

UNIVERSITATEA “OVIDIUS” DIN CONSTANȚA  
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE ȘTIINȚE UMANISTE  
DOMENIUL: FILOLOGIE

**THE POWER OF WORDS: MIGRATION  
NARRATIVES IN THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC  
SPACE IN THE US TODAY**

**Summary**

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2022

# **The Power of Words: Migration Narratives in the Contemporary Public Space in the US Today**

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*Keywords: cultural studies, systemic-functional grammar, Critical Discourse Analysis, migration narrative, interdiscursivity, racism*

The current doctoral dissertation contains an introduction and four chapters, followed by conclusions and its bibliography. Its title draws attention to the political and ideological dimension of public discourse, also announcing the approach taken. Critical Discourse Analysis, in between cultural studies and applied linguistics, will provide the theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of the corpus of this doctoral dissertation.

The focus is on representations of migration, seen here as migration narratives, in a number of articles taken from important American periodicals, more precisely as they are articulated and disseminated by the publications included in the corpus.

Lots of people are influenced by narratives which appear in the public space, including popular newspapers and periodicals. They tend to see the world and human experience by means of words shaped in smaller or more comprehensive narratives. One of these broad narratives is the narrative of migration, which is based on particular ways of representing, revealing and telling the history of human migrations in a particular historical-geographical context. It has different shapes in different places. In the tabloid press, the narrative of migration usually wears the ideological clothes of nationalism and jingoism. Over the last few decades, in America as well as in Europe, nationalism and jingoism found a wide audience among the less privileged members of society, people who are easier to impress and influence with an anti-immigration discourse.

The context in which the articles under examination in this thesis were written and published is significant. They appeared shortly before, during and immediately after Donald Trump's presidential term. Trump was a very important figure associated with anti-immigration discourse. His immigration policies and ideas divided the American public space. The dissertation, using the perspectives given by CDA and PDA, the latter

being an important branch of the former, concentrates on articles in which anti-immigration discourse, displaying features of racism and xenophobia, is expressed in a more or less straightforward manner.

The dissertation starts from the realization that migration has been seen as positive or negative by various groups of people at various times, their attitudes depending upon specific political, cultural and economic circumstances. Such attitudes are to be seen in the way migration narratives are shaped in the public space. Culture in a broad sense as defined by both CDA and cultural studies in general, has a strong political and ideological dimension. Therefore, migration lends itself to an examination from the perspectives offered by such approaches as Critical Discourse Analysis and cultural studies in general. Perceptions of migration are expressed in language in context, in discourse. Norman Fairclough's *Language and Power* is a foundational book for CDA. It promotes the central concept of power and the necessity to understand its mechanisms in language and in society in order to promote the improvement of society. CDA is not only a descriptive and detached approach. It militates for the improvement of communities and of the ways they see the world. In this particular case, it is about host communities and immigrants having to do with immigration discourse as promoted by influential periodicals, among which tabloids assume a central place, because of their wide target audience.

The Introduction briefly refers to important concepts, figures and theories that have been instrumental in the research that led to the finalization of the current dissertation. Immigration discourse has been seen as fundamentally marked by racism and xenophobia, whose forms have undergone some changes over the previous decades, both in the U.S. and in the rest of the world, especially in Western Europe. Such terms as text and context, discourse, ideology, racism and the importance of CDA, discursivity and interdiscursivity will stress both the importance of power in public communication. Particularly relevant to this doctoral dissertation is an inquiry of how Critical Discourse Analysis has been applied to the examination of racism present in immigration discourse in recent history, as illustrated by the corpus. Brief references will first be made to situations in western Europe as noted and examined by some of the leading CDA scholars, especially at the end of the twentieth century. The observations and theories

developed by these scholars are very relevant to the American public discourse as well. Critical discourse is useful for understanding how both written texts and spoken political discourse recorded by the media have contributed to the consolidation of systemic racist stereotypes, ideologies, or cultures. Although the United States is a country founded on massive immigration, racism and a strong anti-immigration discourse have been very prominent in the public space, with Donald Trump's presidency being one of the most critical times as far as this discourse is concerned.

One of the problems initially addressed in the introduction is the misrepresentation of immigrants, by tabloid and other major media publications. This has led to the shaping of a biased discourse among some sections of the American public about the influence and perceived threat of immigrants towards them as native citizens of the United States. A significant part of the media misrepresentation of immigrants has thus led to a considerable stigmatization of migrants. This misrepresentation has assumed a variety of forms, from more direct to less direct ways.

The current dissertation has chosen as corpus articles from *New York Post* and *New York Daily News*. All of them relate to migration as a general phenomenon and to specific cases that invite broader contextualizations, but which are based on specific cases that lead to generalizations prompted by negative incidents. In relation to their investigation three main research questions provided the basis for their analysis and interpretation.

- 1.What linguistic mechanisms do tabloids use to persuade and manipulate a certain target audience of readers from the host community?
2. What language and ideology characteristics can be discovered in the American periodicals as far as the migration discourse is concerned?
- 3.The third question has to do with how figurative language, metaphor in particular, plays a prominent role in CDA's work on the shaping of the migration narratives of American periodicals. The cognitive and ideological power of those metaphors is closely linked to it. Relevant starting points for this undertaking have been Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Teun Van Dijk 2008, Hart 2014.

4. A fourth question is related to the ideological frameworks of such American periodicals as *New York Post* and *New York Daily News*, in their dealing with, and promotion of, attitudes toward migration.

It is well-known that public discourse does not represent the truth. It represents opinions held by those who express themselves in speech or print. The printed and online press, including the tabloids which this research deals with, are no exception. Tabloids are almost inevitably biased, subjective, representing the specific interests of influential social groups. The readers who want to improve their critical skills have to improve the ways in which they deal with this situation. They have to be or become critical readers in order to avoid being manipulated. That is one of the reasons why this particular approach was chosen for this doctoral dissertation. This is the approach offered by CDA. Some of the authors associated with CDA that have been useful in this dissertation all agree that this is a very productive and very useful way of dealing with the sometimes hidden agenda of these representations.

Chapter One announces an integrated historical outline as a starting point for the definition of a comprehensive context in which migration and power are to be examined. It is an integrated approach because it considers economic, cultural and political factors that contributed to the history of emigration to America, from the early age of colonization to the contemporary age of intensive globalization, when large numbers of people are on the move. In between these two distinct periods, the post-Emancipation age of migration to America marked an important development.

Immigration continues to be a heated topic of debate in America today. Although the U.S. was founded upon migration as Europeans settled in the New World, globalization and industrialization have dramatically increased the pace at which immigration continues to take place. This has contributed to the emergence of a multitude of opinions regarding immigration, especially negative ones, as those on the Republican side, with President Trump as its emblematic figure. These anti-immigration nationalistic perspectives have evolved in a quest to strengthen ontological security narratives.

Elements of Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) in the interpretation of migration narratives in the U.S. public space, as the title of Chapter Two announces, adds systemic and functional elements to the theoretical framework in which CDA had

found a source of inspiration in the examination of language in social context, performing specific work. This chapter applies the theoretical understanding and concepts associated with CDA and SFG to the interpretation of the selected articles. CDA and SFG have a common relation in the link between language and society. CDA applies SFG as an instrument to analyze texts and discourses, focusing, apart from the systemic-functional dimension, on the ideological dimension of discourse.

Halliday's contribution is essential from the very beginning. He insists on the primacy of meaning. He sees language as a kind of semiotic system, "not in the sense of a system of signs, but as a systematic source of meaning" (Halliday 1985:192). He further believes that language is full of an abundance of "potential meaning", and this is particularly evident in his definition of linguistics as the study of how people exchange meaning. On the basis of CDA and SFG, this chapter contains interpretations of the selected immigration narratives in articles from the already mentioned *New York Post* and *New York Daily News*.

It is critical to understand the importance of three concepts as they apply to critical discourse analysis when examining, analyzing, interpreting the language of some articles in some American periodicals, placing them in their proper contexts. In CDA as a continuation and broadening of the scope of SFG, contextualization is as important as the close examination of the language material of discourse. These important concepts include power, critique, and ideology. These aspects are intimately interconnected. In contemporary discourse analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar and CDA resort to such language resources as transitivity, modality, participants, processes, as well as to mystification as the particular type of process designated in the clause and the consequences of this for the types of participants that can occur in the clause. Accordingly, transitivity, modality and such attending effects as mystification function as part of a linguistic system with multiple entities that promote critical interactions between speakers or writers and their audience. In this context, transitivity describes the processes of clauses and the roles they play concerning material and verbal processes. These verbal and material processes are instrumental in the representation of the immigration discourse. The chapter examines the complex migration discourse through the application of the SFG perspectives. It deals with articles and reports with significant ideological and

political weight with both Democratic and Republican agendas to demonstrate how these frameworks can critically revealed in both texts and relevant contexts.

These articles show a dualistic, polarized political perspective, regardless of whether or not they supported pro- or anti-immigration ideology. The discourse is subjective, emotionally loaded, emotionally evocative, often using excessively loaded language. Most of the articles also used rhetorical repetition to reinforce their claims. The use of passive, nominalization, or transitivity to highlight certain aspects and to obscure others, to evade responsibility for the perspectives promoted, feature prominently in many of the articles discussed in this chapter. They will be re-examined within a more comprehensive framework in the subsequent sections of the doctoral dissertation.

SFG and CDA have enabled proper understanding of the theoretical implications in the interpretation of these articles. Fairly simple grammatical or interpretive approaches are heavily implemented in most of these articles in some regard. They function as clear evidence of the relevance of critical and ideological approaches to discourse, how discourse can be twisted to adhere to any sort of agenda, even if these applications might not appear obvious at first glance. Understanding contextual elements of these articles and the implications that can be obtained from the relationship are essential in order to ensure a more comprehensive understanding. As far as context-based observations are concerned, it was discovered that the context of many of the narratives described in the periodicals herein is individualized. The characters as participants described in stories are either highly individualized or highly generalized. Objective facts were seldom reported, and instead, the emotionally loaded stories of individuals were either told, or, generalizations were made and imposed upon demographic groups such as immigrants, criminals, or gang members. These generalizations were used to stigmatize social stereotypes, while the individualization of subjects was used to foster the emotional appeal of the messages. The mechanisms of generalization, characterization, patterns, over-lexicalization, transitivity, thematization, lexical cohesion, and metaphorical analysis are applied to the articles to show how they seek to persuade and manipulate through the creation, confirmation or naturalization of underlying prejudice and bias.

Chapter Three focuses on “*Cognitive Metaphors in American Tabloids for Migration Narratives in the US Public Space*”. This chapter discusses the current use of

metaphors in the selected corpus and how this can impact the representation and perception of certain key topics, such as immigration and race. This chapter examines articles from a variety of agendas and biases to fully understand the workings of metaphor in writing. It has become obvious that metaphors have been an integral part of how people think about their social experience. Continued research to improve the understanding of language communication shows that the use of metaphors is increasing, in keeping with more and more appeal to the emotions and feelings of the target audiences. If metaphors are becoming more important in relation to how tabloid journalists and politicians address their audiences, then it is particularly important, from a CDA perspective, to develop a better understanding of how figurative language works and how it is used to naturalize, legitimate and confirm such ideologies as racism.

After considering the articles in this chapter, it becomes obvious that the use of metaphors can have a significant power, how the messages are perceived being largely dependent on this special use of figurative language. In the articles where few, if any, metaphors are used, the general impression is that the content is more straightforward and factual with apparently little or no discernible political bias present, thus creating the impression of a more honest message. However, as CDA claims, every statement as discourse has political power, in an obvious or less obvious way.

The anonymous, Associated Press (2018), article *“Honduran Woman in Migrant Caravan Gives Birth on U.S. Soil”* reports President Trump as saying that he could “...end birthright citizenship with a swipe of his pen.” The metaphor, “swipe of his pen,” is designed to convey that the president thinks he has a lot of power, even exceeding constitutional limits. Ending birthright citizenship would involve constitutional changes, not presidential power. The author clearly shows his anti-Trump position here. Normally, changing the law requires a lot of effort for many people. In this case, the president wanted to convey that he is able to simplify the process into a very easy action, being probably aware that this is not possible, the president only able to make a recommendation. The choice of the noun “swipe” is specifically used to convey the contrast between what Trump wants and believes and what the law requires, exposing the ridiculous situation which is evoked. The metaphor thus carries political weight against an anti-immigration discourse. It is a subtle form of manipulation, by means of which the

author chooses Trump's metaphoric expression to reveal his ignorance. Another example, in an article by John Lott - "*Sorry, Hillary: Trump's Policies Are Clearly Better for Blacks*" - metaphors are used to promote an intense propaganda discourse in favour of Trump and against Mrs. Clinton during the months of the 2016 presidential elections campaign. A series of metaphors (people are "trapped," guns fall in the wrong hands") seem to be specifically chosen to outline a narrative that is not explicitly stated in the text, but which is clearly political in effect. Such situations can be problematic for political journalism and for wide target audiences since many people rely on political news outlets to shape their understanding of politics. By relying on these new sources which have a clear political bias and the powerful tool like metaphors to shape people's perceptions, such messages lead to many people falling victim to plans to align their perception of a certain situation with the interests of news outlets often serving the political interests and agendas of some influential politicians.

It is difficult to find a political article that does not make use of at least a minimum of metaphorical weight, whether it is added intentionally by the author to help shape the narrative or by a person invoked in the story the article conveys. When used in obvious ways, metaphors can be an effective tool in creating a memorable reading experience for the target audience. Accounts of events by people who were deeply involved in investing in these messages can be an effective ways of showing others the potential benefits and problems associated with political views. In the articles discussing immigration, having firsthand accounts of events from immigrants may significantly change the orientation of the story. Some of the authors relied on metaphors to impress the readers with the seriousness and urgency of the represented situation. Conveying messages, in our case migration narratives, which simplify complex situations by the use of metaphors to make them easier to understand, helps to increase the journalist's power by recourse to emotion rather than to reason.

By their inherent nature, metaphors are simple and easy to understand. In every case where metaphors are used, the meaning is meant to be more vivid. This has much to do with the fact that metaphors rely on shared emotional experiences. Tabloids more than other publications, with their metaphorical, sensationalist language, try hard to shape how audiences view the reports and political ideas that they disseminate, which are meant to

manufacture consent within one specific target audience. Therefore, the use of metaphors in this kind of journalism is by definition a misuse of metaphors. Instead of allowing their audiences to see things more clearly and more critically, these metaphors simplify, mystify and manipulate their target audiences, appealing to their biases and feelings, which are previously known both by the owners of the periodicals and by the authors working for those particular periodicals.

The research is meant to support the claim that the use of metaphors is being coupled with the desire to manipulate readers' perceptions. This may be a difficult problem to solve since it will require a more active attitude on the part of the audiences to deal with the power of the metaphors in the articles they read. With the potential benefits that metaphors provide to the author, and with the vividness that they add to the discourse, this is unlikely to happen soon. Such tabloid texts, like literary texts, appeal to people's emotions, even if the quality of the two kinds of texts, journalistic and literary, may be very different.

The final chapter comes up with a more comprehensive framework for the discussion of the problematics in the previous two chapters through the critical examination of two ideologically different articles in the realm of political agendas on immigration. This chapter engages in this discussion by means of the mechanisms offered by the theoretical resources of CDA and SFG. These frameworks were applied to one article by David Siders and one stating the official position of the DNC (Democratic National Committee)'s political agenda. Past, current, and future policies on immigration are evoked in relation to the confrontation seen in politics metaphorically as a battle for the 2024 presidential elections.

David Siders' *Politico* article — “Republicans Go All-In on Immigration as a Political Weapon,” published on June 30, 2021, in anticipation of a Republican political party rally for the 2024 presidential elections, reveals both the relevance of context and of the linguistic framework adopted for the textual analysis in terms of characterization, generalizations, patterns, over-lexicalization, transitivity, thematization, lexical cohesion, metaphorical analysis. Thus, in terms of characterization, the dramatic and powerful headline (to go all-in in a gambling venture, a sort of American roulette?) is supportive of Republican views, highlighting discourse which negatively impacts on the ideology of

the Democratic Party. In terms of generalization, the Democratic Party positions as well as specific issues related to immigration are all wrapped up in an overall discourse of failure and negativity. Lexical cohesion elements and metaphorical language combine to bring together terms associated with war, failures, and confusion attached to the Democratic Party, while achievement, effectiveness, and a good strategy are associated with the Republican Party.

All in all, the article intends to stress the strengths of the Republican Party to use its immigration discourse as a key focus point for the upcoming presidential election in 2024 as both sides prepare policy reforms, seen differently by the author, with the Republican side obviously shown as superior. The basis of Siders's article is obviously the Republican platform, which is strongly advertised and supported. The article discusses the political agenda of the Republican Party through an examination of public policy related to immigration. This is one of the articles in which the ideological dimension is so openly declared that the intended power of words appears to be somewhat undermined by the directness of the political message.

At the opposite ideological pole is the article supporting the DNC: "DNC Statement on Donald Trump's Trip to the US-Mexico Border," which, as the title shows, starts from a specific detail. The article was published on June 30, 2021, in anticipation of a Republican political party rally for the 2024 presidential elections to combat articles like the above-mentioned Republican-focused article. It obviously focuses on the strengths of the Democratic Party in the area of immigration policy after the Trump Administration in hopes of eliciting trust for future immigration policy for the upcoming election based as well on prior Democratic Administrations. DNC uses the article to remind readers of the negative aspects of immigration standings during the Trump Administration. The article spends much time discussing the need to fix the immigration issues after former President Trump's departure from the White House. It highlights the hard work and effort that the Biden administration put in to correct the issues regarding immigration that were left from the prior administration. The same frameworks (characterization, generalizations, patterns, over-lexicalization, transitivity, thematization, lexical cohesion, metaphorical analysis) are used. The question is whether these frameworks are effective in the clarification of ideological work on audiences in general

or only on those sensitive to Democratic Party discourse. Background knowledge and political context, as well as the previous performance of the party in previous administrations are obviously as important as propaganda tactics on both sides, which confirms the importance of context in CDA.

The language resources were used to support, with different degrees of success, the underlying ideology towards immigration and discrimination in the texts. Through the close examination of these articles, a critical reader may be able to discern and understand the manipulation tactics used in public discourse, especially at election time. Such mechanisms and tactics continue to influence large sections of American society through the creation and perpetuation of discrimination, bias, and xenophobia. It is only through the understanding of these mechanisms that are used by writers that readers, including large target audiences, can better see the underlying ideological weight within the text as discourse.

The research done on the selected corpus appears to confirm the overall expectations associated with the research tasks and hypotheses that preceded it. What appeared to complicate the clarity of the general picture is something easy to understand. Discourses, like culture in general, like human communities, are dynamic entities, which keep changing. They are also complex and sometimes contradictory. Diversity and dynamism are some of their key features of immigration narratives, with racism, bias, discrimination, xenophobia changing their configurations. Their negative features are sometimes well hidden, but they still exist. Whether one can state that there is systemic racism in such countries as the United States is a claim open to interpretation, like many other cultural aspects.

This thesis includes linguistic analyses of American tabloid articles within a broader interpretation which also referred to significant contextual elements. It examines the language means used by some articles to target their audiences in order to shape public opinion regarding immigration issues in the United States. The doctoral dissertation examines how language plays a key role in racial stigmatization, thus confirming and naturalizing racist and anti-immigration discourse.

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