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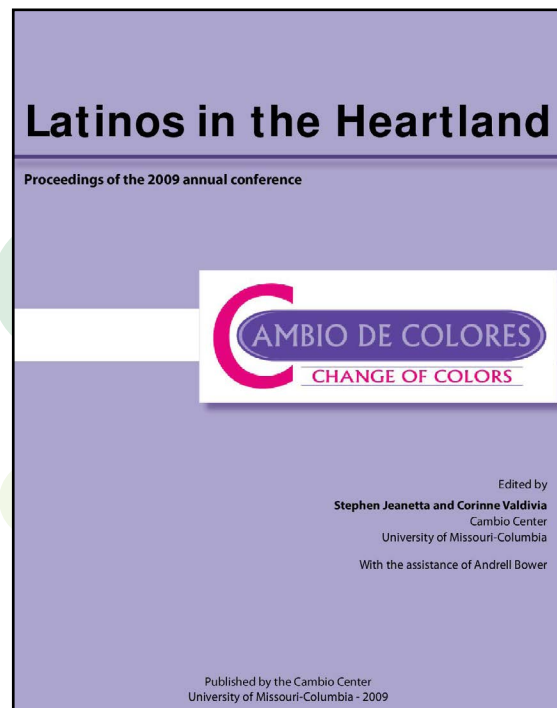
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Representation of immigrants and other social actors in a local Missouri newspaper: A linguistic analysis

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Abstract

Each summer hundreds of migrants, the majority of whom were born in Spanish-speaking countries, arrive in Lafayette County (Missouri) to work on the apple orchards in the towns of Lexington, Waverly, Dover and Wellington. Their contact with local townspersons is minimal, but their presence is known. How might local townspersons views of immigrants be formed when contact and communication is limited? One possible answer is the local newspaper.

This study examines the “representation of the social practice of immigration” (Leeuwen 2008: 28) as conveyed by The Lexington News, a newspaper with 2,000 subscribers, according to personal phone contact with the Lexington News Jan. 23, 2008, in a town with a population of 4,536 persons (City-data.com). Because the media not only report but also shape discourse in large part by linguistic means, examining word choice, word order, grammatical roles and other linguistics elements can reveal ideologies not evident in a more perfunctory reading.

A few months before the migrants arrived in the summer of 2008 for the fall apple season, the Lexington News published an article that reported on a “raid of a residence,” which resulted in the deportation of six men. Subsequently, seven articles or editorials related to the incident were published. How social actors are represented in the newspaper articles and the influence that might have on public perception is the topic of this study.

Although all of the people involved in the event are social actors, this analysis revealed that the way they are represented in the discourse varies. For example, people in positions of power, e.g. the police chief and the city administrator are given primacy by being called by name, given the grammatical role of agent, etc. Van Leeuwen calls this process “activation” (2008: 33). Note the actor in this following example: No charges in the case have been filed by the U.S. District attorney.

By contrast the immigrants are “passivated”(van Leeuwen 2008: 33) by a variety of strategies, including when they are the grammatical subject. Note the following example: Six Hispanic males were taken into custody by the ICE. The grammatical assignment of the “six Hispanic males” serves to put them in a marginal place of being acted upon. Of further interest is the adjectival use of “Hispanic” to describe the men taken into custody while no reference is made to the ethnicity of the ICE officers. The results of the analysis consequences of the representation of social actors are presented. In spite of claims to the contrary, newspapers and other media do not present neutral versions of reality or even influence only individual readers but shape public discourse in sometimes subtle, but powerful, ways.

Consequently, how individuals and groups perceive and treat one another might be affected, which in turn could influence how well immigrants are able to integrate into communities. The result could be detrimental to both immigrants and native residents of Missouri.

Keywords: Hispanic media representation, immigrant media representation

► Representation of immigrants and other social actors in a local Missouri newspaper: A linguistic analysis

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Each summer, hundreds of migrants, the majority of whom were born in Spanish-speaking countries, arrive in Lafayette County, Missouri, to work in the apple orchards in the towns of Lexington, Waverly, Dover and Wellington. In the summer of 2008, a few months before the migrants arrived for the fall apple season, the Lexington News published an article which reported on a “raid of a residence” that resulted in the deportation of six men. Subsequently, six related articles or editorials were published. How social actors are represented in the newspaper articles and the influence that might have on public opinion is the topic of this study. Newspapers influence not only individual readers but also shape public discourse and perceptions. Such perceptions and subsequent treatment could influence how immigrants integrate into communities.

Methods

Analytical approach – Critical Discourse Studies

This research takes a sociopolitical view following the philosophy of critical discourse studies, in which power differentials are part of the examination of discursive practices and patterns (van Dijk 1993). I follow van Leeuwen’s sociosemantic model focusing on the roles allocated to each social actor and examining “what interests are served” and “what purposes achieved” by such assignments (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 33).

Role Allocation

Social actors can be presented in texts as taking active or passive roles. Van Leeuwen uses the terms activated and passivated to show that writers and speakers give actors these roles rather than somehow naturally and neutrally finding them in these roles.

Activated social actors in discourses are behavers in behavioral processes, assigners in relational processes, sensors in mental processes and sayers in verbal processes. In short, they are the ones who are assigned to action by doing, making, thinking and talking. They may take a grammatical participant role, be the one by whom or from whom an action is done in a passive structure, be the premodifier in a noun phrase (a police investigation) or the postmodifier of a process noun (a flood of immigrants) (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 33).

Passivated social actors are “on the receiving end of” an activity (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 33). “Subjected” passivation can be accomplished when actors are grammatical objects, goals in a material process, phenomenon in a mental process, or by “circumstantialization through a prepositional phrase” (discovery and arrest of illegal immigrants) or by possessivization or adjectival premodification where objectification is implied. Passivated actors can be “beneficialized” when they are hearers in a verbal process or they gain or benefit (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 34).

Data and Procedure

Six newspaper articles constitute the data for this study. On May 2, 2008, The Lexington News, a newspaper with 2,000 subscribers (The Lexington News, personal communication, January 23, 2008) in a town with 4,536 households (Lexington, Missouri), published an article that reported on “a group of illegal immigrants [that] was discovered on April 13” at a local residence. On May 7, a follow-up article reported that the result was the deportation of six men. The paper published five articles and one letter to the editor related to the incident during a two-month period. Each reference to a social actor from all six articles was counted and analyzed according to role allocation.

Results

I found 204 tokens, or mentions, and more than 25 types of social actors. Four types had over 20 tokens each - immigrants, the police, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency and an attorney named Bob Langdon. These were deemed key players, first by the sheer volume of their mentioning, and second by how they were assigned roles. Table 1 illustrates how often each of the top four social actors were either activated or passivated.

Table 1: Tokens and types of top four social actors in Lexington News articles regarding “alleged illegal immigrants,” May-June 2008

Actors	Activated		Passivated				Unidentifiable		Total
			Subjected		Beneficialized				
ICE	19	79%	2	8%	3	12.5%	--	--	24
Langdon	23	77%	5	17%	2	7%	--	--	30
Police	18	69%	3	11.5%	4	15%	1	4%	26
Immigrants	1	4%	20	80%	2	8%	2	8%	25
									105

Activated social actors

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (also called the Customs agency or ICE) was activated 19 of the 24 times it was mentioned, or 79 percent. In example 1.1² the agency is assigned as both behavior (investigated) in a behavioral process and an assigner in a relational process (determined the status of illegal to the immigrants).

1.1 The Customs agency investigated and determined that six of the immigrants were illegal. (article 6)

Bob Langdon is first mentioned in the third article, in which he is introduced in the first words of the article as “Lexington Attorney Bob Langdon” and is coupled with “former City Administrator Don Borgman” as a compound subject³. He is mentioned by name or pronoun reference 30 times in articles three, four and five. Langdon is activated 77 percent of the times he is mentioned, as in the example 1.2, in which he is activated by adjectival premodification. His name is used as a modifier, and the action he takes (announcing) as a sayer in a verbal process is nominalized.

1.2 Bob Langdon’s announcement on a Kansas City television station May 8 that he plans to move his family from Lexington and sell off his downtown properties confirmed rumors around town that he was leaving. (article 3)

The role of the Lexington police and/or Don Rector, chief of police, was activated 69 percent of the time that it was mentioned. Example 1.3 shows the police as doers in a behavioral process.

1.3 Lexington Police began their investigation after receiving a call from a neighbor reporting suspicious activity at the residence. (article 2)

The immigrants, alternately referred to as illegal immigrants, Hispanic males, the six or the four,

² In all examples the social actor being highlighted is bolded. There is often more than one social actor per sentence.

³ Langdon and Borgman are co-owners of a vineyard where the immigrants worked in a subcontract capacity.

are activated only one time, and it is in the same sentence (1.4) where they are also passivated as both subjected and beneficialized.

1.4 Six of the illegal immigrants, who had been employed by a St. Louis-area contractor and were working on the vineyard at Linwood Lawn, were later deported. (article 5)

Six of the illegal immigrants are activated as behavers who were working at the same time as they are “passivated beneficial clients” who were employed and “subjected” to being deported. In this one instance where they are doers, any dynamic force they might have is diminished by what is done to them.

Passivated Social Actors

Immigrants were mentioned as social actors 25 times in the data set, and 22, or 88 percent, they were passivated. Twice, immigrants were beneficialized as was shown in 1.4 and 20 times subjected. This subjection is shown in example 1.5 in which immigrants are assigned the place behind the preposition “of” to result in possessivization.

1.5 The announcement came in the wake of a Lexington Police Department investigation at a house April 13 and the subsequent deportation of six illegal immigrants. (article 4)

The unpacking that is required in this construction is increased by the use of a nominal to report an action. In 1.5, the entity that must have done the deporting is ICE, but it is not mentioned in the sentence.

Bob Langdon was the second most passivated social actor with seven tokens, or 23 percent of mentions. In 1.6, he is subjected as a goal in the material process of clearing.

1.6 Lexington Attorney Bob Langdon and former City Administrator Don Borgman have been cleared in connection with an investigation of illegal immigrants found at a residence in Lexington on April 13. (article 3)

Seven times the Lexington police are passivated in the data: three times as subjected and four as beneficialized. In example 1.7 the police are beneficialized receivers in a verbal process.

1.7 The neighbor reported to police that he believed the residence was vacant.

ICE and its agents are passivated in 5 of 24 mentions, or 21 percent, and beneficialized in three mentions, such as when they are the receivers in a verbal process, as in example 1.7.

1.8 Officials from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement were called in to investigate (article 1).

ICE officials are not the sayers in this case, but their status is increased by the fact that they were called in as experts.

Conclusions

The police, ICE and Langdon are indisputably portrayed as the actors, doer, talkers and decision-makers in the articles examined. As a result, their positions of power are reinforced. Immigrants, by contrast, are objectified by being counted, discovered, investigated, deemed illegal, arrested, referred to by their ethnicity and gender and depicted as suspect. Although only 10 immigrants were represented in these articles, they might be taken to represent all immigrants if the readers have no frame of reference by which to counterbalance these portrayals. That is, readers might not actually know any “immigrants” or “Hispanic males.” Likewise, they might not personally know the police, ICE employees or Langdon. Views of individuals and groups are formed, at least in part, by the media. This could be detrimental to migrants and residents in Lexington.

When surveyed, Missouri Latinos reported that the discrimination they experienced was hindering their integration into community life (Lazos, 2002). Discrimination can result from lack of or faulty information. A study in Great Britain concluded that “[m]isperceptions and misinformation lie at the heart of how new migrants are received, with the media playing a key role in filling what is often a

vacuum of accurate information [...]” (Institute for Public Policy, 2007, p. 6). Hundreds of migrants live temporarily in Lafayette county, and some immigrants and Latinos live there permanently. For the sake and well-being of the whole community, the newspaper and other power brokers would do well to consider what language they use to portray people and strive for a more balanced representation.

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► Reading, Writing, and Technology: Preliminary Results from a Bilingual Reading and Computer Literacy Program in Lincoln, Neb.

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Introduction

The issue of Latino education has become an increasing concern in recent years. Although their numbers in the public school system have grown exponentially, their achievement scores have not. Many programs have attempted to address the below-average academic performance among Latino students. This paper examines one such program: a family literacy program implemented by El Centro de las Américas (El Centro), a Latino community center, in coordination with staff from the Reading Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The program’s aims were to promote family literacy in Hispanic families by combining a common component of the Latino culture, family focus, with an emphasis on an increased parental role in the child’s education. Strategies used were informal reading discussion groups with a bilingual liaison and a basic computer skills class. Children in the families were interviewed over the course of the program to assess their reading abilities and retention and detect improvements.

Latino Students’ Academic Achievement

In 2008, the Latino high-school graduation rate in Lincoln was 55.7 percent, compared with an Anglo graduation rate of 81.7 percent (Lincoln Public Schools, 2008). Spanish-speaking Latino students in particular are more prone to dropping out and scoring significantly lower on standardized test scores in all subjects than their English-speaking counterparts (Lopez, Gallimore, Garnier, & Reese, 2007). These statistics are compounded by the fact that an increasing percentage of the students in elementary schools are from Latino families. During the past 20 years, the national Latino school-age population has grown 150 percent, and today, one in five elementary school students is Latino (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

Family Literacy

Educational research indicates that the most effective strategies for addressing poor high-school performance and high-school incompleteness begin in the pre-school and elementary school years (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Some common antecedents to poor academic performance in high school can be traced back to elementary school and include inadequate early literacy experiences (Lopez, et al, 2007). Interestingly, early literacy experiences appear to affect all of the other content areas in school, including math and science (Shaw, Nelsen, & Shen, 2001; Lopez, et