

## Teaching and learning discourse analysis: some ideas on the use of ICTs

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**Abstract.** ICTs have played a major role in transforming the way we teach and learn. The purpose of this paper is to present some ideas on how ICTs can be implemented in the teaching and learning of discourse analysis. ICTs offer valuable material to help explain key theoretical concepts of discourse analysis and to examine linguistic and social reality. A tweet, a video song, a speech, an advertisement or a hoax-mail may enhance students' motivation and stimulate critical thinking.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, ICTs, language teaching, language learning

### 1 Introduction

Discourse analysis (DA) is a broad interdisciplinary field which studies how language is used within its social context. Rather than being considered a clear paradigm of well-defined practices, DA includes somewhat diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. DA has plenty of utilitarian aspects as a method for teaching languages at different levels (i.e. McCarthy & Carter 1994; Norton 2008). Not only does it exemplify new ways of looking at grammar and vocabulary (i.e. McCarthy 1991), but it also encourages students to develop their critical thinking skills (i.e. Cots 2006). DA can be applied to any text or situation, so that a song, a photo, an e-mail or a video can become the subject of linguistic examination and social debate.

The purpose of this paper is to present some ideas on how information and communications technologies (ICTs) can be implemented in the teaching and learning of DA. ICTs offer attractive material which connects with students' interests and strengthens their motivation. Through this material students can analyze linguistic and social reality in a critical manner. The DA classroom can be considered the initiating

stage to activate students' assessment of the information they receive and to turn them into critical learners and citizens.

The proposals presented in this paper are based on the methodology employed in the optional subject *Lingüística Inglesa II*, belonging to the previous degree in *Filología Inglesa* taught at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Although the degree in Modern Languages currently on offer at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria does not include any course on DA, the approach suggested might be worth considering either for subsequent reforms of the teaching plan in the existing degree, aiming to provide more linguistic courses, or as part of Master's Degree.

The purpose to accomplish in this piece of work is twofold: to demonstrate how the materials presented exemplify some key theoretical concepts of DA and how these resources provide a valuable platform to perform some practical exercises of DA. The methodology adopted fulfils the main objectives set in the previous degree for the subject *Lingüística Inglesa II* and which should also be included in any course on DA:

- To provide essential theoretical concepts and tools for the analysis of texts.
- To consider the text an instrument of social action.
- To encourage students to undertake critical assessments on texts following coherent reasoning.

## **2 Some Ideas: a Resource, a Concept**

The procedure followed in this paper is to match the explanation of some crucial concepts in DA with different types of materials where the theoretical aspects under study are reflected in some way. In general terms, the resources provided by ICTs will be exploited in order to demonstrate the function of discourse as a form of social practice, and additionally, as an instrument of power and ideological control (Fairclough 1995).

Since the approach presented here is set in a higher education context of Spanish students learning English linguistics, the different types of discourse employed will be mainly in English. However, bearing in mind that the linguistic concepts explained may also be applied to the

study of other languages, on occasion texts in Spanish may also prove appealing and effective.

## 2.1 A Tweet: Grammar and Discourse Analysis

The analysis of a tweet by a well-known Spanish footballer can be explored to introduce the difference between grammar and DA:

“Un poco triste por la derrota pero satisfecho del trabajo y esfuerzo realizado. Hoy he jugado de medio retrasado”.<sup>1</sup> [Feeling a bit sad for the defeat, but satisfied with the work and effort I’ve made. I’ve been a bit behind on the pitch today.]<sup>2</sup>

The following questions based on Salkie’s (1995: ix-x) introduction to *Text and Discourse Analysis* should guide the student in the process of inferring the difference between both concepts:

Grammar or discourse analysis?

- In which case a sentence that does not work is ungrammatical?
- In which case a text that does not work is incoherent?
- Which one tries to lay down how people should speak and write?
- Which one tries to describe how people actually do speak and write?

Students will realize to what extent the comments made by this famous footballer reflect how a grammatically-correct sentence may not be appropriate within its social context. Using texts related to both actual events and charismatic sports figures will awaken their consciousness as regards the social and linguistic impact of the DA considerations.

Twitter allows people to involve in communities of shared values and to create social bonds. It is “the place you go when you want to find out what people are saying about a topic right now” (Zappavigna 2011: 804). By examining some research, such as Zappavigna’s (2011) study on how language is used to build community through tweets, stu-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://alcompasdeljuego.com/2013/11/02/sergio-ramos-fue-medio-retrasado-en-el-clasico/>

<sup>2</sup> Author’s translation.

dents will realize how twitter, as a system that makes meaning with language and enacts social relationships, may fail dismally on occasions by an inaccurate use of the language. Most importantly, they will realize the responsibility assigned to public figures who may turn a linguistic contribution, supposedly aiming to enhance some common social, political or cultural links, into the centre of much derision. The analysis of the structure and meaning of further tweets might evince how Twitter works as a semiotic activity where sometimes the nature of the meaning which is negotiated through language by affiliated members may get distorted.

## 2.2 A Song: Interrelationship Discourse-Society

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) (i.e. Fairclough 1995) studies discourse as a tool for the social construction of reality and as an instrument of power and ideological control. Discourse “implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it” (Fairclough & Wodak 1997: 258). Thus, the relationship between discourse and social context operates in two directions, in such a way that both discourse is shaped by social conditions and context is affected by discourse structures as well.

Through the following activity students will notice how this bidirectional relationship works for all kinds of texts, ranging from the ones traditionally considered socially relevant (i.e. a political speech) to other seemingly minor types of texts (i.e. the lyrics of a song). In order to exemplify it, students are presented Aleshinskaya’s (2013) paper, where musical discourse is interpreted as social practice within the framework of CDA. In this study, the author adopts an interdisciplinary approach, which includes social, psychological, gestural, technical or visual information, to examine how musical discourse represents specific aspects of the social environment.

After commenting Aleshinskaya’s (2013) article, an analysis of the video of the song ‘Love the Way you Lie’ on YouTube is proposed.<sup>3</sup> This song, performed by the American rapper Eminem and the Barbadian singer Rihanna, describes two lovers in a dangerous love-hate relationship. Students should focus on these questions:

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uelHwf8o7\\_U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uelHwf8o7_U)

- What type of relationship is depicted in the video?
- Do you think some personal experiences in difficult relationships may have influenced the decision of both singers to perform the song?
- Can you describe any aggressive scenes on the video which might influence the audience?

As a part of our popular culture, the interrelationship or mutual influence between discourse and society is clearly represented in music. Not only does music reflect social reality, but it can also influence the behaviour and attitude of the people who listen to it, especially adolescents. Thus, the main purpose of this activity is to promote debate on the social impact of music. Students should realize how the changes undergone by lyrics, with explicit references to violence, drugs, sex and misogyny, have become an issue of concern for society. When illustrated in music videos, the influence of music lyrics is especially noticeable. Although suggestive lyrical content and images may not cause violence directly, it may encourage its audience. Thus, DA should inspire debate on the power of music to convey damaging messages to a vulnerable audience.

### 2.3 An Advertisement: Social Inequality

DA with critical purposes takes a particular interest in issues of social inequality. More importantly, the text is constructed through the interaction of linguistic agents that hold a particular position in the social structure. Individuals have their own identity within the social dimension of discourse: “to use language is always, inevitably, to enter into particular positions” (Kress 1990: 90).

Learners are presented the advertisement ‘Inspiring Guinness Wheelchair Basketball Commercial’ from YouTube, where a wheelchair basketball game is portrayed, although only one of the players is a disabled person.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this activity is to analyze the concept of social inequality as it is depicted in the advertisement. These questions would guide the debate:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Vxjh6KJi8E>

- How does the advertisement deal with social stereotypes and the disabled?
- Which scenes or words capture the attention of the audience in a most effective way?
- Do you think that the idea of befriending a disabled person might be offensive for the disabled?

Finally, the analysis made by the students will be contrasted with the opinion of a disabled person<sup>5</sup>: “By representing inclusion of disabled people as inspiring, this both reflects existing social stigma and can cause nondisabled people to continue to subconsciously perceive us as somehow being less than”.

Advertisements offer many advantages for teaching purposes: they make learning more entertaining and vivid, they incorporate images and text in a very precise and effective manner, they are comparatively short, and they also reflect the culture and social system where the discourse is produced. However, the reality depicted may be subject to different interpretations. Thus, a further objective of this activity is to illustrate how sometimes advertisements do not achieve the intended purpose. Different interpretations may come to the fore, some of them producing a divergence between intention and interpretation. This mismatch seems to be reasonable since the creators of the product to be sold and the likely recipients assume significantly different contexts, and context influences their interpretation as well.

#### 2.4 Hoax E-mail: Naturalization

CDA claims that it is naturalization that gives ideological representations the status of common sense (Fairclough 1995, 2001). “A dominant discourse is subject to a process of naturalization, in which it appears to lose its connection with particular ideologies and interests and become the common-sense practice of the institution” (Fairclough 2001: 89). Critical positions aim to elucidate how naturalization operates, unveiling the social determinations and the effects of discourse which may remain implicit or opaque to interlocutors. Naturalization processes make use of strategies in a subtle way. In this sense, the objective of critical analysis is to ‘denaturalize’ the text by revealing its

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<sup>5</sup> <http://wordsiwheelby.com/2013/09/just-one-of-the-guys/>

strategies and hidden motivations. As Fairclough (1995: 27) suggests, “denaturalization involves showing how social structures determine properties of discourse, and how discourse in turn determines social structures”.

The electronic mail has become an everyday part of our Internet experience in both personal and work-related contexts. In the last few years deceptive messages have proliferated a lot, giving evidence of how being excessively explicit may affect the persuasive effect of the text. In the following activity students will explore how the process of naturalization in a hoax mail fails, since fraudulent intentions are too evident. In these cases, strategies are not used skillfully, which turns them into ‘xstrategies’ with a highly dissuasive effect on the reader.

#### AWARD NOTIFICATION LETTER<sup>6</sup>

Dear Winner,

It is very certain to us that this notification will come to you as a surprise. Please take your time to read this notification carefully as we Congratulate you on and for being a Winner in this Internet Promotional Lottery program which was organized by Yahoo in conjunction with the British National Lottery Commission during which your EMAIL ADDRESS emerged as one of the ONLINE WINNING EMAILS and subsequently won you the sum of \$ 900,000.00 (NINE HUNDRED THOUSAND UNITED STATES DOLLARS)

Therefore, on your urgent reply to this message, the details for the winning prize payment will be released to you.

Kindly Fill the Form below and send the details to the Payment Officer whose contact appears below:

MARTINEZ BABBY

Email: martbabby@gmail.com

#### 2.5 A Speech from a Film: Critical Position

Non-critical or descriptive approaches underestimate the way in which discursive practices are socially moulded or their social effects (Fairclough 1995: 23). CDA takes a particular socio-political position: “Their perspective, if possible, that of those who suffer most from dominance and inequality. Their critical targets are the power elites that

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<sup>6</sup> E-mail taken from the personal inbox of the author of this paper.

enact, sustain, legitimate, condone or ignore social inequality and injustice” (Dijk 1993: 252).

‘The Great Dictator’ is a satirical political film written, produced, and starring Charlie Chaplin where he denounced Nazism. Students will be asked to analyze his final speech taking into account the critical position he adopted towards the socio-political context existing at that time.<sup>7</sup> Students will have to find some information regarding the social and political situation in the world in 1940, when the film was released, as well as information about the plot and main characters of the film. They should also focus on the people the speech is directed to, namely viewers outside the film and/or the dictator’s audience. The purpose is to identify the strategies employed by “the great dictator” to take a “critical” position as regards the world context in that period.

### **3 Results Obtained**

The results obtained after putting some of these ideas into practice prove quite encouraging. Integrating ICTs enriches the teaching and learning of DA. A song, an advertisement, a film or a tweet can help learners visualize and understand fundamental concepts in DA. Using ICTs increases the interest of students in the course, since they can appreciate how the theoretical concepts studied can be transferred to their everyday life. Critical learning awakens students’ curiosity about the information they receive through different means. They become conscious both of the potential of words to influence the reader and shape his behavior, and the potential of critical skills to interpret society and culture. They perceive how most types of texts can be assessed as tangible and attractive instruments to interpret culture, and how they can even reveal hidden meanings or motivations. All things considered, a range of perceived practical and motivational benefits supports the noticeable enthusiasm of teachers for the use of ICTs in the DA classroom. Additionally, teaching DA through ICTs makes students aware that there is a rich and complex world outside class to be “criticalised”.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcvjoWOwnn4>



## 4 Conclusion

New technologies have played a main role in transforming teaching and learning methods. They have enhanced the variety of material likely to be used, as well as the authenticity of the tasks. The purpose of this paper has been to exemplify the potential of ICTs as teaching tools in DA to help explain and make visible some key theoretical concepts. Integrating ICTs into teaching facilitates and enriches learning. It also motivates students and promotes higher-level reasoning. But above all, it shows the great diversity of resources available for students to visualize concepts and to stimulate critical thinking.

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