

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA DISCOURSE AND OF ITS WAYS OF DISSEMINATING INFORMATION

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Abstract: Information nowadays can hardly find its way to reach people unaltered. It would seem that, in today's society, characterizing a piece of information as true, authentic, genuine, correct or real has become a somewhat *utopic* endeavour. The present paper sets itself as a goal to detect and unveil as many ways as possible in which media delivers news and information in a distorted manner, thus trying to uncover the strategies and techniques that have become legitimizing ways of manipulation on both a national and a world-wide scale. The theoretical approach that we shall use in analysing this type of media discourse and which gives us the necessary tools to help us bring to light the above-mentioned strategies and techniques is *critical discourse analysis* (CDA). We find CDA to be the most suitable theoretical perspective and methodology for the type of analysis the present paper tries to undertake. An ethical perspective will also come as an upholding factor to our arguments and, in the end, some references will be made to this aspect.

A CDA perspective on media discourse

In the introduction to his book, *Analysing Newspapers. An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*, John E. Richardson looks into newspaper discourse by referring to his views of *society, journalism and language*. In his view, 'Journalistic discourse has some very specific textual characteristics, some very specific methods of text production and consumption, and is defined by a particular set of relationships between itself and other agencies of symbolic and material power' [1] which sets of characteristics 'that is, the language of journalism, its production and consumption and the relations of journalism to social ideas and institutions – are clearly inter-related and sometimes difficult to disentangle. In other words, 'they are different elements but not discrete, fully separate elements' [2]. In his opinion, news are in close connection to the actions and opinions of powerful social groups and, while it is evident that they have to be understood in connection to the target and intended audiences, it is wrong to consider that important issues such as 'contemporary democratic politics, social values and the continuing existence of prejudice and social inequalities' should be looked into outside the influence of journalism. They are key themes that are also the result of the 'structures, functions and power of journalism' [3]. He argues from the beginning that his analysis of newspapers is from a CDA perspective, because CDA starts by identifying a social problem, then takes the side of those who suffer most and critically analyse 'those in power, those who are responsible and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems' [4], and because 'in response to social inequality and the abuse of power, CDA demands 'politically involved research with an emancipatory requirement' [5].

When discussing his view of language in the book, Richardson declares that his book is based on 'five fundamental assumptions about language', of which the first one is that 'language is *social*': it is 'central to human activity', 'it is through the use of language that we grant meaning to our actions; equally, it is through our use of language that we can attempt to remove meaning from our actions. As Blommaert [6] puts it:

[...] there is no such thing as 'non-social' language [...]. Any utterance produced by people will be, for instance, an instance of oral speech, spoken with a particular accent, gendered and reflective of age and social position, tied to a particular situation or domain, and produced in a certain stylistically or generically identifiable format.' [7]

Richardson then refers to the the 'kind of dialogue' language has with society, in which 'language is produced by society and ... goes on to help to recreate it' (mind the dialectical relationship), and when he says that, he does not just refer to 'the way things are done'; language use 'goes on to recreate these social and sometimes institutional expectations – expectations that we all have when we pick up a newspaper or a magazine, that it will be written in a particular way' [8]. The same 'recreation' of expectations is available when we listen to a *certain* political figure/ leader preparing to make a statement on a *certain* subject in reference to which we have *certain* expectations. Also, depending on the political figure in question, we may have different expectations that depend on the speaker's political background and views, on his/her educational background, but ours as well, on the context in which the discourse was created, on the general statement which is aimed at by making the respective statement. All these factors and aspects come to contribute to the use of language and to what Richardson calls the 'social-ness' of language, in that 'language *first* represents social realities and *second* contributes to the production and reproduction of social reality or social life.' [9]

The second assumption about language that Richardson takes into consideration when analysing newspapers is that 'language use enacts *identity*'. 'What this means is that people project themselves as a certain type of person, and that the identity that a person projects relates, in part, to the activities that they're attempting to accomplish.' [10] In the case of political leaders, for instance, this is an obvious situation, as, by the type of identity they construct for themselves, they seek to project a certain image of themselves and to impose certain assumptions about what they aim at. Even more, because the aspects of communication are open to a certain degree of interpretation, listeners may interpret the meaning of an utterance in relation to the speaker's identity and

to the context as well. But, in order to fully appreciate communication you have to recognise the identities and the activities that are being acted out. Put another way, our understanding of the communicative act is shaped, in part, by who is speaking/writing and the context in which this occurs.' [11] This entails that the listener/reader has to have a certain knowledge of the speaker's identity and of the area in which the speaker acts.

Richardson's third assumption about language and, perhaps the most important one to grasp' is that, language use is always *active*; it is always directed at *doing* something; and the way in which language achieves this activity is always related to the context in which it is being used' (2007: 12) He makes his point by relating to certain verbs expressing the *active* nature of communication that he uses to describe journalists' activity: 'journalists may use language to *inform* us of an event, or to *expose* wrongdoing, or to *argue* for or against something. Each of these verbs – inform, expose and argue for – demonstrates the active nature of communication in these cases.' [12]

The fourth assumption, the one according to which 'language use has *power*', refers to the way in which some people's opinion is 'more credible and authoritative than the opinion of others' and how this is of great interest and worth taking into account when analysing discourse. In our opinion, as far as media discourse is concerned, this is language's most important aspect, as, when it comes to shaping opinions, the media's role is probably the most important one and the language used by the media and the way in which that language is used may act as a trigger for a whole manner of thinking, may create *trends* of thought, and this is, we think, a great responsibility.

The power of journalistic language to *do* things and the way that social power is indexed and represented in journalistic language are particularly important to bear in mind when studying the discourse of journalism. Journalism has social effects: through its power to shape issue agendas and public discourse, it can reinforce beliefs; it can shape people's opinions not only of the world but also of their *place* and *role* in the world; or, if not shape your opinions on a particular matter, it can at the very least influence *what* you have opinions on; in sum, it can help shape social reality by shaping our *views* of social reality. For these reasons, and many more, the language of the news media needs to be taken very seriously. [13]

The fifth assumption about language is that it is *political*, which comes, in Richardson's opinion, as the natural outcome of the fact that language is social and has power. These two aspects of language combined inevitably produce a third one, which is that language is political. The assumption according to which 'language is 'clear' and acts as a neutral window on the world' needs to be contested, according to Richardson, because it can even be a dangerous assumption and, in order to sustain his argument, he quotes George Orwell and his essay on 'Politics and the English Language' (1946) where 'he argues two basic points: first, that ugly or offensive thoughts corrupt language; and second, that language can corrupt thought.' [14] As a socialist, Orwell suggests that, the decline of a language must ultimately have political and

economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely.' Thus, language is a medium of power that can be used to sediment inequalities of power and legitimate iniquitous social relations.' [15] Then, Richardson quotes a larger part of Orwell's essay that we shall render in what follows for the sake of its relevance for contemporary politics:

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. [...] All issues are political issues, and [...] When the general [political] atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. (Orwell cited in Richardson 2007: 14)

Media discourse in action – the role in society

The process of disseminating information is often influenced by various external factors. Though this is a process that should arguably stay free of any external interference, things unfortunately, more often than not, take the wrong turn and the result is distorted information, manipulation of the public opinion, creation and recreation of untrue stories, of false conflicts that, unfortunately, lead to real ones. The reason we chose to make an introduction into media discourse by using mostly Richardson's book on *Analysing Newspapers* is that we consider his assumptions about language and language use in media discourse as very well-founded assumptions in the sense that he underlines the exact functions of language that are most important in media discourse. Also, his critical discourse analysis perspective is one which serves our interests in a most appropriate manner in that it brings forth the exact objectives one should be pursuing and that we are after, as well, namely unveiling the discursive strategies and techniques of the media discourse whenever social events and social changes (be they major or less major) come to the attention of the public opinion. Needless to say that the media's responsibility is a great one in this respect and that concepts such as 'integrity', 'subjectivity', 'truthfulness', 'impartiality', 'consistency' are key factors that should stay at the source of each and every single piece of information that is being distributed, broadcast, made public by whatever means. In the development of a nation, of society, of civilization generally, of humankind if you want, there is probably nothing more important than getting the right information about everything that happens around you, around the world, about people

and events that might influence your day to day life and activity. Because, if your day to day activity depends on, or is related to, or is likely to influence others' day to day activities (and I think it is fair to say that this is, or should be the case for everyone), then it is fair to say that detaining the truth about what you do is of crucial importance. If, in the above theoretical introduction we have made reference to, or given examples mainly of political issues being made public, is because politics is probably the domain of life where language use is most subject to distortion. Richardson's fourth assumption about language, the one stating that 'language use is power', is, in our opinion, the most important when it comes to the role of the media in disseminating information. If we were to make a classification of the types of discourses that are more powerful (in the sense of being more credible and more authoritative), it would be difficult to decide whether to place political discourse or media discourse as the first most 'powerful' type of discourse in this list. While political figures and political leaders display a type of 'power discourse' simply by what they stand for and by what they represent, by the fact that they find *themselves* in key positions, in power positions that allow them to project that power into their discourse as well, the representatives of media discourse, although not always finding themselves in key positions, can, however, very often find themselves in a position that allows them to control even more of the public opinion than the politician manages to. Take the today's television broadcasting channels that are in a permanent spin to get hold of the information and to pass it on. None of them however takes the time to double check that information anymore. It seems that, in a permanent pursuit to be the first to 'tell it', somewhere along the way, journalists have forgotten the most important aspect of their job and mission: their responsibility towards the entire public opinion that awaits their reaction. As their reaction should not limit itself to merely be 'the first reaction', it should also bear the weight of 'integrity', 'subjectivity', 'truthfulness', 'impartiality', 'consistency'.

Richardson's first assumption about language, namely that 'language is *social*', tells us about how important language is in this whole process of developing relationships established between people and society. As 'central to human activity', language cannot but be in a dialectical relationship with society. For language is indeed the result of society and, on its turn, goes on to reshape society, to recreate it and even control it, sometimes. CDA theorists are probably the first ones to theorise this type of relationship when, in the endeavour to describe discourse as social practice, they argued that this implied 'a dialectical or a two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them.' [16]

The assumption that 'language use enacts *identity*' is just as important as the one above. Actually, they are interrelated and they ensue from one another. People's identities are related to their day to day activities and their day to day activities are part of their social life and are, eventually, what constitutes society. At the same time, a nation's identity is largely constructed by the things it is

exposed to, such as social events and changes, political decisions, all of these being made public through the media. Consequently, everything that reaches the common man is a contributor to his or her day to day life, to his or her identity. Once again, the media's responsibility proves crucial in that it turns out to be a key factor in shaping not only opinions and visions about the world and about life, but whole identities.

The fact that language is 'always *active*' is, in a way, self-evident and self-explanatory. Language use means making decisions, communicating decisions, enacting them, thus changing lives, changing hierarchies, in a word it triggers social changes. Language is probably most active in media discourse. It constantly disseminates information and it is often easy to disregard the multiple meanings of a certain headline, or, on the contrary, this aspect is a tool used intentionally to create confusion or to manipulate. In constant change, in constant action, language never ceases to contribute to changes in society.

We will discuss Richardson's fourth and fifth assumptions about language in parallel, as we consider them to be in a type of dialectical relationship that we have previously mentioned. The fact that 'language use has *power*' and that it is *political* comes to fill the dotted spaces in this description of the role of language in society. The remaining question marks referred most likely to why is language that influential. The answer comes with precisely these two assumptions about language. That language use has power is definitely not a new idea. One who probably dwelt most on this aspect is Michel Foucault, for whom it is in discourse that power is both most manifest and hardest to identify, and according to him, power can only be established in discourse: "...in a society such as ours...there are manifold relations of power that permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse." [17]. More recently, Patrick Charaudeau argues in his book entitled *Le discours politique. Les Masques du Pouvoir* that relations are definitely being established between *language, action, power* and *truth*. CDA theorist Van Dijk talks of the '*power abuse*' in discourse and how *access* to discourse is also a question of power; Ruth Wodak does not necessarily see power as deriving from language, but "language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated vehicle for differences in power in hierarchical social structures." [18]; Norman Fairclough introduces in the theory and study of CDA the notion of '*social change*', seeing discourse as a '*social practice*' [19] and the relation between discourse and society as a dialectical one (discourse is socially constitutive and socially conditioned).

Starting from these general theoretical approaches, one can better grasp how language has power and how using language to disseminate information is a delicate matter subject to all kinds of interpretation. That language is political is again not a new idea, but the fact that

nowadays it has turned into a 'political tool' is to take its influence and use to another level. Describing language as a 'political tool' is not an overstatement in our opinion if we take into consideration this past century's major events that have triggered major changes in society/-ies and that have proved to be so much more influential due to the type of discourse that these events gave birth to. Each major event came with a certain type of discourse and each type of discourse was used to serve interests. Take the events of September 11, 2001 in New York, take the more recent economic crisis that led to political crisis around the world. And, most importantly, take the way the media 'advertised' these events and the manner in which it chose to present them to the public opinion. It was sometimes done in the manner of 'reality TV shows', as Baudrillard [20] puts it, and was meant to induce the sensation that nothing is too much. When, in fact, sometimes it is too much.

A Orwell put it, 'All issues are political issues, and [...] When the general [political] atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.'

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