Approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis

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Criado Sánchez, Raquel
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"Why racism <u>didn't</u> cause these riots": a critical discourse analysis of oldham's 2001 episode of ethnic violence

Raquel Criado Sánchez
Universidad de Murcia
rcriado@um.es

Abstract

This paper examines an article published in the Daily Mail in May 2001 and signed by an Asian British politician. It dealt with the race riots which happened in Oldham (England). The author's alleged main argument was that these riots were not triggered by racism but by Oldham's deplorable life conditions. A sympathetic attitude towards the people of his own race can equally be appreciated, while he criticizes whites' behaviour.

Our first objective is to obtain a generic awareness of the ideologically-laden representation of the Asians and whites involved in these events. Secondly, we aim to unveil the textual procedures by which this portrayal becomes subtly intermingled within the development of the author's main thesis. Accordingly, our methodological instrument consisted in a battery of eight lexico-grammatical categories which were selected to examine these two groups of characters.

Results indicate a carefully elaborated formulation of the theses mentioned above.

1. Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis is an approach of discourse analysis which considers language a social practice and advocates that ideological significant stances are expressed by linguistic choices derived from different situations and purposes. Outstanding researchers in this field are reported by Fairclough and Wodak (1997): Hodge and Kress, 1988; Fairclough 1989; 1992; Wodak 1975, 1986; Wodak and Matouschek 1993, van Dijk 1980, 1993, 1996, etc.

Within this theoretical framework, the present study examines an article which appeared in the *Daily Mail* on 29th May 2001 signed by an Asian British politician, Manzoor Moghal. At the time he was a member of the Labour Party and chairman of the Federation of Moslem Organizations in Leicester. His article analysed the origins of the race riots that took place in Oldham (United Kingdom) on the night of 26th May of that year. Several Asian-owned houses were attacked by a party of white hooligans. 500 Asian youngsters plundered urban property and shops, and strongly battled with the police. The riots, which continued on 27th and 28th May, were followed by a long serious and socio-political debate about ethnic violence in Britain.

Moghar's alleged unique thesis claims that the factor to be found at the heart of Oldham's riots is not racism but poverty (which is said to affect all its inhabitants). Racism cannot be held responsible due to the idiosyncratic tolerant nature of British society. However, throughout his article the author subtly weaves a supporting attitude towards the people of his own race. This is accompanied by a negative image of both the police and white youths.

Our aim is two-fold. Firstly, we attempt to gain a general insight into this ideologically influenced depiction of Asians and whites. Secondly, we endeavour to unveil the textual procedures through which this representation becomes strategically interwoven within the formulation of the author's main thesis. For that purpose we will examine a battery of several lexico-grammatical categories.

2. Methodological procedure

Concerning our methodological instrument, after a careful reading of the relevant literature (Fowler and Kress 1979; Toolan 1988, 1998; Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 1993, 1996), we decided to focus on the analysis of certain lexico-grammatical features which were considered to examine ideological values. They are as follows: naming of participants, transitivity, syntactic highlighting of information (thematization and topicalization), nominalization, modality (modal verbs and adverbs; evaluative/expressive adverbs and adjectives; tenses; pronouns), logical connectors, presuppositions and rhetorics (rhetorical questions, repetitions, metaphors).

3. Results and discussion

In order to better understand the author's ideological influence in his representation of Asians and whites as revealed by the linguistic material, we believe it necessary to firstly include a description of the textual thematic structure.

As mentioned above, the only alleged purpose of this article, as revealed by its very title ("Why racism didn't cause these riots"), is the following: to demonstrate that the race riots in Oldham were not racist-rooted but rather that they encompassed instead two groups of youths of different races who fought each other due to the miserable economic situation in the city. This main thesis is in turn accompanied by a subthesis which advocates that Asians are a peaceful community while whites (youths) are antisocial. One of the main mechanisms for the articulation of these theses can be found in the skilful combination of the textual thematic structure with typographical features. In effect, the text is divided into four sections. The first one is an introduction which smartly appeals to national pride by conveying the notion of Britain as a tolerant and unified society. The second, which is preceded by the heading "Reality", develops the above content by focusing and substantiating the argument that poor houses and work conditions account for Oldham's riots.

Then Moghal proceeds to expose his subthesis in the third part of his article,

which is strategically placed in the middle following the witful reference to national pride of the first two parts. The very heading, "Despair", alludes to Asian elders' good nature. They feel distressed at their youngsters' behaviour in the riots, who are, revealingly enough, depicted as their whites counterparts' imitators. The last section, is titled as "Cynical" because it develops Moghal's criticism of the politicization of the supposedly public-founded "Commission for Racial Equality" hinted at in the previous section. This part finishes with a new allusion of both Asians and whites as members of the same society who are legitimized in their pursuit of a better life status in Oldham. This desirable situation would eradicate the scarce spots of racism in Britain.

For practical reasons due to space limitations, we will jointly deal with both Asians and whites in each lexico-grammatical category.

3.1. Naming of participants

Most times whites are identified as one general and unified group. At the beginning, in accordance with the national pride alluded to, the name of the country itself is employed[1]:

1) *Britain* welcomed me – and tens of thousands like me." (lines 53-5).

Along the same lines, in other occasions "white British" and by extension all British citizens are referred to by the term "country":

2) This *country* is one of the most racially tolerant anywhere in the world." (lines 108-10).

Uncivilized whites are mentioned as a cohesive group on the basis of age:

3) Antisocial behaviour patterns common among many deprived *white inner-city youths*. (lines 135-42).

This is framed within the prompting of an anti-racist framework (van Dijk 1996: 19). In effect, the latter is a reversal of racism, an ideology holds that the *Others* are

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[1] All the extracts from the article will include the specific features analysed in *italics*.

somehow inferior, and accordingly presupposes an overall dichotomy of *Us* (white people) versus *Them* (non-whites). This in-group and out-group distinction can be inverted as in our case, in such a way that *They* or the *out*-group, (i.e., the white youths) are depicted as entailing a menace to *Us* or the *in*-group, be it the Asians or the rest of the society.

Nevertheless, there are also instances in which troublesome whites are directly identified as neonazis, thus somehow relieving the remaining majority of whites from the others' awkward attitudes:

4) While *extremists* undoubtedly exist in Britain. (lines 105-6).

As far as Asians are concerned, there exists a neat differentiation between the problematic and the unproblematic ones on the basis of age. Similarly to their whites' counterparts, the youths are related to the disorderly party:

5) The parents of the *Asian youngsters* who rioted at the weekend. (lines 126-8).

The older Asians are straightforwardly attributed positive 'interaction' values, specifically those corresponding to "deference": polite, respectful, civil, correct, etc. (van Dijk 1996: 40-2):

6) *The older Asian generation* in areas such as Oldham is [...] respectable, peace-loving and law-abiding. (lines 130-4).

Interestingly enough, there is no reference to older whites as displaying these qualities.

3.2. Transitivity

Halliday's theory of the grammar of transitivity concerns the textual representation of events and entities as demonstrated in divergent grammatical processes and participant types (Halliday 1978, 1985). We agree with Fairclough (1989: 120) and Toolan (1988: 238-9) that these related selections can be ideologically significant.

We have distinguished the following major processes kinds in our article as depicted by Toolan (1998: 79-80; 82-93): material (clauses of actions, concrete or abstract) and relational (clauses of being – having the condition or status of).

In the first ones, agents or intentional actors exercise their actions upon a target or 'medium'. Accordingly, in the initial identification of whites with their native country, a positive image of the former is conveyed through material processes (which entail the whites as 'voluntary agents' of the acts performed):

7) *Britain welcomed* me – and tens of thousands like me- and *enabled* me to build up a number of successful businesses. (lines 53-7).

This initial allusion to national pride and its subsequent inclusion of all races under the same integrated society accounts for the portrayal of the youngsters from both groups as intentional agents of violence in material processes:

8) What is wrong with society when young men, whatever their colour, claim to be drawing attention to their grievances by *throwing* bricks and petrol bombs and *assaulting* the police? (lines 4-13).

An identical type of process is employed to specifically convey the ruthless Asian youths' behaviour:

9) Their children and grandchildren *have assimilated and absorbed* the aggressive, anti-social behaviour patterns common among many deprived white inner-city youths. (lines 135-42).

The action evoked implies passivity on the subjects' part. These are merely copying their white counterparts, which somehow indicates the latter's inherent blame and a subliminal support for Asians. In effect, this superficial material process hides an underlying relational process (which characterizes or describes an entity 'x' with a specific quality 'y'). This is a phenomenon called 'reconfiguration' by Toolan (1998: 96) and agreed on by the same author and Fairclough (1989: 124) to be possibly motivated by ideological reasons. It could be argued that Moghal would not want to explicitly express the possession by the Asian youngsters of the conditions mentioned.

Revealingly enough, when the author overtly differentiates between young and

older Asians, the latter's intrinsic good nature is pervasively denoted by relational processes:

10) The older Asian generation in Oldham *is* conservative with a small c –. (lines 130-2).

Neonazis on their own equally appear as conscious callous agents in passive sentences which contain a material process:

11) Riots *were inflamed* in Oldham by outside   intervention from far Right Organizations. (lines 117-20).

3.3. Nominalization

Nominalization (the transformation of processes into the syntactic form of a noun phrase) can be ideologically meaningful as it enables us to leave causality and responsibility inexplicit. This linguistic category specifically contributes to diminish the responsibility of both groups in the riots:

12) *Boredom, frustration* and *an absence* of any sense of opportunity – these are the conditions which caused the two groups to turn on each other. (lines 97-101).

Since Moghal includes both parties under the same situation, a certain degree of political correctness might be perceived at a double level: towards the people of his race and the whites, the race of those who had welcomed him. Moreover, nominalization also ultimately allows to surreptitiously attribute the roots to another participant: the (local) government. In effect, in the previous paragraph Oldham's deplorable life and working conditions had been briefly but accurately described.

3.4. Syntactic highlighting of information (thematization and topicalization)

Thematization, or "shifting of a noun-phrase into the informationally significant first place in the sentence" (Fowler and Kress 1979: 209) is an author's powerful means to manipulate the readers' attention to the content that s/he considers a priority. It is manifested, among others, in passivization, which is used to underline the raving

conduct of white extremists:

13) There are reports that riots *were inflamed* in Oldham by outside intervention from far Right Organizations such as the British National Party. (lines 117-25).

Another function of thematization is nominalization. Example (12) perfectly fits into this category. Besides the recently discussed reduction of responsibility, this thematized nominalization allows to focus on the key argument of Moghal's thesis. This argumentation is further supported through a semantically controlled highlighting of information, specifically the rhetorical 'strategy of suspense' (van Dijk 1993: 277):

14) *What I find* so pleasing is that there is no conflict between my role as a British politician and my role as a Moslem of East African Asian origin. (lines 65-9).

The object of the predicate 'find' (the lack of conflict) is foregrounded with its placement at the end of the sentence, after its qualifying clause, so as to direct the readers' attention towards it.

3.5. Modality

Modality is ideologically significant since it underlies the speakers' attitudes and judgements as reflected in language. Toolan (1998: 46) specifically conceptualizes modality in the following manner:

> Modality denotes the linguistic means available for qualifying any claim or commitment you make in the language […] Most of the utterances we make can be qualified in terms of the strength (or weakness) of the probability, or obligation, or willingness, or usuality, with which we stand by them.

The use of pronouns in this article deserves special mention, particularly the 'inclusive we' (Fairclough 1989: 127; Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 274; Fowler and Kress 1979: 202). It involves both the reader and the addresser, which helps to definitely signal the British society as multiracial from the very beginning:

15) The riots in Oldham this weekend are a reproach to *us* all. (lines 1-4).

This striking declaration allows for the employment of the 'inclusive we' in the

rest of the article. This practice becomes vital in the shaping of Moghal's main thesis. In effect, initially the author skilfully includes both groups in the same society while portraying white British as tolerant. He then recurrently uses 'we' to address himself to the whole of that society which, being composed of different races, is fair-minded and unprejudiced. In other words, the 'inclusive we' paves the way for the strategic national pride referred to:

16) *We* in this country can stand tall and proud in the knowledge that, though far from perfect, race relations in this country are among the world's best. (lines 112-6).

Moghal equally personalizes his analysis and overtly professes his authority by means of the pronoun 'I':

17) *I* think *I* am in a position to know [that the answer to the question of whether Britain is a "deeply divided, bitterly intolerant, institutionally racist society" (lines 27-9) is no] (lines 38-9).

In general, the first person pronoun is included in metaphorized instances (Toolan 1998: 57):

18) *I believe* that this country is one of the most racially tolerant anywhere in the world. (lines 107-10).

The "I believe" metaphors reflect the author's modality of subjective certainty about the asserted events: he is sure about them. In fact, the statement above could be rephrased as "It is certain/likely/possible/essential that this country is one of the most racially tolerant anywhere in the world".

It is worth noticing that the overall directive speech act of persuasion (trying to convince the readership as to the rightness and logic behind his argument) is also achieved by a mixture of the following factors: the expression of the author's authority as a leading politician through the pronoun 'I', together with his ascription to one of the traditional victim races of racism, a topic developed by himself in the introduction. Thus he gradually becomes identified as a credible witness or expert of the reality depicted (van Dijk 1993: 264).

Identical connotations of certainty and unquestionableness as modal metaphors can be breathed in the fragments which contain the present tense. It reflects the writer's leadership as a politician, especially when combined with the 'inclusive we' and modal metaphors:

19) The riots in Oldham this weekend *are* a reproach to us all. (lines 1-4).

20) I believe that this country *is* one of the most racially tolerant anywhere in the world. (lines 107-10).

The author's favourable attitude towards Asians is further realized through modal auxiliary verbs. They become very useful to reflect the good nature of Asian elders, such as for instance "will", which indicates the near-certainty of their feelings towards the reprehensible Asian youths' acts (Toolan 1998: 49):

21) They *will* be horrified at just how successfully their children and grandchildren have assimilated and absorbed the aggressive, anti-social behaviour patterns common among many deprived white inner-city youths. (lines 135-41).

An even higher degree of certainty about the same truth is conveyed by 'must':

22) The parents of the Asian youngsters who rioted at the weekend *must* be shaking their heads in despair. (lines 126-29).

The alleged anti-civilized nature on the part of white youths and neonazis advocated by Moghal is also reproduced in expressive (evaluative) adjectives:

23) Their *odious* activities [neonazis']. (line 124).

This evaluative device equally underlies the positive portrayal of people other than whites as respectable, with the ensuing activation of the antiracist ideological structure:

24) The very many *hard-working and law-abiding* members of racial minorities in this country. (lines 168-71).

On the other hand, Moghal's (alleged) attempts at impartiality in his account of the participants in the riots are reflected by means of *overlexicalization* (Fowler and

Kress 1979: 211) or *overwording* (Fairclough 1989: 115). This is a process which consists of the provision of a high number of synonyms or near-synonyms:

25) The riots in Oldham are *painful, inexcusable* and *wholly depressing.* (lines 70-1).

Here the predicative position of the adjectives is a further element of the writer's modality in this article, since it constitutes an indication of his commitment to the evaluation of the truth depicted (Fowler and Kress 1979: 212).

3.6. Logical connectors

These are clearly employed to support Moghal's main thesis and subthesis. In the former case, example (26) speaks for itself:

26) The riots in Oldham are painful, inexcusable and wholly depressing. *But* it is wrong to dignify or excuse them by suggesting that they are a reaction to racism in Britain. (lines 70-5).

In Moghal's secondary argumentation, connectors definitely clearly point to the author's sympathetic stance regarding the youths of his race whom he justifies:

27) *But* it is surely not surprising that ill-educated Asian youngsters in Oldham should persuade themselves that they can expect nothing but 'institutionalized racism' from the bobby on the beat, *and so* target him or her for abuse or assault. (lines 187-90).

In effect, after stating the confessed institutionalized racism from law-orders, 'but' reflects the unavoidable consequence in Asian youths' minds. 'And so' signals these youths' ensuing logical expected attitude, which helps to diminish their voluntary agency in the material process of 'targeting' the police.

3.7. Presuppositions

These are "the linguistic constructions that prompt us to note some further claim or point, behind those explicitly made in a text" (Toolan 1998: 214). They are primarily found to sustain Moghal's main thesis. Firstly, in relation to the deep origin for the

causes of the riots (Oldham's lamentable situation):

28) In this *once* great industrial town. (line 94).

Secondly, presuppositions are also employed in connection with the advocacy of non-racism in Britain:

29) *While extremists undoubtedly exist in Britain, as they do in any other nation,* I believe that this country is one of the most racially tolerant anywhere in the world. (lines 105-10).

30) *Small* pockets of racism in Britain. (lines 224-5).

3.8. Rhetorics

The various rhetorical tools observed in the article contribute to shape the substantiation of the author's principal thesis. There are a remarkable number of rhetorical questions:

31) Wat is wrong with society when young men […] whatever their colour, claim to be drawing attention to their grievances by throwing bricks and petrol bombs and assaulting the police as well as each other? (lines 4-13).

Repetitions (van Dijk 1996: 56) also play their role in specifying the 'real' motives for the riots:

32) First, we must ask ourselves: was this really a race riot? [...] I would answer *no, no and no* again. (lines 22-3; 37-9).

The same applies to semantic contrasts in the form of overlexicalization:

33) Oldham [...] is an area of *poverty, deprivation* and *sheer desperation* for too many of its inhabitants. (lines 79-81).

34) If Oldham had been a *stable, harmonious* and *prosperous* society. (lines 121-5)*.*

Probably the most outstanding rhetorical feature due to its overwhelming effects is the use of metaphors. These strategically appear at the beginning and at the end of the article in accordance with its thematic structure (the content being the argumentation of

Moghal's main thesis). Initially, due to its unfortunate circumstances,

35) Oldham was a *powder keg waiting to blow*. (lines 76-8).

The advocacy for the truly lack of racism in Britain in the last part is expressed as follows:

36) For that is the only way to ensure that whites and Asians alike become impervious to the few bigoted individuals determined to foster the small pockets of racism in Britain so they can spread their *poison*. (lines 220-6).

Thus the social problem of racism is here represented in its commonest form: as a disease (Fairclough 1989: 120). Accordingly, its prime ideological relevance lies in the fact that dominant interests are absorbed as interests of the whole society: racism is poisonous, and as such the whole majority of –decent- whites and Asians have to become immune so that it does not spread.

Conclusion

In the previous analysis we have tried to unmask the writer's favourable stance towards the people of his race, which constitutes a subsidiary thesis. We have equally attempted to unravel the way that it intelligently becomes intermingled within the general argumentation of his main -and supposedly unique- thesis (racism did not provoke the violent Oldham's riots). In order to do so, we have analysed a battery of eight lexico-grammatical categories in both Asians and whites. This was supplemented by an examination of the text thematic structure. Its strategic amalgamation in conjunction with typographical features contributed to the successful formulation of both theses.

The introduction, second and fourth parts (the last two respectively headed as "Reality" and "Cynical") are devoted to the construction of the main thesis. From the very beginning, Moghal skilfully creates an image of the British society as truly multiracial with the recurrent use of the 'inclusive we'. This one allows for the powerfully persuasive allusion to national pride in two manifestations: the tolerance of

British society as a whole and of white British. In this way, the latter are designated by the name of their country, which is portrayed as an active welcoming agent in material processes.

This positive representation of British society becomes variously enhanced by topicalization, the 'strategy of suspense' and remarkably common modal devices (precisely the present tense, the modal metaphor and the use of the pronoun 'I'). The latter emerges as a vigorous instrument for the expression of the writer's authority thanks to his known leading position in politics and his Asian racial membership. All these elements allow for his portrayal as a credible witness of both theses.

Significant subtle concessions on whites are appreciated before turning to the third part, 'Despair', where the author overtly states his sympathy towards the people of his own race. In effect, in accordance with the representation of Britain as a unified society, uncivilized behaviour is attributed to both Asian and white youths, who are depicted as active agents of violence in material processes. Most importantly, the author's political diplomacy is reflected in two levels, one solely related to whites and the other to the two parties together. Firstly, sometimes there is an explicit reference to neonazis as the exclusive blameful troublemakers by means of material processes and evaluative adjectives. This leads to the underlying conclusion that there exists a neat differentiation between a minority of reprehensible whites (extremists) and an overwhelming majority of honest whites. Secondly, the youngsters of both races are somehow relieved from their responsibility in the riots with the help of thematized nominalization, which denotes the real causes of the turmoil. These, according to Moghal, are Oldham's lamentable life and working conditions. The linguistic tools used to substantiate Oldham's lamentable life and working conditions as the actual violence triggers are various: presuppositions and the rhetorical instruments of repetitions, semantic contrasts, metaphors and overlexicalization of predicative adjectives.

After this initial sociopolitical categorization of the motives for riots together with the effective reference to national pride, Moghal successfully shapes a subtle argumentation for the defence of Asians. This support is strategically placed in the middle of the article in the section titled "Despair". This heading directly hints at the older Asians' distress provoked by their youths counterparts' reprehensible behaviour.

Indeed, one of the two mechanisms for the shaping of Moghal's backing constitutes the neat distinction between the two generations (absent in the case of whites) and the highlighting of the Asian parents' and grandparents' good qualities. The distress mentioned is linguistically signalled by the modal auxiliary verbs 'will' and 'must', indicators of near-certainty and absolute certainty respectively. Likewise, older Asians are attributed positive interaction values in a relational process, the effects of which are reinforced once again by the incorporation of the present tense. This phenomenon is one of the activators for the antiracist ideological framework in which the *in*-group or Asians (and the rest of racial minorities) are represented as peaceful and hard-working.

The second argumentative tool in the Asian support is the foregrounding of white youths' faults and the justification of Asian youngsters' actions. In effect, the latter are rendered as passive agents in material processes who merely imitate white youngsters. Similarly, Asian youths' active aggressive agency in a material process where the police are the affected medium is excused by a logical connector.

This carefully woven support of Asians located in the middle of the text is followed by the final part, "Cynical". Moghal's main discoursal achievement in this last section is the retaking of his prime argument: deplorable conditions and not racism triggered Oldham's riots, since Britain as a whole is not racist. This is realized by means of a metaphor which depicts the social problem of racism as a poisonous disease. Its spreading will be erradicated with the adoption of suitable housing and working measures by the local government, which will allow both Asians' and whites' immunization.

Thus Moghal ingeniously ends up his article in a cyclical way by conveying the same notion which has constituted an essential skeleton of the argumentation of his main thesis: Britain is a harmonious multiracial society. In this way Moghal's ultimate authority and credibility as an impartial analyst and witness are decidedly asserted.

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Moghal, Manzor. "Why racism didn't cause these riots". *Daily Mail*, 29th May, 2001.