Sorina CHIPER

DISCOURSE STUDIES IN PRACTICE

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A teacher welcomed to a local council meeting to pursue linguistic interests is a rare sight. Sorina Chiper's book *Discourse Studies in Practice* is one of those events that journalists would cherish dearly but linguists treasure even more. When Applied Linguistics first made its formal way into the English Department of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania discourse analysis was not intended to be a separate course topic but rather permeate throughout several courses in both Translation studies (for translators and interpreters) and TESOL. Sorina Chiper's book is, in this context, a special occasion in the general academic interest in discourse analysis.

The teaching of languages has evolved tremendously from knowing about the language system to knowing how this system allows for meaning creation in a process conditioned by the social and political context. Today, courses of English in a non-philological educational programme absolutely must address discourse issues. Understandably, Sorina Chiper's book originates partly in her professional preoccupations as she teaches a number of ESP (English for Special Purposes) courses along with the ubiquitous norm of general English practical courses. Her second source of inspiration comes from a string of research grants for applied linguistics where she had a chance to try her hand at linguistic and cultural identities, discourse, linguistic and cultural anthropology etc. Thus, Sorina Chiper is at home discussing topics such as branding, communication ethics, discursive strategies, corporate identity, legitimation, intertextuality, and institutional identity with a strong line of discourse theorists behind such as N. Fairclough, J. L. Austin, R. and S. W. Scollon, S. Titscher, R. Wodak, and H. Grice.

It is difficult to teach languages without making them relevant for real life. Well beyond the study of grammatical and lexical structures, the book proposes a

bold aim for mastering a language – to create political discourse. This is an innovative category of texts to bring to class, and the texts themselves are harvested from the most sensitive environments, places of intense political communication such as universities, high-stake companies, or local councils, where it would have been a special treat to be invited a few years ago, especially for a lay person without any decision-making power or direct social interest. The author's declared aim is as bold as it is candid: she encourages her students to question the discourse they are presented with in the media and exercise their right to be critical and cautious toward it while the political landscape still enables them to.

Two chapters in the book (the first and the last) explore the refined discourse universities practice in their relationships with prospected collaborators and students. Chipier's area of interest is the way universities construct their image in the promotional materials they release for a variety of audiences: websites (aimed at the general public, both local and international), faculty brochures/prospectuses (mainly for students), a promotional CD (usually featured in the gift-exchange protocol at official visits and exchanges). The study is never done in isolation, both chapters undertake a comparative analysis of Romanian products and their international counterparts (and the discourse thereof) i.e., similar presentations issued by other European universities, and the contrast is based on the theoretical basis of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A particular interest is given to Fairclough's concept of marketization in discourse (Fairclough 91-125).

The 2000s represented a turning point in the public discourse of universities as they tried to expand their institutional value in the direction of profit-making enterprises. Chipier seizes the change in 1) the actual documents made public by Romanian universities, and 2) the rhetoric borrowed from business. At the time when the Bologna system was implemented, significant changes were made in the curriculum in order to squeeze the necessary content in a shorter BA programme (reduced from four years to three) as well as simplify the actual curriculum. As a result, a shorter and simpler educational programme was promoted as a better deal than its predecessor especially as, in Chipier's words, the aim was for universities to "adjust to European standards, being thus colonized by the EU educational discourse" (Chipier 18) at all levels of activity and communication. The choice of words is significant for Chipier's hypothesis of a continued tradition of propaganda in the academic public communication, taken from the pre-'89 culture and translated into a newly-found European culture of change, a propaganda betrayed by the universities' perpetual preference for standardized language even at the risk of failing to match the promoted image with actual fact, and this is a common feature among the Romanian universities (from some university cities such as Bucharest, Iași, Bacău, Cluj, Galați, Baia Mare, Ploiești, Brașov, Bacău, Alba

Iulia), along with a clear preoccupation for the assertion of legitimacy and academic quality.

Branding occurs as a simultaneous process in all the universities Chiper is studying, which validates the premise of her discourse analysis. Branding is a particularly seminal topic in the field of discourse analysis, especially in the context of public communication and translation studies. In his study “Critical Discourse Studies and Branding” (2018), Alon Lischinsky gathers under the umbrella term of branding a “complex ensemble of practices of semiotic design and integration” aiming to enhance interest in an organization. As Chiper notes throughout her book (not just in relation to universities, but in all kinds of corporate milieus), the shared goal of both state and private enterprises (including universities) is precisely to manipulate the potential audience’s emotion and representation towards an illusory sense of added value of the institution itself and what it offers. The only difference in branding among various institutions is the way they construct the potential profile of their target audience. Here is where Chiper’s comparison of Romanian universities to those from other European countries completes the general picture. That all organizations cultivate a capitalist business model is clear and unsurprising (the very shift to the Bologna system was an attempt to boost the business side of academia), but the semiotic puzzle of wording, format and layout varies with the university’s age, constructed image and scope. The linguistic component of branding is of particular interest to the author as she explores the process and products of text translations in the corporate documents of Romanian universities (websites etc. in Romanian and their English translation) and compares their branding effect to that of other European universities. Translation is itself a negotiated mediation which aims to convey such connotations as specified by the beneficiary, and the book includes abundant examples of this, but processes such as text repair, adaptation and localization are also exploited in Chiper’s analysis to reveal the semiotic limitations of the shift from establishments of higher education to corporate organizations.

Other five chapters of the book explore the semiotic ballet performed by public authorities and private entities. Branding and image projection are the core of all (socio)linguistic investigation. The five chapters cover a variety of angles of investigation: an actual meeting of the local council (with the locus of what is expected to be participatory democracy, the procedure, the minutes and documents), media campaigns conceived to promote an unpopular mining project (Roșia Montană), the very communication of the mining company (website etc.), documents from other organizations and local authorities, official press releases and reports, political declarations, and even documentaries. It is not the primary aim of this book to discuss the political and socio-economic realities of either a

country such as Romania or of a particular region. The merit of this research is to raise awareness as to the serious ethical issues that come with using language in order to exercise power in an environment where, in the author's words, "democracies rely on consent rather than on coercion for the implementation of decisions made in the contexts of debates and deliberation" (Chiper 96). This does not mean that non-democratic regimes are devoid of linguistic manipulation simply because power is enforced regardless of the subjects' consent: there are some very interesting observations in the book about the social dynamic of local instances of open sociolinguistic monopoly and non-democratic rule over a small rural community. What the author is pointing out is that democracy (at least the way it is understood at a theoretical level) entails a higher level of linguistic manipulation than any form of non-democracy. In a democratic society the citizens need to have more refined linguistic skills so they can see through the persuasive (and often deceitful) wording in the communication of both state and private entities, and the entities, in turn, use language to outwit the citizens into giving their consent or relinquishing power.

The relationship between linguistic proficiency and political power is not necessarily new – after all, the history of diplomacy and the history of translation both make abundant reference to the potential of alteration in the meaning of words (polysemy, metaphor etc.). But only recently has research focused on an alarming phenomenon generated by the increasingly complex technical possibilities in the mass-media: it is now possible to construct meaning (in the light of Michael Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics) from a more diverse range of texts and communication codes (not just linear texts, but also non-linear and multi-modal texts, plus codes pertaining to other modes of communication e.g., colours, pictures, sounds, shapes, other symbols etc.), as well as from non-explicit elements (implicature as defined by Stephen Levinson). As long as the citizens' linguistic skills match those of the interested parties (state institutions, businesses with public or private economic or political interests), power in democracy will still derive from informed consent. But there comes a point where the preoccupation for the projected image (the portrait against a carefully composed background), for the brand (tradition, quality, high standards, social status, political orientation, fashion, flexibility, globalization, inclusiveness, values etc.), for the clients' emotional decisions/choices (rather than rational choices to pursue a certain course of action, or to buy/accept something) compels an organization (university, private business, local council, non-governmental organization, a state institution etc.) to artificially manufacture (just because it is technically possible and politically justifiable) an image where the referent is left behind i.e., presenting a hypothetical (albeit conceivable) risk/benefit/situation as if it were a fact, using implicature and elements associable with specific psychological responses in the target audience. As Sorina Chiper points out in her

book, this is where discourse is used to divert the audience's attention to a place where a text (loosely meaning a range of products: advertising campaigns, websites, print, written correspondence etc.) is elaborately conveyed so as to elicit a subjective reaction without committing to a palpable asset (financial gain, civil rights, property, equity etc.). And this threat stems not from democracy, but from language and technology.

Language and technology have an intertwined future, without a doubt. Sorina Chipier is well aware that, as a teacher and researcher, it is her perpetual mission to investigate discourse transgressions and raise her students' awareness while effectively teaching them how to use discourse to attain their social and political aims. Her book, *Discourse Studies in Practice*, is an accomplished effort of demonstrating research methods of discourse analysis and sampling illustrative texts for them.

Works Cited

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