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The importance of media in foreign language learning

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Abstract

The use of mass media to teach language in authentic context represents a double challenge for language teachers. Although media give learners access to authentic language utilized in real life, they convey pre-planned ideology with themselves. The paper clarified the importance of media’s authentic language in language learning and teaching and also raised the consciousness of the teachers and learners toward the ideology-laden structures. The researcher used Critical Linguistics and descriptive-analytical method to prove the ideological representation of news structures, and the analysis was done in terms of lexico-grammatical features in order to clarify the role of authentic language in language learning. Author provided some practical and efficient findings that can be applied in language classes to enhance the language and socio-cultural proficiency of the students. It is recommended that teachers provide analytical framework to help students reflect on their language experiences and practices.

Keywords: media, language, learning, and teaching

1. Importance of the study

The emergence of various critical perspectives, among them Critical Linguistics which is related to my study, has provided the opportunity of being aware of the ideology. This study will reflect that media language is ideology–laden and isn’t neutral one, as such, the teachers should be careful in language classes and raise the consciousness of the students toward the ideology lying behind the linguistic structures. The most outstanding research on media discourse in recent years is under the umbrella of CL. It sheds light on mental pre-textual strategies which precede text production and illustrates these strategies are used to obfuscate the true nature of reality. The study illustrates that media language is true to life and is an important source to get information about the society and culture of target language. This can provide good opportunities for language teachers and learners and provides necessary input in language classes and enhances the linguistic and communicative competence of the learners. According to Bell (1995), there are four practical and principled reasons for why media language has always attracted the attention of linguists, particularly applied linguists and sociolinguists. First, the media provide an easily accessible source of language data for research and teaching purpose. Second, the media are important linguistic institutions. Their output makes up a large proportion of the language that people hear and read every day. Media usage reflects and shapes both language use and attitudes in a speech community. Third, the ways in which the media use language are interesting linguistically in their own right. These include how different dialects and language are used in ads.

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or how radio personalities use language to construct their own images and their relationships to an unseen, unknown audience. Fourth, the media are important social institutions. They are crucial presenters of culture, politics, and social life, shaping as well as reflecting how these are formed and expressed. Media discourse is important both for what it reveals about a society and for what it contribute to the character of society.

2. Literature Review

According to Schiffrin (1994), there are different definitions of DA which refers to the two paradigms in linguistic (formalist and functionalist). A definition derived from the formalist paradigm views discourse as sentences and the definition derived from functionalist paradigm views discourse as language use. The classic definition of discourse as derived from formalist assumptions is that discourse is language above the sentence or above the clause. Van Dijk (1985) states that structural descriptions characterize discourse at several levels or dimensions of analysis and in terms of many different units, categories, schematic patterns relations. In all of the structural approaches there is a common view that structural analysis focus on the way different units function in relation to each other, but they disregard the functional relations with the context of which discourse is a part. Fasold (1990) considers a functionalist aspect of the discourse and states that the study of discourse is the study of any aspect of use. Agreement with this viewpoint Brown and Yule (1983) state that the analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affair. Functionally based approaches tend to draw upon a variety methods of analysis, often including not just quantative methods drawn from social scientific approaches, but also more humanistically based interpretive efforts to replicate actors, own purposes or goals.

Critical Linguistics, built on the functional grammar originated by Halliday, was developed by Fowler and his colleagues in the 1970s. Original versions of Critical Linguistics were open to the charge of both linguistic and social inadequacy. More recently, critical linguists have themselves critiqued some of their own earlier stances and from this have evolved the critical discourse analysis approach (Bell, 1995; Hussein, 2010; Pieri & Diamantini, 2010; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011). Fowler (1991) regards the forms of language as not neutral, so that "any aspect of linguistic structure …. can carry ideological significance" (p.67). The tools with which he approaches media discourse are drawn from functional linguistics and involve the analysis of the transitivity of sentences, including the role and nature of participants, the use of passives and nominalizations (which can mystify relations by omitting agents, or reify events or processes by naming them), and the impact of modality (which indicates the stance of the speaker towards what is said) (Bell, 1995).Richards and Schmidt (2002) state that critical linguistics "is an approach to the analysis of language and language use that focuses on the role that language plays in assigning power to particular groups within society. The assumption is the relation between form and function in discourse is not arbitrary or conventional but is determined by cultural, social, and political factors, i.e. the texts are inherently ideological in nature" (p.133). According to Johnson K. & Johnson H. (1998, p.90), critical linguistics attempts to explore the relationships between language use and the social conditions of that use. The critical linguist "views the world as social structures manifesting different ideologies, and studies the way language use reflects these". Critical linguistics proposes that analysis using appropriate linguistic tools, and referring to relevant historical and social contexts, can bring ideology, normally hidden through the habitulization of discourse, to the surface for inspection. In this way, critical linguistics can shed light on social and political processes.

3. Method of Analysis

The data for this study is selected from two sources: 'Al Jazeera' & 'CNN', which are very different from each other. Al Jazeera, an Arabic network, is viewed by millions of people in all parts of the world. It is founded to cover the Arabic countries perspectives. So it is clear that this network will load the coverage of the news, on the one hand, to support the interests of the Arabic countries, and to raise the consciousness of the Arab and Muslim people to stop manipulation of their mind by the opposite networks, on the other hand. And CNN is an American network which is sent to millions of people in all parts of Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. As we know because of political and economical background, the domain of activity and coverage of this network is more widespread than Al Jazeera. It is a kind of network which competes with Al Jazeera especially in events related to Middle East with attachment to the interests of U.S.A. It is not surprising that, as a result of this news coverage, the people of the world get a
seriously biased version effects in issues related to Americans. I have chosen the data from internet and have tried to choose them in a way that is covered with networks which have divergent perspectives. Because this provides the opportunity to understand how different networks cover the same facts differently. Linguistics tools will show the differences. This emphasizes the assumption that if the event is the same for both reports, variation in their textualization strategies can be related to their underlying ideologies.

Before starting my study I wanted to make use of Fairclough's model for analyzing the news structure. But despite his great contribution, through the Critical Discourse Analysis, to the understanding of the hidden structures of news which are ideology - laden, his model cannot highlight the underlying strategies used to shape the surface structures of the news, Fowler (1991). Fairclough's contribution to my study is that he shows that language is socially constructed and this is clarified through the linguistic tools of Fowler. The linguistic tools show that what events are reported are not a reflection of the intrinsic importance of those events but reveal the operation of a complex and artificial set of criteria for selection. Then, according to Fowler (1991), "the news that has been thus selected is subject to processes of transformation as it is encoded for publication; the technical properties of the medium – television, for example – and the ways in which they are used, are strongly effective in this transformation. Both 'selection' and 'transformation' are guided by reference, generally unconscious, to ideas and beliefs (p.2). Analysis of output, through these linguistics tools, can reveal abstract propositions which are not necessarily stated, and are usually unquestioned, and which dominate the structure of presentation. Fowler (1991) asserts that news is a representation of the world in language, and in news each particular form of linguistic expression in a text, e.g., wording, syntactic option, etc., has its reason. There are always different ways of saying the same thing, and they are not random, accidental alternatives. Here Critical Linguistics, as a building block to my study, means "an enquiry into the relations between signs, meanings and the social and historical conditions which govern the semiotic structure of discourse, using a particular kind of linguistic analysis" (Fowler, 1991, p.5). Because Halliday's systemic – functional linguistics is specifically geared to relating structure to communication function, Fowler's model is rooted in Halliday's SFL, and his approach provides most of Fowler's descriptive apparatus. Critical linguistics is central for my method of analysis because as Fowler (1991) asserts “it seeks, by studying the minute details of linguistic structure in the light of the social and historical situation of the text, to display to consciousness the patterns of belief and value which are below the threshold of notice for anyone who accepts the discourse as natural” (p.67). Fowler's attitude to linguistic tools is essentially eclectic. As I said, for him the best model for examining the connections between linguistic structure and social values is the functional model developed by Halliday, but he adds terms and concepts from other models when they do a particular job better.

Through the light of lexico-grammatical model and descriptive methods the author clarifies the biased representation of the news with some examples. I have provided some lexis representing the same fact, presence of America in Iraq, both in Al Jazeera and CNN. In Al Jazeera Iraqis are represented as 'Muslims', 'Shia leaders', 'Sunni leaders', 'wounded soldiers', 'wounded people', 'naïve politicians', 'innocent soldiers', 'orphans', 'security troops', 'Iraqi soldiers', 'mujahidin', 'fighter', 'soldiers', 'anti-occupant fighters', 'resistant troops', 'Iraq civilians', etc ,and Americans are represented as 'militant', 'offenders', 'U.S troops', 'battle officers', 'occupant fighters', 'U.S soldiers', 'war leaders', 'strong militans', 'heavy gun-men', 'equipped soldiers', 'murdering', 'bombing', 'torturing', 'confining', 'arresting', 'forcing', 'shooting', 'firing', 'warning', etc. And in CNN Iraqis are depicted as, 'hardliners ', 'terrorists', 'sniper', 'insurgents', 'militants', 'kidnappers', 'armed fighters', 'rebels', 'firing', 'shooting', 'beheading' 'hanging', 'kidnapping', 'torturing', 'tormenting', 'prisoning', 'executing', 'injuring', and Americans are depicted as 'freedom fighters', 'suffered troops', 'life savers', 'suffered soldiers', 'tormented fighters', 'peacekeeper's, 'international soldiers', 'cooperative forces', 'American officials', 'veteran officials', 'veteran soldiers', 'hardworking soldiers', 'patient soldiers', 'wounded soldiers', colleagues, etc. With an example I illustrate that in these networks the facts are represented differently from the grammatical perspectives. Al Jazeera headlined: 9 Americans killed in Baghdad fighting, while CNN portrayed in this way: Insurgents killed 9 U.S fighters. As it is clear we can get that in Al Jazeera Americans are considered as patient role of a negative material process, killed, and it is being passivized in order to obfuscate the real agent of the negative activity and in CNN agent of process is foregrounded, in which insurgents are considered as agents of negative material process, killed. Americans are depicted as innocent fighters, who lose their life, and Iraqis are illustrated as cruel people who take the life of Americans. Critical linguistics and descriptive methods help the author in disclosing the fact that media discourse is shaped according to the socio-political interests of countries covering the news. And this fact is verified by a great media critic like Chomsky (1989) who believes that mass media reflect the foreign policy and public opinions of the country where media institutions operate - because of the political matters the ideology behind these networks are totally different. So, I come to this conclusion that strategies utilized in shaping the structures of the media are totally different and this requires raising the consciousness of the
public, specially the students in language learning classes, toward the social, cultural, and political factors included in media language.

4. Results and Discussion

The study has provided some practical insights and findings that can be interesting for language learners, teachers, and educators. As it is depicted in CNN, Iraqis are given negative agency roles, and Americans are considered as patients who are paying prices for cruel operations. When Americans are considered as agents, they are given positive images that do their best to dominate the best situations. And in Al Jazeera Iraqis are represented positively. This fact is clarified through the use of lexico-grammatical devices and descriptive methods. The analysis of the data gathered from the media discourse suggests that no media genre is free from the ideology-laden issue. To enhance the practical usefulness of this study, I shed light on the various levels and dimensions of news discourse through the comprehensive analysis of a concrete example taken from Al Jazeera and CNN networks. The structured analysis of news discourse in these networks shows that they have particular social, political, or ideological implications – and these facts are illustrated through the use of CL. This implies that through the media study you can get practical and important information about the beliefs, culture, and society of the country and because they have authentic language they can be efficient source for language learning classes – especially in countries like Iran which doesn’t have access to native speakers.

This study reveals the fact that news are usually organized by an abstract schema, consisting of conventional categories that specify what the overall function is of the topics of the text – according to van Dijk (1980) this kind of schema is called superstructure. It reveals the fact that news reports follow a hierarchical schema, consisting of such conventional categories as headlines, main events, context, history, forming the background category. Typical for news stories, in these two networks, is the fact that both of them foreground the most important information which is beneficial for them and background the information which threatens their own benefits.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The emergence of various critical perspectives since the mid 1980s has been welcomed by linguists, particularly applied linguists and sociolinguists. And media language has been in the central attention of these principles. So, media discourse is important both for what I reveal about resourceful and authentic materials and for what it contributes to the pedagogical principle. According to applied linguists and sociolinguists, in learning every language we must emphasize the cultural factors, because as Halliday (1994) and Fairclough (2003) claim language is socially constructed one, as such, if we remove the language from social context, it is meaningless. This implicates that media's language is true to life and authentic source for accent, dialect, style, etc.-it can be used as a model in the class for language learners. According to Cook, P (2001), the pedagogical implication of critical literacy is to see it in terms of the pedagogical application of critical discourse analysis, and therefore a quite central concern for critical applied linguistics. Critical Literacy is sometimes also combined under the rubric of critical language awareness, since the aim of this work is to empower learners by providing them with a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experiences and practices and on the language practices of others in the institutions of which they are a part and in the wider society within which they live (Clark and Ivanic, 1997). This implies the fact that in pedagogical camps we as teachers must raise the consciousness of the students to the underlying structures and information backgrounded in the materials.

According to the task-based approaches, there must be communication gaps between the participants in conversation, as such; the learners use the language to convey information. The language of media is ideology-laden and contributes to both surface characteristics of language like accent, dialect, style, and to the underlying knowledge which provides knowledge gaps between the participants. According to Fairclough (1995) the aim of educational system is to pave the way for students to answer questions, like the following, about any media text: 1. How is the text designed, why is it designed in this way, and how else could it have been designed? 2. How are texts of this sort produced, and in what ways are they likely to be interpreted and used? 3. What does the text indicate about the order of media discourse? 4. What wider socio cultural processes is this text a part of, what are its wider social conditions, and what are its likely effects? The first question highlights the idea that "texts are based upon choices, and that alternative choices might always have been made" (p. 202). Sometimes the question will direct attention to the variation that currently exists in media practices. The second question related to the issue of production and consumption processes. With regard to production, it is important to be aware that what we come
across in the media is not "a simple and transparent representation of the world, but the outcome of specific professional practices and techniques" (p. 204). The third question assumes that any given media text will shed some light upon the practices of the media, and the media order of discourse, in that "it will be a product of a particular state and evolution of the order of discourse" (p. 204). The fourth question brings into the picture wider social conditions (including economic and political ones) which constrain media discourse, and their social effects — in terms of " systems of knowledge and beliefs (and ideologies), social relations of power, and the positioning of people as social subjects" (p. 204).

To sum up, overview of pedagogical information can include: First, using authentic language in language learning classes can enhance proficiency of the students in language. Second, media provide an easily accessible source of language data for learning purpose. Third, media can familiarize students with real and authentic context which is necessary for language learning. Fourth, media use different dialects and styles which can be interesting for language learners and can familiarize them with different forms of language.

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