

# **ISSA Proceedings 2014 ~ Discourse, Argumentation And Constructivist Approaches: Analysing Discourses Of Social Change**

*Abstract:* My research in recent years has focused on the analysis of discourse of social change as a type of 'ideological construction', using a holistic, interdisciplinary approach that combines: a) constructivist rhetoric and argumentation; b) the constructivist theories of Bateson, Goffman, Gumperz and Lakoff; and c) embodied social cognition studies. This article examines the concept of ideological construction in relation to data from the Spanish 15M movement.

*Keywords:* Constructivist rhetoric, Critical discourse analysis, Complexity studies, Discourses of social change, Embodied cognition, Ideological construction, Socio-cognitive frame, 15M.

## *1. Introduction*

In recent decades, research in Critical Discourse Analysis (or CDA), particularly in Europe, has shown a growing interest in political discourse in globalized, democratic societies. This, in turn, has led to a broader definition of the term 'political discourse', used here in the wider sense of the varied discursive practices of political professionals, and the socio-political proposals for change generated by diverse social groups, described as 'discourses of social change' by Montesano Montessori & Morales-López (2014) and Morales-López (2012, 2014).

Discourses of social change are ideological speech acts that call for radical social and political reforms. They appeal, in the first instance, to the country's citizens, in order to gain support for the speakers' ideological position, but also to government, key state bodies and other international institutions, in an effort to have their proposals adopted as policy (Morales-López, 2012, 2014).

## *2. Theoretical framework and methodology*

This study looks at discourses of social change from three different perspectives:

1. pragmatic-functionalist;
2. rhetorical-argumentative; and
3. socio-cognitive. **[i]**

This triple-perspective approach illustrates more effectively why the construction of meaning in ideological discourse is inseparable from the following key factors:

- a. the deliberate selection of multi-modal communicative resources;
- b. human action and the local and global contexts in which the communicative act takes place; and
- c. the cognitive constructions of the actors themselves.

In the pragmatic-functionalist tradition, discourse is understood as a socio-semiotic process, in reference to the idea that symbolic meaning is constructed in dialectical relation to the prevailing social reality. Halliday (1977, p 50) explains this clearly when he describes his view of language as:

*[...] a sociological event, a semiotic encounter through which the meanings that constitute the social system are exchanged. The individual member is, by virtue of his membership, a 'meaner', one who means. By his acts of meaning and those of other individual meaners, the social reality is created, maintained in good order, and continuously shaped and modified.*

According to Halliday (1977), the construction of social reality in its most basic form occurs through spontaneous conversation in the course of everyday encounters, so that changes or continuity within the social system (and culture in general) are reflected in the discourse and simultaneously created by it. This dialectical relationship has also led to the diversification of discourse texts themselves, as the source and expression of new social (and ideological) meanings in particular contexts of situation.

Ethnography brings an important additional dimension to this functionalist approach. In this regard, the relationships between discursive data and the local and global context (Duranti, 1997; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001; Blommaert & Jie, 2010), and data, context and action (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2005; Scollon, 2008) are crucial. Ethnography also helps to unify more scattered data, since the goal of a successful ethnographic study is, as Duranti (2007, p. 87) points out, to create a dialogue between the different viewpoints and voices present: that of the researcher as well as those of the people studied.

The constructivist rhetorical-argumentative perspective is also essential for the analysis of this type of ideological discourses; classical authors as well as modern experts such as Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958), Meyer (2008), van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004), van Eemeren (2010) and Pujante (2003), among others. The pragmatic-discursive approach provides useful tools for analysis at the micro level: in relation to speech acts (Searle, 1975), as the basic units of any communicative activity; and also in relation to the selection of contextualization cues (linguistic forms that activate contextual inference), as defined by Gumperz (1982, p. 131).

However, this type of micro-level analysis limits our ability to appreciate the full complexity of the constructions involved in ideological discourse, including such macro-level factors as argument and fallacy, pragma-dialectical rules, etc. (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958; Perelman, 2007; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004; van Eemeren, 2010; Pujante & Morales-López, 2008, 2009). Both the pragmatic-discursive and the rhetorical-argumentative approaches share what I consider to be two vital features of discourse analysis: a functionalist orientation (the goal of which is to establish a dialectical relationship between communicative functions and the forms that convey them), and a constructivist view of knowledge (that is, the idea that reality does not exist independently of discursive practices).

What these approaches lack, however, is a socio-cognitive perspective. For my own research, therefore, I have adapted the approach used in embodied and social cognition studies, which dissent strongly from the rationalist view of knowledge and the computational model of cognitive information processing (Harré, 1981; Forgas, 1981, p. 259; Capra, 1996, pp. 275f.; Morales-López, 2011, 2013). Harré (1981, p. 212) is clear about where the problem lies:

*Cartesianism is everywhere, suggesting that if anything is cognitive it must be individual and private (and then how can we find out about it in publicly reliable ways?) The error of identifying the cognitive with the inner processes of individuals [...]*

From a socio-cognitive point of view, reality exists, but individuals reorganise it to fit their perception of the world. A person's world view is not individually constructed or separate from their physical and emotional being, as Bateson (1972, pp. 454, 461, 464) explains:

*The mental world - the mind - the world of information processing - is not limited*

*by the skin [...] What I am saying expands mind outwards [...] It is the attempt to separate intellect from emotion that is monstrous, and I suggest that it is equally monstrous to attempt to separate the external mind from the internal. Or to separate mind from body.*

Bateson's constructivist approach is also found in American authors such as Bartlett (1932), Mead (1956), Goffman (1974) and Gumperz (1982), and has been reformulated more recently from a cognitive perspective by Lakoff (2007). Other precursors of the approach include Bakhtin (1981), Voloshinov (1929) and Vygotsky (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2005), while the constructivist point of view is also found among social theorists such as Berger & Luckmann (1968), Castoriadis (1975) and Bourdieu (1990), among others.

My interest in this type of approach has led me in recent years to authors applying a similar constructivist approach in other disciplines (studies of complexity, in particular). One example is the socio-cognitive interpretation found in Maturana & Varela (1990), Varela, Thompson & Rosch (1991), Maturana (1996) and Capra (1996), among others. For these authors, human cognition operates through a network of interconnected, sensorimotor sub-networks (knowledge, emotions, etc.), which are in turn interwoven with embodiment, action and environment; Damasio (1994, 2010) reaches similar conclusions using neurological studies.

The biologist Humberto Maturana (2006, pp. 96-97) explains the relationship between language, knowledge, emotions and social relations in the following terms:

*Language is not a property or faculty of the brain or of what is called the 'mind'. Language occurs as a recursive flow of consensual coordinations that takes place in living systems interacting with each other in a flow of recursive consensual coordinations of doings and emotions. Consciousness and self-consciousness cannot be considered to exist independently of the circumstances of their arising in the relational space of language in the flow of coordinations of doings and emotions. We do not construct the worlds that we live, we just live them.*

If cognitive representations are the result of the interaction between communication and emotion (in the sense of the physical disposition of the body in relation to the specific domain of human action present in the individual at any given time), cognition cannot be treated separately from body and the social and

interactional context. Capra (1996, p. 300) highlights this point by tracing the meaning of the term consciousness back to its Latin origin, *con-scire* 'knowing together'; this sense of shared knowledge also appears in terms such as embodied cognition, embodied action (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991), and networked (or distributed) cognition (Capra, 1996, pp. 59, 89). Such ideas depart completely from the modular, representational theory of human cognition that has dominated cognitive science up to now, and which views cognition as the representation and parcelled sub-representation of an independently existing world.

In my research, the socio-cognitive notion of 'framing' (Lakoff, 2007) is used at an interpretative level to explain the different ideological constructions, world views (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 130), imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1974) or symbolic universes (Berger & Luckmann, 1968, p. 124) that social actors create and attempt to maintain in ideological disputes. In one of his latest books, van Eemeren (2010, p. 126) also refers to the notion of frame and its function of constructing social facts.

Applying this idea of 'frame' rather than 'representation' involves more than a simple change in terminology. Framing offers a new cognitive approach, referred to as 'post-cognitivism' by some authors (Gomila & Calvo, 2008), in which cognition is understood as a unified process resulting from the interplay between the multiple factors mentioned above. Under a frame analysis, the construction of meaning in discourse forms part of a holistic cognitive process, in which the actors' experience of the world is created in the discursive process as part of a dialectical relationship between their subjectivity and emotions, their actions and the environment. **[ii]** All cognitive processes, including the process of signification, are thus inseparable from our biological characteristics and the socio-cultural relations in which we are immersed.

The multifaceted approach used throughout this research demonstrates the need to follow the example set by authors of complexity studies (Morin, 1990; Nicolescu, 2007), and begin to treat discourse analysis as a transdisciplinary field of study and an area of new theoretical and methodological reflection.

### *3. Analysis of the data*

To illustrate the ideas and models discussed above, I have selected the discourse created by a social movement that emerged in Spain in response to major cuts in funding for social services in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis: the so-called '15M' movement.

15M takes its name from a spontaneous peaceful protest in the main squares of Madrid and Barcelona that took place on 15 May 2011, before spreading to other cities across the country. (The group is also referred to as the 'Outrage Movement' - *los indignados* - after Stéphane Hessel's 2010 essay, *Indignez-vous*.) While Spain is no stranger to the struggle for democracy, the 15M group presents a number of novel characteristics, including its emphasis on peaceful resistance and the movement's imaginary of a new democracy or world view, transmitted through inventive placards and slogans designed by the citizens themselves and posted in public squares and spaces and/or on various websites (Pujante & Morales-López, 2013). The hypothesis of this study is that these placards (in combination with the numerous demonstrations and the overall dynamic of the movement) functioned, in the first instance, as a sign of protest, but also as a way to reframe the population's understanding of the economic and social crisis, and rearticulate the identity of the country's citizens, transforming them from victims into agents (Montesano Montessori & Morales-López, 2014).

Two recent studies examine some of the most noteworthy slogans produced by the movement (Pujante & Morales-López, 2013; Montesano Montessori & Morales-López, 2014), dating not only from the period of encampment in different towns and cities, but also from the many events and demonstrations that took place during the months that followed. **[iii]** This article analyses two additional 15M slogans.

One of the first slogans used by the emerging movement was: 'Real democracy now. We are not goods to be bought and sold by the bankers and politicians' (*Democracia real ya. No somos mercancías en manos de políticos y banqueros*). (The first part of this slogan is, in addition, another of the names used by the group.)

From a discursive point of view, the creativity of the slogan lies, firstly, in the use of the adjective 'real' as a modifier of the noun 'democracy', introducing a new collocation whose meaning could imply that the democratic system in place since 1975 has been anomalous in some way - or even reminiscent of the dictatorship it was intended to replace. A second discursive construction is the use of temporal deixis, introduced by the adverb *ya*. The temporality of the adverb turns this entire statement into a directive speech act (Searle, 1975) with deontic modality (Ridruejo 1999): the actors are not stating a fact, but expressing their intention that the world - or the political world, at least - should be made to fit their view of

reality. The third device is the implicit causal argument created by the juxtaposition of the two premises. Lastly, the slogan presents two metaphors: the citizens as merchandise (a material object for exchange), and the bankers and politicians as the actors who handle them like puppets, moving for their own ends the life-strings of those worst affected by the economic situation. The second slogan reads as follows (Fig. 1):**[iv]**



Translation: 'Your other bench – the bench more and more people are choosing.'  
'Don't pay for their recession. Rise up! Occupy the streets!'

Fig.1: *Translation: 'Your other bench – the bench more and more people are choosing.'* 'Don't pay for their recession. Rise up! Occupy the streets!'

The use here of a well-known bank advertisement represents the discursive recontextualization of a capitalist message for a completely opposite socio-political purpose.**[v]** The persuasive effect of the original advertisement was based on the homonymy in Spanish between the word *banco* 'bank of money' and *banco* 'park bench'; in the 15M slogan and image, however, *Tu otro banco* has only one possible referent. In order to appreciate the full meaning of the park bench in the context of the 15M movement, we must first analyse the metonymy created here: this bench and countless others like it were where citizens, in squares in cities all over Spain, sat to debate and demand their rights (that is, the physical space in which the communicative action took place for that action). The group of citizens mobilized by 15M refers not just to the people who started the camps, but also to those who came to see what was happening, and it is to them and future observers like them that the authors of the slogan are addressing their

message when they use the pronoun of solidarity 'you' (i.e. someone close). The slogan concludes with three directive speech acts designed to persuade the public to add their voices to the cause.

#### *4. Interpretation*

These two illustrations are just a small representation of the huge number of examples collected as part of this study. To account for the emergence of so much discursive creativity, in terms of both meaning and the devices and resources used, the following factors must be taken into consideration:

Firstly, the relationship between discursive creativity and the communicative and contextual circumstances in which the slogans were formed. These were not the specific speech acts of individuals discoursing in isolation to persuade/convince a particular audience, but the collective communicative outcome of a series of assemblies, information boards, blogs, websites, etc. and the shared emotion of those experiences.

This new communicative action, which began with the encampment of a group of activists in a public square in one city and spread spontaneously via social media to other parts of Spain, could be interpreted as a major feat of civic cooperation: the collective action of a group of citizens who begin to realize that the political class, though democratically elected, has undermined the democratic values enshrined in the 1978 Spanish Constitution, and the ideals of European integration; has turned its back on the people, and handed over the country's wealth and that of Europe to the financial institutions. Extreme communication situations, such as that represented by the 15M protest, appear to bear out the belief held by certain authors that cooperation is one of the most powerful drivers of human evolution: 'Societies, both animal and human, might almost be regarded as huge cooperative nervous systems' (Hayakawa, 1973, p. 11; see also Capra, 1996).

Possibly as a consequence of the movement's entirely peaceful nature, the groups involved in 15M appear to have adopted discursive creativity spontaneously as a way of raising awareness of their common cause. Their preferred form of expression was the slogan, a narrative discursive genre that has the advantage of communicating a great deal of information in a very small amount of space, while at the same time maximizing the number and variety of rhetorical-discursive strategies available.



A second point to be considered is that these slogans are the result of a widespread, co-distributed cognition (Capra, 1996, p. 89; Maturana & Varela, 1990) that places Spanish democracy since 1975 within a new ideological frame or construct. According to one study, carried out by the newspaper *El País* in 2011 (23 October), 73 per cent of Spaniards expressed themselves in agreement with the messages and demands of the *indignados*.

The slogans of the 15M movement cannot be examined from a solely socio-semiotic or rhetorical-argumentative point of view, therefore, because these perspectives do not account for the full potential meaning and persuasive effect of the discourse (Pujante & Morales-López, 2013). The analysis of these slogans requires a more holistic approach, integrating additional disciplines, such as ethnography, which views the signification process as inseparable from the context of situation and social action (in the case of 15M, the occupation of public spaces and subsequent dissemination of messages via social media); and socio-cognitive analyses, which establish a continuum between the speaking subject (complete with subjectivity and emotions) and reality. The messages created by the 15M movement not only transmit knowledge, in the form of a new interpretation of the Spanish socio-political situation, but also connect at an emotional level both with the past and with the need for younger citizens to become more actively engaged in politics.

## 5. *Conclusions*

The interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary constructivist framework for this analysis highlights the inseparability of all factors and actors present in the creation of a new ideological discourse: the speaking subjects; their speech acts, and their recontextualization in relation to other acts; the interlocutors present in the physical space in which the statements are first uttered, and the interlocutors who receive those messages through traditional and social media; the local context in which the statements are made; the socio-political environment that gives rise to them, and the action or actions carried out at the same time by the social actors present.

Only by examining all these variables together can we fully understand the complex meaning of ideological discourses, especially those which arise in spaces of radical conflict, as is the case in Spain today.

## NOTES

- i.** This research is part of the ‘Constructivist Rhetoric: Identity Discourses’ project, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competition (FFI2013-40934R; period: 2014-2016).
- ii.** For a description of the origins of the idea of ‘framing’ among American theorists, see Morales-López (2011). Montesano Montessori & Morales-López (2014) looks at the relationship between framing and Somers’s theory of narratives and narrativity (Somers, 1994).
- iii.** For an example of the spontaneous protests and slogans launched by the 15M movement, see: <http://www.rtve.es/noticias/20110516/miles-personas-piden-toda-espana-cambio-d-el-modelo-politico-social/432656.shtml>
- iv.** All the 15M’s speeches are open access.
- v.** See the original advertisement at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpLbXcmVvkw>

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