

Investigating emancipatory discourses in action: The need for an interventionist approach and an activist-scholar posture

Department of English Language, Linguistics and Writing
University of the West of England
Bristol, UK
Email: narteynartey60@gmail.com

Abstract

This Special Issue provides a collection of cutting-edge research that examines discourses that serve emancipatory agendas by taking a social justice approach. To this end, the issue draws on data from Africa, Latin America, North America and the Arab Levant to illuminate how members of non-dominant and marginalized (disempowered) groups sculpt a positive image for themselves, engage in solidarity formation for group empowerment and reconstruct their experiences in a manner that gives them voice, agency and a positive identity. The issue argues for a more interventionist stance in ideologically oriented discourse analysis and demonstrates why (critical) discourse analysts must not only expose and resist the inequities or injustices in society but, more crucially, also adopt an activist-scholar posture in order to push for positive social change.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, emancipatory discourse, non-dominant or minority groups, language and identities, voice and agency

Introduction

Since its emergence in the late 1980s, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) has become one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis. A transdisciplinary, text-analytical approach to critical social research, CDS aims to analyse 'opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak 1995: 204). It achieves this objective by studying 'real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take (partially) linguistic form. The critical approach is distinctive in its view of (a) the relationship between language and society and (b) the relationship between analysis and the practices analysed' (Wodak 1997: 173). With this focus of attention, research in CDA straddles between language and social structure and often manifests in topics that reveal 'the way social power, abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (van Dijk 2001: 352).

The CDA program, in the last three decades, has expanded both theoretically and methodologically. Hence, apart from traditional schools of thought such as dialectical-relational, socio-cognitive, discourse-historical and social actors approaches, recent developments have integrated insights from corpus linguistics, membership categorization analysis, critical metaphor analysis, feminist studies, geosemiotics, narrative analysis, discourse-mythological analysis and social media analysis, among others. The incorporation of these research paradigms complements the broader theoretical principles of CDA, which orient towards demystifying and revealing power asymmetries, exploitation, manipulation and structural inequalities as part of socially, politically and culturally occurring phenomena (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000).

Beyond the deconstruction of oppression, discrimination and exclusionism

Although one of the aims of CDA research is to demonstrate how social inequality, power abuse and discriminatory practices can be resisted, the majority of studies have centered on the deconstruction of oppression and ideologically driven discrimination rather than the reconstruction of resistance or how individuals as members of social groups contend with and resist social structures and strictures (Hughes 2018; Nartey 2021a, 2021b). These studies have mainly researched the way ideology works through discourse to maintain unequal power structures and produce exclusionist and prejudiced discourses. As Lazar (2014: 188) notes, ‘In CDA scholarship, studies on how discourse is used by historically disadvantaged groups to resist and challenge the social status quo remain largely undeveloped, even though the potential exists’. Hence, the role of CDA research in highlighting the importance of emancipatory discourses (rather than dominant discourses) as well as shedding light on issues bordering on the voice, agency and empowerment of marginalized groups is lacking in the literature. Given that CDA advocates social commitment and interventionism in research, the need for the aforementioned gap to be addressed cannot be overemphasized. It is in this direction that this Special Issue threads the needle.

The Special Issue provides a collection of cutting-edge research that examines discourses that serve emancipatory agendas. The issue does not only continue with the tradition of elucidating how discourse can be used to promote a better understanding of culture and identity, but also offers insights into how discourse can be construed as

an inspiring artefact. The issue brings into focus: (a) how discourse can be used to center the voice and agency of minority groups, including their positive self-presentation and their solidarity formation for group empowerment, (b) how feminists re-make gender relations in our world, (c) how non-dominant groups actively resist injustices and hegemonic discourses directed against them, (d) how discourse can be used to advance the goals of repressed groups in order to instigate progressive social change and (e) access to forms of discourse that can be empowering for marginalized groups' participation in social domains.

By focusing on these issues from the perspective of members of non-dominant groups themselves, the issue illuminates how marginalized (disempowered) groups or oppressed peoples reconstruct their experiences in a manner that gives them voice, agency and a positive identity. As Breeze (2011: 521) notes, 'discourse analysis that explores emancipatory discourses or positive changes in social language use would be useful [in providing] information about the way that positive transformations can be brought about'. In other words, the issue's emphasis on the processes, practices and discursive strategies of emancipatory discourses and the impact of such discourses put the spotlight on CDA's commitment to translational research and a discourse of social change. The Special Issue consists of seven contributions, including this introduction. The collection of papers utilizes multiple theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, draws on data from different parts of the world, including Africa, Latin America, North America and the Arab Levant, and the contributors are concerned with how members of marginalized groups give voice to their concerns, foreground their agency and sculpt a positive identity for themselves. All contributions add to, and build on, existing discussions on discursive positioning, the construction of agency and discourses of resistance.

Overview of studies

Innocent Chilwa begins the Special Issue with an exploration of women's online advocacy campaigns in Ghana and Nigeria. Drawing on social movement theory and computer-mediated discourse analysis, Chilwa's paper analyzes the websites and social media platforms of women action groups in Nigeria and Ghana, with a focus on political participation. In Ghana and Nigeria, even though women are given equal rights under the constitution, disparities in education, employment and socioeconomic

status are prevalent and the gender imbalance in the societal structure is obvious. Hence, Chilwa's study significantly contributes to growing feminist efforts in Ghana and Nigeria by illustrating how feminists utilize the affordances of online media to project their voice and demand the rights of women to political leadership. Importantly, the study shows that the use of online media to promote feminist efforts in (West) Africa has a limitation since digital platforms are available to only few – and often educated – members of the population who have access to the Internet. Hence, there is a need for feminist work aimed at a much bigger audience, including vulnerable rural women, illiterates and the underprivileged. By situating his study in Africa, Chilwa redresses the disproportion of scholarship focusing on women and feminism in the Global North, and readers are required to engage with work that transcends the canonical European and Anglo-American sphere.

The second contribution by Carolina Pérez Arredondo and Camila Cárdenas-Neira investigates the semiotic resources employed in the Chilean feminist performance piece *Un violador en tu camino* ['A rapist in your way']. Their study employs an interdisciplinary framework, including feminist critical discourse analysis, corporeal sociolinguistics and multimodality, to analyze video recordings of the performance in three cities in Latin America (Santiago, Buenos Aires and Mexico City). The findings reveal that the sounds, lyrics, body movements and accessories combine to defy material, symbolic and institutional violence against women. Access to forms of discourse that can be empowering for women's participation in public domains is extremely significant. Arredondo and Cárdenas-Neira's work highlights the use of language and other semiotic modes in achieving this objective, while attending to issues at the intersection of language and social dynamics in specific geographical contexts.

The paper by Eleonora Esposito and Francesco Sinatora addresses a gap in activist scholarship by examining an underexplored phenomenon – post Arab-spring feminist activism in the Middle East. The study explores the digital meaning-making of feminist activist groups in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria using a social media critical discourse studies approach, and reveals the complex interplay of (digital) self-representation, local resistance and transregional networking of Levantine women. Based on their findings, Esposito and Sinatora propose the concept of *digital*

mirroring, an emerging techno-social phenomenon that encompasses diverse multimodal discursive strategies through which activists transcend local sociopolitical boundaries in the shaping of a contemporary digital Arab feminism.

The next paper by Mark Nartey investigates the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement's use of Twitter to promote an emancipatory agenda for Black communities/people. He analyzes various discursive mechanisms deployed by the movement to resist institutional oppression and systemic racism with vehemence, while advocating freedom, liberation and justice for Black people. The paper demonstrates that through these strategies, the BLM movement amplifies the voice(s) of Black people and moves issues concerning their development, progress and welfare from the margins to the center. In light of current happenings in the United States, especially the pervasiveness of White supremacy, Nartey's work is timely, relevant to contemporary sociopolitical issues and contributes to a sociopolitical critique of institutional practices and structures geared towards social transformation.

The agency and discursive positioning of bilingual preservice teachers (PSTs) is the focus of Amber Warren and Natalia Ward's paper. The authors analyze discussions from online language teacher education, in the context of the United States, to understand how conversations between monolingual and bilingual preservice teachers create and delimit structural constraints on teachers' agency. Their study employs positioning theory within a critical discursive psychology approach and the findings show that PSTs tactfully resist structural constraints and construct themselves as agentive by simultaneously positioning themselves and others as capable of and responsible for education of emergent bilingual students (EBs). In addition to informing theoretical understandings of agency, Warren and Ward's paper holds practical implications for teacher preparation programs as they guide PSTs towards equitable education of EBs.

The final contribution by Isaac Mwinlaaru and Mark Nartey critically engages with national anthems of colonized states, a key text-type that has been neglected in the literature on the discourse of emancipation. Arguing that national anthems provide a space for 'writing back' to the colonial powers, the authors examine the discursive construction of resistance in the anthems of former British colonies in Africa and show the need for the (re)construction of relevant ideologies in national anthems to

stimulate desirable, progressive attitudes among citizenry in African states. The emancipatory intervention in this work stems from the outset in the choice of research subject and design, as the paper represents one of the first attempts at examining the discursive construction of resistance and emancipation in national anthems. The paper thus contributes to decolonial research and underscores the role of discourse in political decolonization processes.

Conclusion

This Special Issue does not assume that discourses and social practices that reinforce dominance, oppression, discrimination and exclusionism must no longer receive the attention of (critical) discourse analysts. However, it argues for a more interventionist stance in ideologically oriented discourse analysis by focusing not only on deconstructing language in the service of power, but also highlighting discourses that serve emancipatory agendas (cf. Martin 2012). It achieves its emancipatory objective by taking resistance and agency as its object of analysis and investigating discourses that actively resist structural inequalities and power asymmetries. The issue thus advances theoretical understanding of ‘possibilities for transformations capable of enhancing human flourishing and mitigating social ills’ (Hughes 2018: 199).

As has been established in the CDA literature, the dehumanization and/or devaluation of oppressed groups is accomplished through text, talk and social practice. Hence, I submit that as applied linguists and (critical) discourse analysts, we must not only expose and resist the inequalities and injustices in society, but must also adopt an activist-scholar posture in order to push for positive social change. By so doing, our research will not only be done *on* social groups, but more importantly, *for* and *with* them. Admittedly, there might be good reasons why some scholars may not want to adopt an activist-researcher stance, but it is hoped that this Special Issue has shed light on the role of scholars as public transformative intellectuals and demonstrated the need for scholars to promote a social justice agenda and/or let advocacy and empowerment be included in our work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Mark Nartey is a Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the Bristol Centre for Linguistics, University of the West of England. He is an interdisciplinary scholar who specializes in corpus-assisted discourse studies, with a focus on issues at the intersection of language, culture and society. He is interested in how discourse figures in social processes, social structures and social change. He has published extensively in (critical) discourse studies, with his recent papers appearing in *Discourse & Communication*, *Gender and Language* and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

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