



## **Book Review: Laura Felton Rosulek. (2015). *Dueling Discourses: The Construction of Reality in Closing Arguments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 248.**

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Discourse is communication and communication may imply manipulation. Simple as this looks, the performance of language is crucial for the gaining of the goals if we are talking about politics, businesses and any other transaction setting. Trials are very much to the fore.

In an era where instant communication media is spread to every corner of the world and where every piece of information gets homes, portables or phones of every citizen, manipulation or information that is not accurate is a topic that cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, the use and misuse of the facts and events that media, politicians and other agents make use of is well-known and lots of studies have been done so far.

In this sense, legal discourses do not escape of this influence. Even worse, the power that jurors, defenders, prosecutors and others over language, discourse and exposition of the crimes bias us to think who are good or bad lawyers rather than who are innocent or guilty. Unfortunately, not being in all cases the good ones with the right verdict. In this sense, the author of this book names three conditions in which this may happen: silencing, emphasizing and de-emphasizing. The author also provides a table (7.5, pages 204-5) in which she summarizes a wide selection of means for achieving silence, de-emphasis and emphasis in discourse, valid for the study of any sort of text.

This book represents a qualitative and quantitative analysis of seventeen criminal

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trials of the closing arguments or summations in the trials. The originality of the book resides not only in the big number of cases, never done before, but also in that these court trials were celebrated in the same town during a relatively short period of time (1997-2005).

But the best attractiveness of the book is in my opinion the combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and linguistics of persuasion and argumentation through sociolinguistics and discourse analysis theoretical frames. Indeed, being so much criticized in some forums for its lack of consistency Critical Discourse Analysis here is expressed within a theoretical and corpus frame where silence represents a new genre of discourse.

The organization of the book is as follows: Chapters one and two explain the theoretical frame in which the study is based on; next chapters dedicate long pages in the different agent in a court trial: the defendants, the victims, the jurors and the lawyers; chapter seven, called "The Big Picture", deals with some final conclusions.

Chapter one is not simply a retelling of the theoretical presuppositions in which the corpus relies. Since the very first paragraph it represents the application of that frame in the data analyzed. So, as Critical Discourse Analysis does not provide a methodology itself, she explores data within the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework. I want to highlight subchapter number six: "Discourse as Constructions of a Social World" is remarkably revealing while she explains those linguistic elements relevant to her study from a discursive perspective. For example, she names the use of plural pronouns and acknowledges and explains how they create "social groups". This is a fact especially relevant in this sort of discourses insofar as the different agents may use the plural pronoun "we" to refer to the society in abstract, to the victim and jurors or the lawyer and jurors, and so on.

On the other hand, subchapter number eight is the most relevant since it focuses on the core of the book: the three elements to be analyzed with their different possibilities and examples. This is limited to Critical Discourse Analysis in the sense that many political discourses omit relevant information about an event purposely. In this way, society can change the bias towards that happening according to the focus of the exposition.

But if the chapter dedicated to the theoretical frame is engaging, next are even more. The different characters implied in a jury are analyzed extensively. The different roles and the linguistic analysis reflect the subjectivity and manipulation these speeches convey. Indeed, explanations are accompanied with examples taken from the corpus analyzed, and we can see in the different examples how the use of the title or the word "defendant" instead, can be used with the purpose of providing a status to the person defended. Following Halliday's classification (1994) of processes and the

different categories according to the verbs used that represent events, the qualitative analysis is shown revealing. It is also established the importance of the focus in the same trial from the prosecutor's and defendants' viewpoint. Relating the same process, the recipient of the focus will bias the vision of the facts.

The study not only includes the semantic properties of the lexical items used but the power of silencing, de-emphasizing and emphasizing. These last two features are used through the use of first person names, euphemisms and dysphemisms. Related to silencing, it looks as if they were irrelevant facts for the lawyers. Note that, for example, prosecutors don't use the word "victim" but employs his/her first name. Another example is the use of different verbs with similar meaning but slightly different connotation: *suffer* and *die* versus *cry* and *fall*. Also, the importance of pronouns and deictic elements "to silence the passive role of the jurors in the creation of the present discourse" (p. 156) is analyzed.

Every element analyzed in the seventeen trials that represent the corpus is offered with some tables that reflect the statistics in the use. Although these results are not much surprising the interest of the book resides in the description of those strategies used to silence, emphasize and de-emphasize the events.

To end with, if we had to state a criticism in the research, some readers could miss a deeper interpretation of the tables exposed. Indeed, the study is overwhelming and the tables reflect a deep analysis of the corpus, but the final section of every chapter could be more extensive about how we manipulate with words and the intention when doing that.

## About the author

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