

## Descriptive Language in Snow Fall by John Branch

Uyên-Minh Le Nguyen\* and Thao Quoc Tran

*Faculty of English Language, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH), Vietnam*

---

### ABSTRACT

This study examined several descriptive parts of speech (e.g., strong verbs, descriptive adjectives, and descriptive adverbs) and figures of speech (e.g., simile, metaphor, and personification) in The New York Times' digital mega-story Snow Fall by John Branch. A corpus-based approach was applied to examine the occurrences of each category hereof in the six-chapter multimedia presentation. The theoretical framework of the descriptive language list was based on Barcelona's (2003), Strausser's (2009), Mathis (2013), and Dunkelberg's (2017) propositions. Results reveal the function of descriptive language is a means of cohesive and artistic devices in journalism writings and, in particular, online digital mega-stories in order to allure readers today. Hopefully, the findings might be a parameter for skill-training for the future of journalism.

---

### ARTICLE INFO

#### *Article history:*

Received 14 August 2018

Received in revised form

6 June 2019

Accepted 10 June 2019

Available online

27 December 2019

---

#### **Keywords:**

Descriptive language,  
digital mega-story,  
lexical repetition,  
Snow Fall

---

### Introduction

In the modern technological phase, the Internet and mobile devices have made for the rapid spread of information (Hedley, 2005); as a result, social media have grown and changed. Journalism is also campaigning to keep up with the changing world of media. Along with the increase of the intellectual level, the demand for news of the unique has also been raised. The tiresome superficiality of the boring pages may make many readers turn away. According to Jenkins (2008), the public's role has been transferred from passive recipients of information to active online creators and publishers. It is indicated that the new generation of online media users have changed their reading routine because of a plethora of multiplatform information. They do not concentrate on any websites for very long and the hyperlinks can lead them to various paths far away from the initial sites. Reporters have realized that the narrative quality has influenced their recipients' act of continuity. In fact, the journalism articles are nonfiction, but they use an impressive style to enthrall the audience "to make them read like fiction" (Gutkind, 2012, p. 6). Furthermore, many scholars have considered that the development of multiple media convergence was a result of the acceleration of human mental abilities.

---

\* Corresponding author

E-mail address: [dalatkitty@gmail.com](mailto:dalatkitty@gmail.com)

The new reading competence compelled journalists to be more innovative. Nevertheless, traditional media techniques are still used in today's media world while narratology and medium theory are the foundation of modern news media.

Recently, the concept of "Digital Mega Stories" (DMS) has been used to refer to electronic journal works as a friendly scene and an accessible way to use the multimedia platform. The New York Times' (NYT) "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek" has become an outstanding example of the DMS genre. The NYT's Pulitzer Prize-winner hit 2.9 million viewers in the first week (Romenesko, 2012). The multimedia feature *Snow Fall* by reporter John Branch reported the 2012 Tunnel Creek avalanche in which four skiers were buried and only one survived. He also interviewed and discussed phone call recordings. This is considered to be the first mega story which serves both the public and academic recipients. This work shows that the nature of the mega stories is actually a way of expressing how the public can feel about the complexity of the story in the simplest way. Therefore, the designs of the text and visual/audio effects in the story have attempted to engage viewers and pundits alike. It allows the public to more deeply perceive the work and interact with their own stories based on the content of the mega-stories (Dawes, 2014). This kind of interactive media can give an insight into the future of online journalism and appeal to readers with impressive graphics and narrative construction. The journalists wove the similes, metaphors, and personification into their text. After its online publication, the story received positive criticism and acclaims as a "revolutionary break in a format" (Williams, 2014) for both writing quality and online presentation, and won numerous prestigious awards. The advent of the project has inspired pundits to conduct sufficient research (Rue, 2013; Sonderman, 2012; Sullivan, 2012; Williams, 2013; as cited in Scanlan, 2015) regarding the influence of multiple media structures as a journalistic phenomenon, but there is a paucity of thorough discourse analysis in the applied linguistics.

This paper aims at analyzing the use of descriptive language and its features in *Snow Fall* by John Branch. Accordingly, two research questions are formed as follows:

1. What descriptive language is used in *Snow Fall* by John Branch?
2. What are the features of descriptive language in *Snow Fall* by John Branch?

## Literature review

The term descriptive language has attracted a wide range of researchers. Spencer (2005) defines descriptive writing as an artistic scheme in which the writer uses vivid and sensory language to create a scene. Readers can engage with the author's insight through its characters, settings, and plots that

they psychologically respond to. Meanwhile, Diehl and Nettles (2010, p. 112) identify descriptive words that can produce “vivid mental images” to trigger all the readers’ senses, including vision, audition, gustation, olfaction, and touch. When descriptive words are skillfully used, they can generate vivid and colorful scenarios or an imaginative world. Without them, the written text would be tedious and unappealing.

Descriptive language is an all-encompassing term that seems to comprise many genres and styles of writing texts from newspaper articles and fiction narratives. However, here are some shared features of descriptive:

- tries to create a very particular or vivid mood or atmosphere
- conveys a strong sense of individual settings, people, events or experiences
- focuses on detail but can also ‘zoom out’ to over-views
- draws on a range of sensory experiences, such as taste, sight, sound, touch, and smell.

(Gould and Rankin, 2014, p. 20)

The study of descriptive language in verbal texts has long been the domain of writing skills and language evolution. De Temple, Snow and Wu (1991) designed studies to make comparisons between spoken and written descriptions. Their findings indicate that the quality of the texts was affected by the mode of production. Coker (2006) conducted a research study to examine the changes of descriptive writing skillsets over time. Schleppegrell (1998) described the characteristics of descriptive writing tasks.

With regard to the recognizing of descriptive lexicon, there is the selection of words themselves and the way in which verbs or other lexical categories complement the subject. Besides adverbs and adjectives, there can be “extra describing” or strong action verbs. In the cognitive linguistic views, the descriptive language comprises the following categories:

- Strong verbs: Unlike superficial/ functional verbs, expressive verbs create impressions and mental stimulation that draws the reader into the action. For instance, some superficial verbs (e.g. “walk”, “look”, “want”, and “walk quickly”) can be replaced with more vivid synonym verbs such as “swagger”, “glance”, “long to” and “race” (Strausser, 2009, p.p. 39-41)
- Descriptive Adjectives and Adverbs: Adjectives modify nouns and pronouns whereas adverbs describe verbs, adjectives or other adverbs or a complete sentence. (Mathis, 2013, p. 408)

A good writer knows how to create vivid worlds so that their readers can imagine the mental picture and understand the message texts are conveying. To write vividly, the writer often uses figures

of speech which are rhetorical devices to bring imaginative expressions and impressions (Terban, 1993). The figures of speech in English have been classified in generic and specific types; however, several kinds are picked out to facilitate the study's goal as following:

- **Metaphors and Similes:** Similes use “like” or “as” to make comparisons. Metaphors resemble similes, in which they are analogies used as a comparison. Besides, the metaphor has been defined as “a conceptual mapping in which a source domain is understood in terms of a target domain (Barcelona, 2003, p. 3). Synecdoche is type of metaphor in which writers use a part of something to imply the whole; for example, ‘head’ for people or ‘hands’ for manual workers (Richardson, 2009, p. 105).
- **Personifications:** Personifications add human qualities to non-humans (Dunkelberg, 2017, p. 38).

In DMS, apart from the narrative details, there are some interviews with people involved or witnesses. The figure of speech can come from both the writer (written language) and the interviewees (spoken language). Writing and speaking are the process of language production that originated from the need of human's communication. Speaking is usually uttered faster than writing; therefore, written language tends to be produced with more careful thought about content and techniques. According to Ghasemi and Jahromi (2014, p. 147), speech is “a first draft status” with some particular characteristics like intonation, stress, pausing, rhythm, body language and variations, whereas written form is more pre-planned and well-organized with punctuations instead of pauses. Spontaneous speakers often simply connect clauses or sentences with the coordinator “and” while literature or journalistic exponents use more figures of speech. However, metaphors and personifications can be applied for both written and oral forms.

## Methodology

### 1. Data

The data for this study is selected from six-chapter transcripts of The New York Times' *Snow Fall*, which include roughly 19,000 tokens (Table 1). These transcripts were written and published online in 2012. *To the peak* contains the most number of tokens (5115 tokens) followed by *Tunnel Creek* (3253 tokens), *Descent Begins* (3184 tokens), *Blur of White* (2570 tokens), and *Discovery* (2537 tokens). *Word Spread* has the least number of tokens (2211 tokens).

**Table 1.** Six-chapter transcripts of The New York Times' *Snow Fall*

No	Chapters	Token	Word
1	Tunnel Creek	3253	1147
2	To the Peak	5115	1483
3	Descent Begins	3184	810
4	Blur of White	2570	726
5	Discovery	2537	683
6	Word Spread	2211	749
<b>Total</b>		<b>18870</b>	<b>3062</b>

## 2. Research procedure

The software named AntConc (version 3.5.7) was employed for data analysis in terms of types and frequency of descriptive language used in *Snow Fall*. The analysis of descriptive language is based on the categories adapted from Barcelona's (2003), Strausser's (2009), Mathis (2013), and Dunkelberg's (2017) propositions (Table 2). They include *Strong action verb*, *Descriptive Adjective*, *Descriptive Adverb*, *Simile*, *Metaphor*, and *Personification*.

**Table 2.** Categories of descriptive language adapted from Barcelona's (2003), Strausser's (2009), Mathis (2013), and Dunkelberg's (2017) propositions

No.	Descriptive language	Example
1	Strong action Verb	<i>swagger, glance, long to, race</i>
2	Descriptive Adjective	<i>Beautiful</i>
3	Descriptive Adverb	<i>Slowly, fast</i>
4	Simile	<i>like, as</i>
5	Metaphor	<i>Life is a journey.</i>
6	Personification	<i>The wind played with her hairs.</i>

This research focuses on the repetitive ratios of descriptive language items rather than functional and other ordinary lexemes. The functional words such as modal/ auxiliary verbs (e.g., *to be, do/does, have, can, might, and will*), non-describing verbs (e.g., *make, do*), quantitative adjectives (e.g., *few, several*), adverbs of degree (e.g., *very, pretty*), like as a verb and as in adverbial clauses of time/ reasons were excluded from the wordlist. With respect to validity and reliability of data analysis, two other linguists in the field were invited to work as double-checkers by examining the texts randomly. The consent between inter-raters and the researcher had to reach 95%.

## Results and discussion

### 1. Descriptive language used in *Snow Fall*

As seen from Table 3, the use of *descriptive adjective* has the highest percentage, accounting for 46.2% (938 out of 2029 words) followed by *strong action verb* (43.4%; 819 out of 2029 words). The percentage of *descriptive adverb* is seen to be the lowest at 13.4% (272 out of 2029 words). With respect to the word use per 1,000 words, a similar order of word use is also noticed (*descriptive adjective*: 49.7%; *strong action verb*: 43.4%; *descriptive adverb*: 14.4%). This clearly indicates that the author has extensively employed *descriptive adjectives* and *strong action verbs* to attract readers' attention. This finding is supported by Strausser (2009) who states that strong verbs can create impressions and mental stimulation that can draw readers into the action. Moreover, *Snow Fall* is a narrative in which interviews and discussions are embedded, so such types of words are utilized directly by witnesses so as to produce vivid mental images to trigger all the readers' senses (Diehl and Nettles, 2010).

**Table 3.** Use of Descriptive language in terms of parts of speech in *Snow Fall*

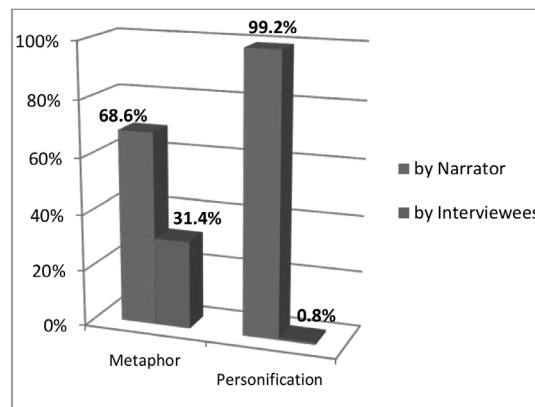
No	Parts of speech	Raw number	%	% Per 1000 words
1	Strong action Verb	819	40.4	43.4
2	Descriptive Adjective	938	46.2	49.7
3	Descriptive Adverb	272	13.4	14.4
<b>Total</b>		<b>2029</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>107.5</b>

In terms of figures of speech, it is found in Table 4 that *metaphor* is most frequently used at 43.0% (156 out of 363 occurrences), and *simile* is at the second most used figure of speech, at 35.8% (130 out of 363 occurrences). Meanwhile, *personification* is the least employed, at 21.2% (77 out of 363 occurrences). Therefore, it appears that *metaphor* is the most useful way for the author to convey the meaning in *Snow Fall*.

**Table 4.** Use of Descriptive language in terms of figures of speech in *Snow Fall*

No	Figure of speech	Occurrence	%
1	Simile	130	35.8
2	Metaphor	156	43.0
3	Personification	77	21.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>363</b>	<b>100</b>

As displayed in Figure 1, there is a difference in the use of metaphors and personifications between two forms of written and spoken style. The metaphors used by the narrator (68.6% out of 156 metaphors) were over twice as frequent as those used by the interviewees (31.4% out of 156 metaphors). The personification used by the narrator (99.2 % out of 77 personifications) significantly outweighed personifications spoken by the interviewees (0.8% out of 77 personifications).



**Figure 1** Use of Metaphor and Personification by the Narrator and the Interviewees in *Snow Fall*

## 2. Features of descriptive language used in *Snow Fall*

To point out the features of figurative language that appeal to the senses and emotions of recipients, a common experiment can be conducted. Strong verbs and descriptive adverbs or epithets are eliminated and substituted by their weaker synonyms. The frail version of writings incurs readers' boredom and renunciation. On the contrary, descriptive parts of speech in *Snow Fall* visually and linguistically convey the image.

Examples [1] and [2] are taken from *To the Peak*, one of the six chapters of *Snow Fall*. They show that an abundance of *descriptive adjectives* is deployed. Descriptive adjectives used in both examples, namely *soft*, *fluffy*, *weak*, *steep*, *above-freezing*, *fragile*, *perfect*, and *sporadic* indicate the thick description of scenes. Through such descriptive adjectives, the messages of stories are conveyed and readers can imagine tragic scenes of snow fall.

- [1] When frosted and protected by **soft** blankets of **fluffy** snow, they are **weak** stilts supporting all that falls on top. When they finally give way, falling like microscopic dominoes on a **steep** slope, they provide an **icy** flume for the snow above. (*To the Peak*)

- [2] A shot of rain or **above-freezing** temperatures, both common in Cascade winters, usually destroy the **fragile** crystals, melding them into the snowpack. But five days of dry, cold weather, from Feb. 3 to 7, created a **perfect**, sparkly layer of surface hoar. Sporadic light snow, never more than an inch or two a day, delicately shrouded it over the next 10 days. (*To the Peak*)

For Example [3] from the chapter *Tunnel Creek*, the author of *Snow Fall* used strong verbs *shattered* and *pilled* to create a sensory and picturesque scene instead of their synonyms *broke* and *fell* that seem to be feeble to readers' cognition. Example [4] gets involved in descriptive adverbs that help strengthen and color verbs to "create a very particular or vivid mood or atmosphere." (Gould and Rankin, 2014, p. 20)

- [3] Snow **shattered** and **spilled** down the slope (*Tunnel Creek*)
- [4] Ski areas that once **vigilantly** policed their boundaries, from Jackson Hole, Wyo., to Squaw Valley, Calif., have **gradually** opened their gates to the territory surrounding them. (*To the Peak*)

The literary devices employed in *Snow Fall* create imaginative expressions and impressions. Take Example [5] for a creation of similes in which *breeze* is compared to *the ocean* and this figure of speech is easily recognized by the signifier *like*. It is noticed that the similes and metaphors are not always demarcated. For instance, in Examples [6] and [7] from the chapter *Discovery*, it seems to be similes and not pure metaphors although the signifiers *like/as* are not visible. However, it is a very low rate that does not significantly affect the findings.

- [5] You'll be on the chair and it'll be freezing, and then all of a sudden there's a warm breeze that smells **like** the ocean. (*Tunnel Creek*)
- [6] It was covered by an enormous pile of chunky ice cubes, some fit for a cocktail glass, others the size of couches. (*Discovery*)
- [7] Snow chunks the size of boulders. (*Discovery*)

Example [8] is a metaphor in which the comparison occurs between the avalanche and the size and weight of *cars* rolling down from a high position. In Example [9], one of the metaphorical types, the synecdoche is *faces* used to replace people. The personification is manifested in Example [10] in which the snow stream acts like a human since things come out the mouth.

- [8] The avalanche was the size of more than a thousand **cars** barreling down the mountain and weighed millions of pounds. (*Tunnel Creek*)
- [9] During a break, they spotted familiar faces **near** the fire pit (*To the Peak*)



The snow stream acts like a human since things comes out the mouth.

[10] The creek bed **vomited** the debris into a gently sloped meadow (*Tunnel Creek*)

*The enemy* in Example [11] can be both a metaphor and personification. The snow which is considered a harmless thing becomes hostile to the humans because of its potential to kill. Possibly, the author aims at helping readers to visualize the events reported in Snow Fall that create an emotional feeling of context, victims, and their experience (Gould and Rankin, 2014).

[11] The very thing the 16 skiers and snowboarders had sought — fresh, soft snow — instantly became **the enemy**. (*Tunnel Creek*)

The metaphor *stomach immediately dropped* in Example [12] and the personification *ocean's always alive* and *mountains feel like they're asleep* in Example [13] in conversation reflect that this figure of speech is occasionally presented in spoken forms.

[12] "Someone told him there was an avalanche in Tunnel Creek," Hessburg said. "He told me, and my **stomach immediately dropped**." (*Word Spread*)

[13] "If you swim out in the ocean, the ocean's always **alive**," Saugstad said. "You can feel it. But the **mountains** feel like they're **asleep**." (*Descent Begins*)

The results also revealed that these figures of speech which can be creatively and actively performed by the journalism writer were higher than those in quotation marks collected from the spoken patterns of interviewees or phone-call makers.

## Conclusion

From the findings, it is proven that the reporter of *Snow Fall*, John Branch used a nexus of descriptive language and effective repetition methods to refine his articles in beautiful and artistic language. A certain amount of strong verbs, and descriptive adjectives and adverbs add emphasis and induce readers to keep reading. The figures of speech (e.g., similes, metaphors, and personifications) make Branch's DMS a vibrantly colorful and sensuous portrayal; however, the speech parts of *Snow Fall* are still true to reality. There is a lower rate of metaphors and personifications in interview/ recording excerpts from individuals who were quoted than those performed by the writer. In general, such findings provide a profound contribution to the correspondent training for creation of DMS which is considered the future of modern journalism.

The study may offer opportunities for future research in more categories of figures of speech (e.g., irony, euphemism, hyperbole, and symbol) as well as the use of descriptive languages and descriptive lexical repetition techniques in various DMS. The concepts could be longitudinally

refined to construct a theoretical framework for applied linguistic study in the discipline of journalism and social media.

## References

- Barcelona, A. (2003). **Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective**. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter
- Branch, J. (2012). **Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek** [On-line]. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall/index.html/?part=tunnel-creek>
- Dawes, K. (2014). **Trends in Newsrooms #8: The impact of digital mega-stories** [On-line]. Available: <http://blog.wan-iffra.org/2014/08/14/trends-in-newsrooms-8-the-impact-of-digital-mega-stories>
- De Temple, J. M., Snow, C. & Wu, H. (1991). Papa pig just left for pigtown: Children's oral and written picture descriptions under varying instruction. **Discourse Processes**. (14): 469- 495.
- Diehl, H. & Nettles, D. (2010). **Strategies for Powerful Comprehension Instruction: It Takes More than Mentioning!** Huntington Beach: Shell Education.
- Dunkelberg, K. (2017). **A Writer's Craft: Multi-Genre Creative Writing**. London: Macmillan International Higher Education
- Ghasemi, H. & Jahromi, M. K. (2014). The Differences between Spoken and Written Discourses in English. **International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World**. 6(4):147-155
- Gould, M. & Rankin, M. (2014). **Cambridge International AS and A Level English Language**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gutkind, L. (2012). **You can't make this stuff up: The complete guide to writing creative nonfiction**. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Hedley, J.H. (2005). Learning from Intelligence Failures. **International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence**. 18(3): 435-450.
- Jenkins, H. (2003). **Transmedia storytelling** [On-line]. Available: <http://www.technologyreview.com/biotech/13052/>
- Mathis, P. (2013). **Blueprints for Writing: Building Essays**. Boston: Cengage Learning.
- Richardson, J. (2009). **Illustrated Dictionary of Literature**. New Delhi: Lotus Press.
- Romenesko, J. (2012). **More than 3.5 million page views for New York Times' "Snow Fall" feature** [On-line]. Available: <http://jimromenesko.com/2012/12/27/more-than-3-5-million-page-views-for-nyts-snowfall/>
- Rue, J. (2013). **The "Snow Fall" effect and dissecting the multimedia long-form narrative** [On-line]. Available: <http://multimedias shooter.com/wp/2013/04/21/the-snow-fall-effect-and-dissecting-the-multimedia-longform-narrative/>
- Scanlan, J. (2015). **Navigating the New Narrative: A Case Study of "Snow Fall"**. M.A. Thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia.
- Schlepppegrell, M. J. (1998). Grammar as resource: Writing a description. **Research in the Teaching of English**. 32(3): 182-211.
- Sonderman, J. (2012). **How The New York Times' "Snow Fall" project unifies text, multimedia** [On-line]. Available: [www.poynter.com](http://www.poynter.com)

- Spencer, L. (2005). **A Step-by-step Guide to Descriptive Writing**. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group
- Strausser, J. (2009). **Painless Writing**. New York: Barron's Educational Series.
- Sullivan, M. (2012). **"Snow Fall" tells a story about an avalanche and a newspaper's digital progress** [On-line]. Available: [http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/snow-fall-tells-a-storyabout-an avalanche-and-a-newspapers-reinvention/](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/snow-fall-tells-a-storyabout-an-avalanche-and-a-newspapers-reinvention/)
- Terban, M. (1993). **It Figures!: Fun Figures of Speech**. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Williams, P. (2013). **Inside 'Snow Fall.' Nieman Storyboard** [On-line]. Available: <http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/2013/03/29/inside-snow-fall-the-new-york-timesmultimedia-storytelling-sensation/>
- Williams, P. (2014). **The future of digital longform, Part 1: "Snow Fall" (yep, that again worth it) + poetry + how we read** [On-line]. Available: <http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/the-future-of-digital-longform-part-1-snow-fall-yep-that-again-worth-it-poetry-how-we-read/>