ik dacht dat het [goud] al binnen was”, zei hij na afloop nog steeds ongelovig. Gebrek aan ervaring had zijn zicht vertroebeld. Een tactische ingreep had hem de zege gekost. [...]
“I thought that it [the gold] was already won,” he said afterwards, still unbelieving. Lack of experience had dimmed his vision. A tactical maneuver had cost him the victory. [...]

(2) [NRC Handelsblad, 17 April 1994]
Danny Blind was getergd, Frank de Boer voelde zich vernederd. Ze waren de beste Ajacieden geweest. Zij hadden zich nog kunnen weren. Ze zochten naar excuses, ze maakten verwijten naar medespelers. Dit was onverklaarbaar, dit was teveel geweest. Uit hun woorden sprak machteloosheid.
Danny Blind was provoked, Frank de Boer felt humiliated. They had been the best Ajacids. They could still have fought back. They were looking for excuses, they made accusations toward teammates. This was inexplicable, this had been too much. Their words expressed helplessness.

By presenting the italicized sentences as FID, the journalists are blurring the boundary between their own perceptions or commentary and the original experiencers’ reports: There is a strong contextually motivated suggestion that

¹ In developing the ideas presented in this paper, I have benefitted from discussions with many colleagues, most importantly Joséd Sanders, Jeanette van den Broek, and students participating in my course at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 1995. I also gratefully acknowledge valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper by Theo Janssen and an anonymous reviewer.
these sentences represent utterances by the players, but they are not explicitly attributed to them and are in fact formulated like the journalists’ commentary. In the ball game reports this mingling of voices, which is an essential characteristic of FID, enhances the readers’ involvement and the liveliness and immediacy of the report. What I want to show in this paper is that FID is used much more widely in various kinds of newspaper reports, and that it need not have the literary quality of suggesting direct, unmediated presentation of a person’s thoughts. Using evidence from corpus analysis, I will argue that the notion of FID can be usefully distinguished from other forms of representing ‘source text’ (what someone said or wrote), and that the unmediated, direct-thought quality of its literary uses should not be considered a definitional characteristic of FID.

1. Linguistic characteristics of FID

There exist a variety of descriptive models for the representation of someone else’s words in spoken or written discourse (e.g., Fludernik 1993; Leech and Short 1985; Sanders 1994; Short 1988; Slembrouck 1986; Waugh 1995). In all those models, the basic categories of source text representation are taken to be direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse, although most authors emphasize that there are no sharp category boundaries and many mixed or intermediary forms.

In quotation or direct discourse (DD) the speech event is produced very much as it was or might have been uttered by the original speaker. In particular, DD may contain exclamations and other expressive material and usually mimics the original speaker’s style and register. Indirect discourse (ID) reports a speech event from the current speaker’s point of reference, that is, first and second person pronouns occur in the third person, deictic expressions are chosen to fit the current and not the original speaker’s time and place, and there may be a ‘shift’ in tense such that, for instance, present time reference in the original context of utterance is realized with a past tense form. ID is usually realized as the complement of a (literal or metaphorical) speech verb. The Dutch construction ‘volgens X’ (roughly: ‘according to X’) is considered an alternative realization of the ID-introducing phrase.

Free indirect discourse (FID) shares some characteristics with DD and some with ID. The rendering of the quoted discourse is not syntactically embedded into
an introducing clause or phrase; however, there may be a speech parenthetical in medial or final position. FID allows expressives, exclamations, and so forth, as freely as DD does, and it maintains the original speaker’s deictic center. Personal reference and tenses in FID, however, are realized as in ID, not DD. For illustration, consider the following (constructed) examples, where ‘NRSA’ stands for narrative report of speech action and ‘NS’ for narrative sentence (i.e., no direct reference to a speech action):

(3) DD She said: “Well all right, I’ll go.”

   ID She said she’d go.

   FID Oh well, okay, she would go then[, she proclaimed after a pause].

   NRSA She reluctantly agreed to go.

   NS She decided to help them out.

Table 1 summarizes the lexical, semantic, and sequential (i.e., discourse context) features that serve as indicators of FID by helping to exclude alternative classifications (as DD, ID, NRSA or NS).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic features</th>
<th>comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>References to original speaker and addressee occur in third person</td>
<td>excludes DD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘shifted’ tenses: present -&gt; past; past -&gt; past perfect; irrealis for real states of affairs (Dutch zou)</td>
<td>excludes DD and NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time and place deictics centered on the original speech event</td>
<td>excludes ID and NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech markers: expressives, informal/oral register, vagueness; exclamations, rhetorical connectives; colon, quotation marks(^4)</td>
<td>excludes ID, NRSA, and NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech parenthetical</td>
<td>excludes NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preceded by DD, ID, FID, or NRSA</td>
<td>suggests not-NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbs (in third person) expressing the putative speaker’s expectations or judgment or other not readily observable mental states</td>
<td>presupposes speech event (in non-fiction)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of these features have been discussed as characteristics of FID in the literature (for an excellent comprehensive discussion see Fludernik 1993). The last category is specifically interesting for non-fiction discourse, as it is here that statements about mental states of persons other than the author presuppose that the person in question has communicated about those mental states. If it is

\(^4\) Examples from my data illustrating the use of colon and quotation marks with FID (FID underlined): although their decision is firm: They will emigrate. (Dutch original: hoewel hun besluit vaststaat: zij emigreren.); headline: General ‘Supports Ter Beek’ (original: Generaal ‘Ondersteunt Ter Beek’). Note that the presence of third-person forms for reference to the original speakers here rules out the interpretation as direct discourse.
contextually plausible that the statement in question is a report of such a communication, I will therefore consider it an FID. Examples in news reports are politicians’ statements of opinion, expectation, or intent, as illustrated by the verb ‘finds’ (Dutch ‘vindt’) in the following example from a Dutch daily newspaper:

(4) [NRC Handelsblad, 9 Nov 1992]
(a) <FID> Zijn partijgenoot Melkert (financieel woordvoerder van de PvdA-fractie) vindt het “verstandig” dat het kabinet voorzichtig is met structurele bezuinigingen. (b) <FID> Investeringsgevoelige uitgaven blijven daardoor zoveel mogelijk buiten schot, <FRAME> verwacht Melkert.

Translation:
(a) <FID> His fellow party member Melkert (financial spokesman of the PvdA) finds it “reasonable” that the Cabinet be careful with structural budget cuts. (b) <FID> That way investment-sensitive spending will remain unaffected as much as possible, <FRAME> Melkert expects.

Some of the verbs in question (e.g., to expect, to fear, to know) can also be used like speech verbs in speech parentheticals that occur with DD or, as ‘verwacht’ (‘expects’) in (4b) above, with FID. Those are not the uses that count as indicators of FID. In the intended uses it must be plausible that the original utterance may or might have contained the verb expressing the mental state.

Example (4) illustrates a phenomenon that occurs in 9% of the FID cases in my data (and in 28% of the ID cases): One or more words are quoted directly (see also example (10) below). Those ‘partial quotes’ (Clark and Gerrig 1990) usually contain particularly newsworthy, ‘quotable’ expressions or expressions from which the writer wishes to distance him/herself (cf. Sanders 1994:46-48, Sanders and Redeker 1993b). Their occurrence thus does not imply that the material outside the quotation marks must necessarily be less faithful to the original speaker’s words (though that may of course be the case, especially in ID).

2. Corpus analysis

In this section I will illustrate and discuss the linguistic characteristics of FID with examples from a 43,776-word corpus of 77 articles from seven Dutch daily newspapers, in which all forms of speech representation have been exhaustively analyzed (see Redeker 1995). Specifically, I will show how the linguistic

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5 The notation ‘<FRAME>‘ here and further on marks speech parentheticals and speech embedders.

6 The articles were selected from the Tilburg University Corpus of Dutch Newspaper Articles, collected and computerized by Jan Renkema, Tilburg, whom I wish to thank for his permission.
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features discussed in section 1 can corroborate the intuitive interpretation of certain sentences that are not marked as DD or ID as representing or paraphrasing the words of a quoted speaker, that is, as FID.

The corpus includes, among others, political and sports reportages. They will be used here as illustrations of two rather extreme subgenres. Sports reportages with their involved and, as Onrust (1994) has shown, often rather literary style, contain the richest forms of FID. Consider example (5) (FID-indicators are underlined):

(5) Soccer [Trouw, 30 November 1992]

(a) <FID> Zijn vijfde seizoen in Amsterdam wilde hij daarom gebruiken als springplank, of als nooduitgang desnoods. (b) <FID> Weg moest hij, weg, weg, weg, (...) <DD> “Heeft een club belangstelling dan moeten ze een afvaardiging naar Amsterdam sturen.” (c) <FID> Willems gaat graag naar het buitenland, bijzonder graag zelfs, maar alleen als de transfer is afgerond. (d) <FID> Zolang dat niet gebeurt, doet hij zijn werk, <FRAME> zegt hij. (...) <DD> “Potje leeg is potje leeg”, <FRAME> wist Pim Verbeek vorige week al te vertellen, (e) <FID> maar oh wat had hij Willems goed kunnen gebruiken. <DD> “Want”, <FRAME> redeneerde de trainer, <DD> “elke reserve van Ajax betekent een versterking voor ons.”

Translation:

(a) <FID> He wanted to use his fifth season as a launching board, or as an emergency exit if necessary. (b) <FID> He had to get away [lit.: Away he must+PAST], away, away, away, (...) <DD> “If a club is interested, then they must send a delegation to Amsterdam.” (c) <FID> Willems will gladly go abroad, very gladly indeed, but only if the transfer is finalized. (d) <FID> As long as that does not happen, he will be doing his job, <FRAME> he says. (...) <DD> “Empty pockets are empty pockets,” <FRAME> Pim Verbeek proclaimed [lit.: knew to tell] last week already, (e) <FID> but oh, how well he could have used Willems. <DD> “Because,” <FRAME> the coach reasoned, <DD> “each reserve from Ajax means a strengthening for us.”

In FID (a) in (5), an intention is expressed in a reported interview with third-person reference to the agent (it is not clear whether the reference time included the speaker’s present, that is, we cannot be certain whether the past tense here is a ‘shifted’ tense). FID (b) is an exclamation presented with a possibly shifted tense. Examples (c), (d), and (e) show third-person reference to the speaker; in addition, (c) contains expressive material, (d) is followed by a speech parenthetical, and (e)
combines a rhetorical connective, an expressive interjection, and an exclamation. The whole sequence shows a very typical pattern with several instances of FID interspersed with DD.

FID is just as common in political reportage, where it lacks the involving literary quality, but still exhibits a variety of characteristic features. The FID instances (a) and (d) in example (6) each contain third-person reference to the speaker, expressive material, and a tense-shifted mental verb. Like in sports reportages, FID occurs in longer sequences of reported speech, which in the case of political reportage tend to contain about as much ID as DD interspersed with FID.

(6) [de Volkskrant, 11 Nov 1992]
De dienstplicht wordt dus afgeschaft? (a) <FID> Nou, zo ver wilde de bewindsman niet gaan. (b) <FID> Duidelijkheid komt er pas in de prioriteitennota, over enkele maanden. (c) <FID> Vrijdag komt het onderwerp dienstplicht in de ministerraad aan de orde. (d) <FID> Ter Beek wilde uiteraard op beide discussies niet vooruitlopen. <FRAME> Maar met de gebruikelijke politieke slagen om de arm maakte hij er alvast geen geheim van dat <ID> de besluitvorming wat hem betreft de kant van afschaffing op moet gaan.

Translation:
The draft will be abolished then? (a) <FID> Well, that far the minister wouldn’t go. (b) <FID> Clarity will only come in the priorities memorandum, in a few months. (c) <FID> On Friday the topic of the draft will be on the agenda of the Cabinet council. (d) <FID> Ter Beek course didn’t want to preempt those two discussions. <FRAME> But with the usual political hedges, he did already reveal that <ID> the decision process, as far as he is concerned, must go in the direction of abolishment.

Another difference between sports and political reportages in the corpus is the fact that tense shifting in FID is regularly employed in the former, but rarely in the latter. This has a quite straightforward explanation: In reports on political issues, the reference time often includes the time of reporting and reading, so that the use of a past tense form (i) is not obligatory in indirect discourse (see Geerts et al. 1984:477), and (ii) might give rise to the (often erroneous) interpretation that the issue in question has been settled. In (7), for instance, replacing the present tense with preterit (in English: past tense) forms would suggest that the discussion of Ter Beek’s budget has ended, whereas the rest of the article suggests it has not.

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7 This cotemporaneity is also the reason why most time and place deictics in these texts cannot be considered as indicators for FID. As original speaker’s and current speaker’s deictic center are very close, many deictics, e.g. in a few months in (6), remain the same from both perspectives.
Afgelopen weekeinde heeft Ter Beek daarom in het kabinet voor het eerst in jaren zijn poot stijf gehouden: (a) bezuinigen op Defensie is in zijn ogen best acceptabel, maar er bestaan grenzen. (b) Verder dan die grens wenst hij in ieder geval niet te gaan als politiek verantwoordelijke. (...) Even lag zijn portefeuille op tafel: (c) hoe kan hij nu een nieuw modern krachtdadig beroepsleger opbouwen als hij daarvoor geen cent te besteden heeft?

Translation:
Last weekend Ter Beek therefore for the first time in years held his own in the Cabinet: (a) reducing defense spending is in his view perfectly acceptable, but there are limits. (b) Further than that limit he certainly does not wish to go as the one who is politically responsible. (...) For a moment his resignation seemed imminent [lit.: his portfolio was on the table]: (c) How can he now build a modern, effective professional army, if he doesn’t have a cent to spend on it?

Note in this example how the very fact that no tense shifting occurs, allows the distinction between the minister’s and the journalist’s voices to be blurred, especially in (c), which might almost be attributable to the journalist himself, were it not for (i) the speech indicating colon and (ii) the friction between the register of political journalism and the involved, rather informal tone.

Can the other indicators (besides tense shifting) support the intuition that these cases are indeed FID? The third-person references in all three cases exclude an interpretation as DD, which might otherwise be quite plausible. Evidence against an analysis as NS are the mental state indicators in zijn ogen (in his view) and wenst (does not wish), the rhetorical connective maar (but), the expressives in ieder geval (certainly; used as an intensifier), nu (now; expressive particle), and geen cent (not a cent; exaggeration), and the exclamation in (c). The colons preceding (a) and (c) further support the rejection of NS, though they would not in themselves provide sufficient evidence, as the FID in question functions as elaboration of and evidence for the statement preceding the colon (i.e., the colon here need not be a speech marker).

The most explicit disambiguation between NS and FID is achieved by using speech parentheticals. In 25 of the 29 cases in the corpus the speech parenthetical does not co-occur with any other indicators. This suggests that the use of the parenthetical may be triggered by a need for disambiguation. Example (8) contains two of those cases. This example also provides another illustration of the fact that tense shifting would yield unintended interpretations.
The characteristic features listed in Table 1, then, can often help in distinguishing FID from other forms of speech representation and from narrative sentences (here: the journalist’s text). FID without any of those features, however, need not be difficult to identify, certainly if it occurs in sequences with more clearly marked FID and with DD and ID. Examples are (6b) and (6c) above and example (9) below, where none of the FID instances contains any characteristic features supporting the interpretation as FID.

3. Quantitative results

The most obvious way in which the above examples of FID deviate from the traditional view of FID as a literary device is the lack of tense shifting. I have argued in the discussion of examples (7) and (8) in section 2 that tense shifting is rare in reports on political debates, as the original speaker’s present usually includes the intended reader’s present, and that transposition to past tense would often yield unintended interpretations.
Table 2 shows that tense shifting in indirect speech is indeed not very common in my newspaper corpus, but still does occur in about 33\% of all relevant cases of FID and in 30\% of the relevant ID cases (see note (b) of the table).\(^8\) Quite a few of the cases included in these figures occur in several reportages on a court case, where the involved parties’ statements are usually reported in irrealis (in Dutch expressed with ‘zou’, the past tense form of the modal verb ‘zullen’), reflecting the necessity to avoid judgment on the truthfulness of such statements during an ongoing trial.

Important for my argument here is the fact that the cases I have identified as FID are not less often tense-shifted than ID. The fact that about two thirds of the relevant FID cases are not tense-shifted can therefore not be used as an argument that those cases violate or deviate from the rules of indirect discourse. They just follow the pattern of regular indirect speech (ID).

**Table 2: Tense and reference time in FID and in ID (column percentages and number of cases)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>reference time:</th>
<th>FID</th>
<th>ID</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tense:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present</td>
<td>92.9% (131)</td>
<td>2.3% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present perfect</td>
<td>19.3% (17)</td>
<td>48.6% (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preterit</td>
<td>6.4% (9)</td>
<td>52.3% (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past perfect</td>
<td>4.5% (4)</td>
<td>13.3% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘zou’</td>
<td>.7% (1)</td>
<td>21.6% (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cases(^b)</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) bold face marks ‘shifted’ tenses  
\(^b\) FID and ID with finite verbs and unambiguously past or present reference time

Let us now look at the formal markers distinguishing FID from NS (see Table 3). All features of Table 1 (in section 1), except the shift of personal reference forms, contribute to this distinction. There were 220 speech indicators occurring (and sometimes co-occurring) in 185 of the 272 instances of FID in the corpus. The judgment to classify a putative FID as speech representation was thus based on the presence of one or more surface indicators in about 68\% of the cases. In all the remaining cases, the putative FID was immediately preceded or followed by a

\(^8\) For more detailed discussions of tense use in reported speech, especially as it interacts with aspect/aktionsart and deixis, see Boogaart (in press) and Janssen (in press) and, specifically for English, Cutrer (1994).
clearly identifiable speech representation (DD, ID, FID) or speech description (NRSA) yielding a strong suggestion that the sentence in question presented material from the same speech event.

Table 3: Speech indicators in FID (number of tokens)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>markers</th>
<th># of tokens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tense shifts</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expressive elements, vagueness</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exclamations, rhet. connectives, etc.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speech parentheticals</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verba putandi</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other verba cogitandi</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the attribution to another speaker is decided, there may still be doubts as to the nature of the speech representation. The distinction between FID and ID is readily made by admitting as ID only syntactically embedded representations or formulations involving specialized ID indicators like Dutch ‘volgens’ (‘according to’). In 46 cases in the corpus the decision against ID and for FID based on this criterion is independently supported by the presence of one or more speech markers (the second category in Table 3 above), which are not admissible in ID.

Distinguishing FID from DD would seem even more straightforward than the FID-ID distinction. However, the lack of tense shifting in about two thirds of the cases I have identified as FID means that the distinction often relies solely on the use of quotation marks. Now it has been suggested by various colleagues that the use of quotation marks in Dutch newspapers may not be very reliable, and that many of the cases I would classify as FID should therefore be interpreted as DD, in particular when the speech representation is followed by explicit attribution by means of a speech parenthetical. Consider example (10) below (compare also the second FID in example (4) and the first two cases in example (8) in section 2):

(10) [*Reformatorisch Dagblad, 9 Nov 1992*]
    <FID> Het kabinet sluit een looningreep ‘als sluitstuk’ van de onderhandelingen echter niet uit, <FRAME> zei hij.

    *Translation:*
    <FID> The Cabinet does not exclude wages regulations ‘as a finishing touch’ to the negotiations, however, <FRAME> he said.

In spite of its apparent plausibility, I cannot agree with my colleagues’ argumentation. Of the 29 cases in question (see Table 3), three contain third-person references to the original speaker (see example (5d)), and another four
have stretches of enquoted DD embedded in them (as in example (10)). Both these features obviously exclude a DD interpretation of those examples. Given, then, that about one fourth of the FID+parenthetical cases are clearly not DD, the hypothesis that these might be DD without quotation marks cannot be considered a satisfactory analysis of this phenomenon.

4. Conclusion

I have concentrated in this paper on the illustration and discussion of formal (surface structure) features which, I have argued, support my claim that a rather broad class of sentences in newspaper reports (and presumably in other discourse types) can usefully be called free indirect discourse (FID). At least as important, of course, are the functional characteristics of this extended category of FID, to which I will briefly turn in these concluding remarks.

Free indirect discourse is usually taken to occupy an intermediate position between DD and ID on a scale of narrator’s influence versus objectivity (for a critical discussion of this widespread view see Fludernik 1993). DD allows maximally objective representations, with the pretention that the quoting speaker has no influence on form or content, while ID may be formulated entirely in the reporting speaker’s words, as long as the content remains unaltered. At the same time DD allows the original speaker’s subjectivity to be expressed much more freely and directly than is admissible in ID. Free indirect discourse is similar to ID with respect to the narrator’s influence, because the reporting speaker reformulates the utterance and can change descriptions and other expressions. Yet it is more like DD with respect to the quoted speaker’s subjectivity, as it admits expressive material, exclamations, and other subjective features.\footnote{For discussions of these twin dimensions of narrator’s objectivity and character’s subjectivity see Sanders (1994) and Sanders and Redeker (1993b).}

FID thus involves the subjectivity of both, the reporting speaker and the quoted speaker. This is the basis for the unique intertwining and mingling of those two voices in this form. In fiction this yields the typical focalization effect, where the story is presented as the experience of the focalizing character, yet always with the possibility of narrator interference. In non-fiction texts, where another person’s experiences cannot be shared directly, the mingling of voices can have different effects, just as direct quotation can be put to vastly different kinds of uses.

Direct quotation can be used to enliven and dramatize a story, but it also has much more dry and sober uses, where it is employed as an objective report of what was said or written and serves what I have called a ‘documenting’ function (Redeker 1991). Although most particular instances of direct quotation contain aspects of both functions, it is instructive to analyze clear cases at both ends of
the continuum. Dramatizing and documenting quotation tend to contain distinct features in the linguistic realization (expressives, exclamations, etc. versus evidentials, hedges, etc.), which can therefore be used as indicators of those functions (see Redeker 1991).

I propose that free indirect discourse has a similarly broad range of uses. On the one end there is the traditionally discussed literary use, where FID suggests immediate access to the quoted person’s consciousness. On the other end there is the use in, for instance, reportages. Here FID allows the writer to present the information as a report of what was said, while at the same time implicitly taking a stance on it. A shifted tense, for instance, distances the writer from the quoted material, while FID without tense shifting tends to suggest an implicit endorsement. Exploring these hypotheses further will require other kinds of data than the corpus analyses presented here, for instance reader judgments as reported in Sanders and Redeker (1993a).

References


