CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN THE AGE OF MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION

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The present paper is intended to develop a theory on the aspects that should be considered while meaning is made and conveyed, in the context of multimodal communication, emphasizing the way in which the discourse constructs and deconstructs versions of the social world. The term theory refers to a set of insights, a collection of categories, intended to provide a conceptual understanding of the self and the world, as well as a rational support for such understanding. The paper is therefore an inductive approach, specific to qualitative research. Considering that inductive reasoning entails the derivation of a general principle, a new insight or a theory from a body of systematically collected knowledge, the grounded theory is employed as the research method.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; grounded theory; multimodal communication; coding; framing; positioning;

INTRODUCTION

Language, as a system of symbols conventionally adopted by individuals, is central to any form of communication and social interaction. Therefore, linguistics becomes the core of any discussion about identities and relationships. An example in this regard is the act of defining. Defining something/someone is an act of placement involving an entity that defines, one that is defined, and a rational process, while changing a definition entails a reorganization of the identification and disidentification process, resulting in a new category or identity as well as in a new relationship.

In connection with the present paper, I consider necessary some explanatory notes with reference to the terms used in the title. Thus, discourse should be understood as any interchange of ideas and concepts, achieved through written, verbal and nonverbal means of communication. In this context, critical discourse analysis is a tool that helps individuals to understand how language, as it has been previously defined, and implicitly the self, are situated in a specific cultural, social and historical dynamics, taking into account that language has a significant role in the power game (Foucault, 1972). Thus, critical discourse analysis is not used here as a research method. Multimodal communication is a holistic type of communication, involving written, verbal and nonverbal communication, images, iconic elements and one or more devices. An interesting mention that should be made here is that it was initially employed to help people with special needs to communicate and, over time and benefitting from the technological progress, it has become widely used.

The aim of the paper is to develop a theory on the aspects that should be considered while meaning is made and conveyed, in the context of multimodal communication, emphasizing the way in which the discourse constructs and deconstructs versions of the social

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world. The term theory refers to a set of insights, a collection of categories, intended to provide a conceptual understanding of the self and the world, as well as a rational support for such understanding. In the particular case considered in this paper, the developed theory, which is not a grand theory, although the terms are often equated in metaperspective, is meant to explain the underlying processes involved in people's symbolic interaction, which is difficult if not impossible to measure. The paper is therefore an inductive approach, specific to qualitative research. Inductive reasoning entails the derivation of a general principle, a new insight or a theory from a body of systematically collected knowledge and observations that are subject to analysis and interpretation. Considering the above-mentioned aspects, the best option in developing the paper is the employment of grounded theory as the research method.

Grounded theory has been developed for over fifty years as a research method appropriate for qualitative research processes, contributing to their legitimation as scientific inquiries, in the absence of statistical data. Providing explicit and sequential data for research, it allows for streamlining and integrating data collection and analysis as well as for developing novel insights.

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Grounded theory approach entails the existence of some relatively common techniques and steps that are conducive to developing an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under research, which may be the developed theory. Moreover, data are collected in a cyclical and iterative manner, each iteration representing a step closer to developing the theory. The mentioned techniques and steps can be grouped under the following topics: theoretical sampling, coding paradigm and theory development. Although the method is an inductive one, considering that it is almost impossible for a particular research topic to have no coverage nowadays, theoretical sampling is the deductive component of grounded theory, mainly referring to data collection

and analysis, taking into account the problem of saturation. Saturation may refer to both data and theoretical concepts. The general perception is that audience claim for saturation, which is not the case in relation to this method that is rather intended to describe and understand phenomena as well as to identify boundaries and develop insights based on theoretical sampling and coding.

THEORETICAL SAMPLING

As aforementioned, it represents the deductive component of the employed method. Considering the impossibility of either providing all the pieces of information about the research topic or starting it from scratch, theoretical sampling is intended to achieve a balance between the two mentioned aspects, mainly in relation to data collection and analysis.

Language can be understood as a system of signs that, following certain rules, convey a meaning. A sign has the particularity of producing a meaning, other than the sign itself, being the subject of a cognitive process on the part of the interpreter. Semiotics is the study of meaning-making based on signs or a specific sequence of signs.

The fact that the sign does not directly signifies, the meaning being different from the sign itself, entails coding and decoding. A code is a system in which a word, number, symbol, image, gesture etc. stands for something else. To find out a meaning for that *"something else"*, a decoding process is necessary.

Coding/decoding processes entail certain combination rules (syntax), which provide them with a degree of structure, as well as certain cultural units (meme), which explain the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena. The term meme comes from the Greek mimeme, meaning imitated thing, shortened following the model of gene.

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It naturally follows that, in a communication situation, there is an encoder/sender and a decoder/receiver. The encoder uses verbal or nonverbal language, as well as images, icons and certain devices, in the case of multimodal communication, to transmit a message. The way the message is encoded is closely related to the purpose of the message.

The decoder/receiver translates the code in order to understand and interpret the message. The translation is a cognitive process, being related to own cultural and relational, namely, social context. It entails both the deconstruction and the reconstruction of the message. Deconstruction (Derrida, 1976) refers to the fact that the message is broken down into comprehensible units, while reconstruction entails a reinterpretation of the units as a whole. Mention should be made that deconstruction and reconstruction processes are not the same for all decoders. That is why, in general, a feedback mechanism is necessary so that the degree of equivalence between the sender intention and the receiver interpretation can be as high as possible in order for communication to be effective.

Therefore, traditionally, a communication model basically involves an encoder/sender, a message, a channel, a decoder/receiver, as well as the implicit cognitive processes and the feedback mechanisms. However, with the emergence of new ways of communication, mainly those facilitated by the technological progress, in the context of multimodality, new models have been advanced.

New communication models essentially entail four processes, namely, production, circulation, use and reproduction, which can be both autonomous and interdependent. Thus, production is defined as the operation of codes within the rules of language. In this context, it is appreciated that communication between the production entities and their audiences is necessarily a form of systematically distorted communication, as an event becomes, more or less literally, a story before it becomes a communication event (Hall, 1973, pp. 1-4). Therefore, production has its own discursive aspect. As for circulation, the audience is both the source and the receiver. With respect to the use, messages are encoded in the form of a meaningful discourse. Last but not least, reproduction refers to the effect of the message/discourse, which has perceptual, cognitive, emotional and behavioural consequences. Thus, decoding does not inevitably follow from encoding. (Hall, 2009, pp. 163-174).

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CODING PARADIGM

From the very beginning mention should be made that the coding paradigm chapter includes two sections – one in relation to coding in communication and the other in relation to coding in grounded theory research method.

Coding in communication

Coding is a term that generally refers to the process of selecting, developing and prescribing a model for standard language using, the act, process or result of arranging symbols in a systematic form/code. A code is defined as a system of rules to convert signs into another form for communication, through a communication channel.

Communication is a complex process that entails the existence of a multitude of codes, especially in the context of multimodality. Some of the common codes used in communication, as they systematically evoke particular meme states, are as follows: language; mathematical symbols; musical notation system; aesthetic codes, related to different types of arts; kinesic codes, referring to the use of physical bodies; proxemic codes, related to the use of space; vocalic codes, referring to different voice qualities (tone, rhythm, resonance, inflection, tempo); haptic codes, related to physical touch; chronemic codes, referring to the use of time; physical appearance; olfactory codes; artifacts (e.g. garments and accessories) and environment.

Communication codes share some important characteristics that are considered by both encoders and decoders in strict relation to the utility of the message. One of the characteristics is related to the syntax, namely the structure of the message beyond grammar, and the degree of its rigidity. The degree of rigidity is high in the case of mathematical notation systems for example. Therefore, it is likely for a rigid or relatively rigid syntax to evoke the same meme states. However, in everyday life communicative situations, the codes that are used do not have such a rigid syntax, not to mention the intrinsic emotional component of a message. Consequently, it is less likely for the codes to evoke the same meme states, which affects the effectiveness of communication.

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Another characteristic of communication codes, also in relation to syntax, is their complexity. Mention should be made that there is no direct relation between rigidity and complexity. The example of mathematical codes is relevant in this regard. They can be very rigid and extremely complex at the same time. The last but not least characteristic that I would like to emphasize here is related to the relevance of the codes in different contexts. Relevance is in strict connection with the meme states a code can evoke. In other words, certain codes can better evoke certain meme states than others.

In the context of multimodal communication, it is questionable whether language still remains the most effective activator of meme states, considering, first and foremost, the initial target of the mentioned type of communication, namely the people with special needs, as well as the existence of more than one semiotic modes. Moreover, in the same context, the feedback mechanism is affected, considering the multitude of feedbacks, on the one hand, and the problem of proximity, on the other hand. Proximity is also in strict connection with the distribution of the message, namely the communication channel, which, in turn, is related to the interface. It is easy to understand that any switch in one of the above-mentioned aspects result in changing the message or in providing it with different nuances that are subject to interpretation.

Under these circumstances, code-switching enjoys a particular attention. Code-switching entails adjustments at the level of the message coding and channel. The adjustments are mainly intended for the sender and the receiver integration, which is particularly the focus of multimodal communication. However, code-switching comes with psychological and social repercussions, both advantageous and disadvantageous, depending on the context and perspective.

Coding in grounded theory research method

Grounded theory is, as above-mentioned, a qualitative research method employed in theory building rather than in theory testing, within the limits the term theory has already been defined. Coding is an iterative process entailing questioning data/concepts and establishing relationships between them by constantly making comparisons

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for similarity and differences. Thus, data are placed under the same or different codes. The iterations uncover the different properties and dimensions of the concepts, to which personal experience can be added, to stimulate thinking about them. Special attention is given to the language, as it can reveal codes in itself, being translated as such, taking into account that words can denote a shift in perception, thoughts, behaviours and interpretations (Corbin, Strauss, 2015). It is evident that all these processes pertain to critical thinking, engaging both intellectual abilities and personal experience.

Depending on the concepts level of abstraction and their relations, the codes used, on iterative basis, in grounded theory can be open, axial and selective. Open coding is the process of collecting data and breaking them up into discrete items that can be labelled to create codes. Axial coding refers to the organisation of codes, by elevating them, based on the relationships between them, into categories that provide a structure. Selective coding, as the name defines it, is the discriminatory process intended to choose the categories that are the building blocks of developing the theory. Diagrams can support the approach (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson&McSpadden, 2011). In this context, we can say that the research method mirrors the logical thinking processes that are evident in the development of logical data models, applicable in the information technology, as well as of parse/syntax trees, applicable in generative and transformational grammar and computational linguistics.

Computational linguistics is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to approaching linguistic questions in a computational paradigm. To that end, in a very brief presentation, it identifies convergence points from a multitude of domains such as linguistics, cognitive sciences, mathematics, anthropology etc. and integrate them, benefiting from the very rapid advances in technology. As it is not my intention to cover such a topic in this paper, I would just mention that computational linguistics is at the root of widespread debates, especially in terms of ethics, on different ongoing applications and research projects related to speech recognition, speech synthesis, machine learning, deep learning, development of genetic algorithms and other artificial intelligence uses that probe the structure of human discourse.

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Moreover, such techniques can be employed in generating deepfakes, which is another topic of concern nowadays, having both profound and extensive implications, especially with respect to our identity and individuality as human beings.

THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Taking into account the concepts/data/codes and categories that have already been presented as well as the particularities of the grounded theory as a qualitative research method, it becomes clear that communication is a highly integrative process that can be understood in relation to a multitude of other processes that do not necessarily belong to linguistics in its basic definition of the study of language. It is due, first of all, to the fact that human communication or discourse appeals to a lot of other factors that are the subject of cognitive, social, cultural and, more recently, computational studies. This aspect becomes more evident in the case of multimodal communication, which is also meant to more effective integration. In this context, it appears that the road to the intended theory of everything is well paved.

In terms of codes and their use in communication/discourse, it can be stated that their variation is strictly dependent on their function, namely on the purpose for which they are developed. Thus, especially in the context of language and power, we can distinguish dominant-hegemonic codes, negotiated codes as well as oppositional codes (Hall, 1999, pp. 515-516; Ross, 2011). It means that certain behaviour/action can be imposed, negotiated or rejected, following the operation of the mentioned codes, which is related to the positions bearing the same names.

The dominant-hegemonic position entails that the receiver is within the dominant point of view, meaning that the sender and the receiver work under the same set of rules, assumptions and cultural biases. Consequently, there is little misunderstanding and miscommunication. The negotiated position refers to the situation in which the receiver is able to decode the sender's message within the context of the dominant cultural and societal views. Thus, the message is largely understood, as the receiver is familiar enough

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to the hegemonic viewpoint to be able to decode the message. Under certain circumstances, the message is decoded as a personal one, due to own biases and viewpoints. Oppositional position represents the situation in which the receiver is capable of decoding the message in the way it is intended to be decoded. However, based on own societal and cultural beliefs, another, unintended meaning is considered as intrinsic to the message, which results in opposition (Hall, 1993, pp. 101-103).

In this context, it becomes evident that coding/decoding processes, language and discourses systematically construct versions/iterations of the world in order to legitimize certain aspects, depending on the intended purpose. In addition, considering that reality is discursively constructed or co-constructed, conceptualization, operationalization, politicization and normalization represent other important aspects primarily related to coding/decoding processes, code-switching included, in the social world, taking into account variables such as structures, mechanisms, events, experiences and perceptions.

As for the case of multimodal communication, which has a powerful interactive component, the particular situation of being both producer and receptor results in an alteration of the meaning-making process in strict connection with the violation of the coding/encoding model. Under these circumstances, as identity is replaced with multiple identities, individual meaning-making becomes collective/mass meaning-making, thus privileging collective identity, which meets the initial purpose of multimodal communication, namely integration. In this way, meeting communication needs becomes much more important than following the coding/decoding rules that provide communication with a higher degree of effectiveness. Last but not least, paradoxically, it can claim for equality functions by removing equality.

Considering the above-mentioned aspects related to coding/decoding and meme states, it becomes evident that communication entropy and, implicitly, redundancy are affected. Entropy comes from the Greek word *entropia*, meaning transformation, being associated with the amount of order/disorder of a system. According to the mathematical model of communication (Shannon, 1948, pp. 393-400),

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entropy is a measure of similarity between streams of data and already existing classes of data (meme states). Briefly and simplified, in relation to coding, namely the limits of possible lossless data compression based on a set of symbols, entropy refers to the degree of unpredictability and redundancy to the degree of predictability. It comes naturally that too high entropy results in failing to decode the meaning, while too high redundancy results in overlooking particular intended meaning, thus affecting the communication effectiveness, which also depends on the level of noise, that can be physical or semantic, and on the channel capacity, that is related to connection and proximity.

Moreover, the alteration of the coding/decoding paradigm can lead, especially in the case of multimodal communication, to aberrant decoding (Eco, 1972, pp. 235-240). Aberrant decoding may be related, beside the use of different languages, to the use of terminology, slang or acronyms. In addition, it can be due to the fact that the sender and the receiver do not share the same meme states, as well as to the use of a too loose syntax, which are frequent aspects of multimodal communication, especially in the case of using icons/emojis/symbols. Broadly speaking, aberrant decoding appears to have become the norm rather than the exception, as it has happened with the purpose of meeting special needs. In this context, it arises the question of attributing coherence to a semiotic entity/resource and, in connection to it, the so often recently discussed topics of functional illiteracy and even of dissociative behaviour.

Therefore, the most important aspects that should be considered while meaning is made and conveyed are related to coding/decoding processes, which entail language/discourse, syntax, semantics, code-switching/alteration, entropy, redundancy, noise, channel and feedback mechanisms. Moreover, considering that versions/iterations of the social world are systematically constructed or co-constructed through particular discourses, their critical analysis is necessary, as their decoding is the justification of our acceptance as true and, consequently, of our behaviour. Critical analysis entails critical thinking processes, in the context of the term critical, which derives from the Greek word *kritikos*, meaning having the ability to discern.

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As for the methods that could be employed in critically analysing discourses, I would suggest framing and positioning. Both methods are focused on meaning-making and constructing identities as well as on their understanding as intertextual phenomena, in terms of self, situation, language in use, relationship, social paradigm.

Framing is mainly related to the discourse context and purpose. In other words, framing can lead someone to accept one meaning over another. When the frames are shared, one interpretation should prevail over all other possible interpretations (Fairhurst, Sarr, 1966, p. 3). That is why it entails asking a sum of questions regarding the meaning that is conveyed, the resources and the methods that are employed in doing it, and the interests at work. In other words, who is delivering the discourse, in the broader sense in which it has been previously defined, to whom, when, how, with what purpose, in what manner should be among the most frequently asked questions on the part of the receiver. Mention should be made that the examination of primary data is rarely enough, which is why iteration and deeply contextualization are often necessary. In addition, particular attention should be paid to the noise.

Positioning focuses on encoding strategies as well as on the boundaries between reception and production, as they have already been defined. It is likely for the mentioned boundaries to be blurred, especially in the context of using different technological devices, an example in this regard being deepfakes. In the case of multimodal communication especially, considering the above-mentioned aspects related to their jointly produced character as well as the multiple identities and feedbacks involved, special attention should be devoted to managing the mass identities and the jointly produced definitions of concepts and events, which is also discursive.

In relation to agenda setting, metaphors, stories, traditions, artefacts, icons can be employed in the discourse construction. In this context, positioning can be regarded as the discursive construction of personal stories so that one person's actions can be made intelligible and determinate as social acts (Ib., p. 4.). In terms of coding and syntax, an entity can deliberately or forcibly self-position or it can be positioned by others.

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As for the military organization, which is part of the state – the main actor in international relations, framing is pivotal. In the context of the intense debate on the topic, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have studied the idea of metaphorical concept, discussing the challenges to metaphorical coherence – apparent contradiction, coherence vs consistency (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980, pp. 5, 41-45). Therefore, individual experiences and attitudes towards sociopolitical issues, war included, are influenced by their framing in linguistic constructions. In this regard, metaphors can sometimes be lethal, a classical example in this regard being Clausewitz's *"War is politics pursued by other means"* (Lakoff, 2012, p. 5)

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CONCLUSION

Instead of a *"classical"* conclusion, I would like to invite the receivers of the above-presented theory to reconsider the following stanza: *"What's in a name?/That which we call a rose./By any other word would smell as sweet"*. (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II). Apparently, a name/definition does not matter so much, but, in a social context, historically determined, it acquires the dimensions of life, love and death, the most important human experiences. Therefore, defining and redefining, framing and positioning change the relationship with language/discourse and with life/world. It becomes much more important while considering that the limits of our language mean the limits of our world, where the world is everything that is the case, being constituted by the facts in logical space (Wittgenstein, 1922/2010, p. 74; p. 25), as well as the idea that one must know before one can see (Fleck, 1979, pp. 129-135; Eco, 1986, pp. 213-215).

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