



The Discourse of Discrimination and Prejudice: A CDA Study of Japanese EFL Students' Writings

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Abstract

A group of Japanese students were asked to write essays about discrimination and prejudice as part of an EFL academic writing class. The presentation discusses the analysis of "discrimination" and "prejudice" as social representations, examined through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. This is part of a study that seeks to analyse the level of naturalization of socio-culturally relevant concepts and its relationship to argument-building. Here, the first stage of this research is presented: How "discrimination" and "prejudice" are socially represented by the students in the context of EFL learning, and specifically, EFL academic writing. The results and discussion focus on the textual difficulties the students had when negotiating their identity as Japanese and their identity as English learners.

Keywords: *EFL, academic writing, social representations, discrimination, prejudice, CDA.*

1. Introduction

This presentation is part of a study that seeks to analyse the social representations of discrimination, prejudice, and related topics in texts written in English by Japanese undergraduate students in order to explore those representations through the study of discourse, and, thus, have a better understanding of Japanese society and the everyday discourse of discrimination and prejudice.

At first, I was expected to deal with the negotiation between the Japanese identity and the EFL learner identity of the students, and how this was shown textually. However, because of the nature of the texts, the implications of the study of identity and all its dimensions, and the expected length of the presentation, it was decided to show the CDA analysis and the discussion implied.

Still, this kind of research of everyday discourse by non-native speakers of English might help develop teaching strategies for the purpose of writing in a foreign language, by considering that a topic could be more suitable than others to teach verbs in the present tense -assuming that topic will bring out more material than existential verbs, just to give an example.

Analysing the discourse of students will help us comprehend how naturalized some unfair social representations are in their writings, despite their main premise being on the line of emancipated thought, and mainly, how this happens textually. From a more practical point of view and in relation to teaching, there is the problem of how an argument would be flawed when containing contradictory representations. A person who is able to think critically will probably reproduce unfair representations less frequently because their arguments will be well-built. A logically constructed argument might fight a negative attitude because the argument will show that a social representation is an ideologically contextualised interpretation and not an utter definition.

Briefly, not only argumentative strategies but also the teaching of linguistic features might be improved when assessing the study of social representations.

This presentation shows the first part of a broader research. Here, I will present the social representations of discrimination and prejudice and related topics in the writings of Japanese EFL learners.

2. Social Representations

Representations are ways in which we categorize the world around us in order to express ourselves in relation to that world. Serge Moscovici introduced the concept of Social Representations in the early 60's as:



[...] a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. [1]

Social representations change when society changes, and they are contextualized. Also, social representations are neither bad nor good. Whether social representations are positive or negative, it is related to which social constructions in favour or against the subject or object which is being represented are carried by the ideology which frames the given social representation.

3. Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination are interrelated concepts in which prejudice would be a negative attitude, and discrimination is the behaviour that that attitude triggers. Both exist in relation to an Other, different from the Self. Several scholars point out that in the dominant-subordinate dichotomy of discourse, the Other is usually unnamed and defined by generalities taken from the negative characteristics of the out-group to which the given Other belongs. Discourse analysis allows us to study social representations by analysing, for instance, pronouns, verbs and other parts of speech related to a given Self and Other.

4. CDA

Fairclough has a three-dimensional view of discourse and discourse analysis (in the diagram below) in which the text analysis will imply a description of a given text (e.g. lexicalization, patterns of transitivity, etc); the processing analysis will be concerned with the text built inside a given discourse practice (e.g. discourse of discrimination, the discourse of prejudice, etc); and the social analysis will deal with the discourse practice and the sociocultural context which affects that discourse (e.g. conservative ideologies, capitalist society, etc).

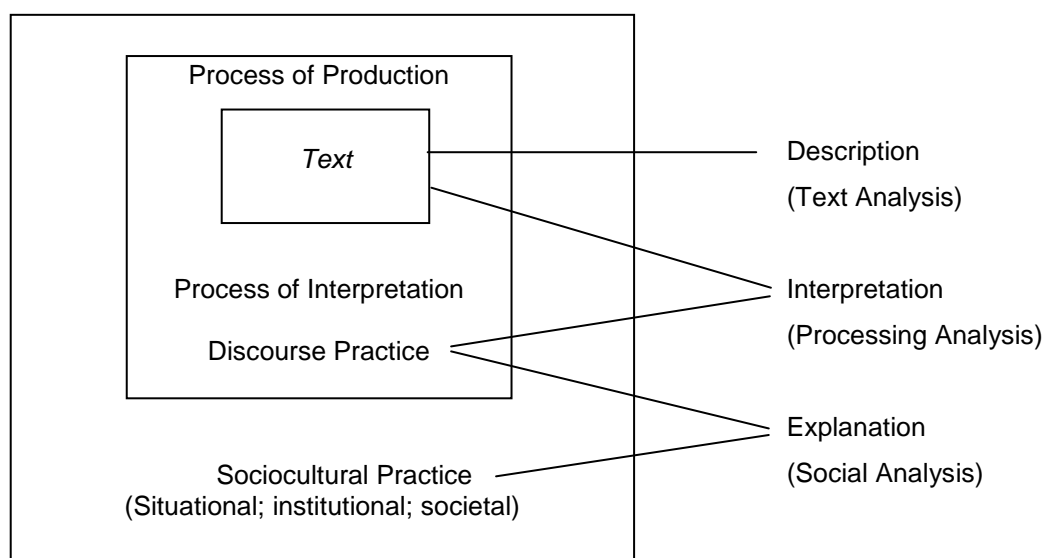


Fig. 1 Diagram taken from Critical Discourse Analysis. The Critical Study of Language [2]

4.1 Text Analysis - Description.

Text analysis is understood as the analysis of linguistic features, including the content and the form of the texts.

4.2 Processing Analysis - Interpretation.

Processing analysis is understood as closely related to context and intertextual analysis. Context is the situation in which the text was created. The analysis of the connections between one text and other texts will conform the intertextual analysis. Analysing intertextuality can help us comprehend how the social practice of discourse is impregnated in any 'new' text.



4.3 Social Analysis.

As seen in the diagram, the social analysis is concerned with the sociocultural practice within which the text is produced. After the stages of description (text analysis) and interpretation (processing/intertextual analysis), the next stage would be to explain the social and cultural conditions which framed what was said in the texts analysed.

5. Methodology

The analysis in this presentation was carried out with an explorative, qualitative approach. The main disciplinary rationale is Critical Discourse Analysis, previously presented.

5.1 Data Collection

The texts were collected in an EFL class of academic writing at a public Japanese university. An extract of the whole sample was taken for the purpose of the writing of this presentation. Twenty-six writings were randomly selected.

5.2 Data Analysis

The analysis was based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), mainly focused on:

- a) Syntax, the sentence structures chosen to deliver an utterance.
- b) Lexicalization, the specific lexical items which were used to build the meaning of concepts.
- c) Local semantics, the local coherence of a text given by levels of implicitness, specificity and strategies related to meaning.
- d) Global semantics, the topicalization of information considered important.
- e) Transitivity, "specifies the different types of processes that are recognised in the language and the structures by which they are expressed" [3]

6. Analysis of Social Representations

6.1 Of the Topics

The instruction stated that the students had to write their texts considering either discrimination, prejudice, or both as the main topics. In this research, I did not separate the texts into subgroups according to the main topic for the analysis. The reason is that the topics overlapped. Some of the students' writings included the two topics in a single text, and there were some students who did not use any of the main topics explicitly in any syntactic form; therefore, I decided to continue taking all the texts into account for every main topic.

6.2 Of the Social Representation of Discrimination.

"Discrimination" was explicit in several of the texts, and it was implicit in a few of them. When I say implicit, I mean that some texts did not include the word "discrimination" as a noun or any other syntactic form (e.g., "discriminate" or "discriminatory"). When taking a closer look at the verbs used with "discrimination", they were almost always existential. "Discrimination" "is" an act, a problem, a word, etc. Interestingly enough, not many material verbs were related to "discrimination". "Discrimination" does not cause harm or affect people. In most of the texts which included the topic, "discrimination" was built up as a very abstract concept and not a reality with consequences. As an example, in the following sentence, transitivity-wise, the use of the mental verb "think" weakens the "responsibility" between the senser -most people/I- and the phenomenon -discrimination:

Text 2 – In Japan, most people think that discrimination is bad. I think so too.

6.3 Of the Social Representation of Prejudice

"Prejudice" was not utilized that often. It was, in fact, mentioned only twice. In both cases, it was used at the beginning of the text and then, the students continued with a related topic, not using the word "prejudice" again. In one case, the related topic was "disabilities" and, in the other, it was "gender".

6.4 Of the Social Representations of Related Topics.



A related topic would be a topic which was mentioned in the texts besides "discrimination" and "prejudice". Not all topics were listed. For example, two texts mentioned bullying, but the recurrence of the topics mentioned was over 20% – 100% being "commented on in all the texts".

a. Inequality. 61.5%. This social representation was the most mentioned in the texts after "discrimination". It is relevant to note the use of the prefix in-. The word "equality" was used only a few times and only in negative sentences. This social representation was mainly related to the topic of "education" and "gender".

Most of the time, "inequality" was utilized in the topic sentence of at least one paragraph of the texts where it was used. The forms "unequal" and "unequally" -though written as "inequal" and "inequally"- appeared only in one text.

b. Woman/Female. 46.1%. "Gender" was represented in dichotomies such as "female" and "male", and "man" and "woman". In the case of "woman" as a social representation, it was topicalized more frequently than "discrimination", for instance. The verbs used were often behavioural as shown in the following sentence:

Text 15 – Many women are forced [to do] housework for a long time.

c. Education. 38.5%.

Text 4 – I think the quality of education are rely to money that children's parents earn is inequality.

Text 13 – But if we want to get a good education we have to [have] a lot of money.

Text 26 – There is inequality of education.

"Education" was represented in various syntactical and lexical ways, and it was almost always related to "money" and "wealth". Also, as referred to when discussing "inequality", it was often related to that social representation as well.

In this case, the range of SFG features I have been using for the analysis varied grandly. Thus, it seemed more relevant to show examples.

d. People with disabilities. 23.07%. The social representation of "people with disabilities" was also referred to as "people with disadvantages".

Text 9 – [...] people who have disadvantage are not equal.

In an EFL context, we always should ask ourselves if what is written is really what the students wanted to say or if it was the vocabulary that they had at hand. In the sentence that follows, the student contrasts "people who have disabilities" with "people who keep their health".

Text 20 – However, people who have disabilities have chances that they get a job less than people who keep their health.

The transitivity relation among people, keep, and health is a material process. It is an active voice, in the indicative mood, and it is, again, placed syntactically in a comparative clause.

7. Discussion

Social representations are used to understand the world. Representations, in simple words, are the characteristics people attribute to given categories to make sense of their surroundings and to be able to communicate with other people.

As noted in the introduction, this presentation showed a part of a broader research, in a summarized version.

I have also studied the social representations of "discrimination" and "prejudice" in texts written by Chilean EFL learners.



It was interesting to see in the texts how the cognitive process of categorizing was used to explain "discrimination" as "part of human nature", just like Chilean students did. Nonetheless, there were some huge differences. For example, in the case of Education, Chilean students did relate it to wealth, but they wrote about it less frequently and they directly placed the responsibility on the government. What they often brought up regarding "having money/wealth" was "class".

In the case of disabilities, this was not alluded to by Chilean students at all. We could imply that Japanese students are more aware of others' surroundings -adding to that opinion my own positioning as a Chilean person who lived in Japan.

8. Final Remarks

The last example given in the analysis embodies the premise of the broader study mentioned in the introduction: How this research can help us comprehend how naturalized some unfair social representations are in their writings, despite their main premise being on the line of emancipated thought, and how this happens textually.

Again, we should go through the process of presenting the class with their own writings and discuss those in the feedback process, and maybe ask "is this what you wanted to say?". But, however we choose to provide them with feedback about their writings, CDA would be an advantageous approach to apply to EFL teaching, as for the reasons mentioned above.

References

- [1] Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- [2] Fairclough, Norman. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.
- [3] Moscovici, Serge. (2001). *Social Representations: Essays in Social Psychology*. NYU Press.