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Constructing an Identity of Able-bodiedness: Discourses of Disability by Primary School Children

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Abstract

This paper examines how non-disabled primary school children conceptualize those with disabilities from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. This research involves an exploration of children's perceptions about this social group, and also the way children shape an identity of able-bodiedness ('Us') in relation to an identity of disability ('Them'). For the purposes of the study, we asked nine year old children in a Greek primary school to produce drawing and a text about people with disabilities, without previously discussing the topic with them. This presentation focuses on the analysis of linguistic messages. The analysis shows that children mainly drew upon a traditional discourse of disability (as individual deficit) rather than upon a progressive one (as a problem of social exclusion).

Introduction

During the last 25 years, disability studies have experienced a shift from an 'individual' or 'traditional' to a 'social' or 'progressive' discourse of disability. This conceptual change could be attributed to the rise of Disability Rights Movement at societal level and the emergence of social constructionist paradigm at academic level. Traditional discourse represents disability as a problem which resides in people with disability themselves, as an individual tragedy (Gold and Auslander, 1999). This discourse also medicalises disability by defining it as 'impairment' (Ferri et al., 2005). The victimisation of people with disability is often stressed by their dependence on the assistance of able-bodied people. According to this 'guardianship discourse', people with disability cannot function without the help of able-bodied ones (Scior, 2003). Progressive discourse has attempted to disclose the social discrimination faced by people with disability. Disability has been dislocated from the body, being thought to be caused by social barriers which oppress and exclude people with disability from a disabling society (e.g. Corker and French, 1999; Oliver, 1996). Constructing disability as an example of social exclusion does not only mean fostering positive attitudes towards people with disability, but also offering them appropriate services and infrastructures.

Despite the conceptual shift towards a social model of disability, the traditional discourse remains the dominant representational resource of disability, as it is evidenced by the training of special education professionals (Vehkakoski, 2004) and the portrayals of disability disseminated by the media (e.g. Valentine, 2001). Pervaded by this discourse, both adults (e.g. Berryman, 1989) and children (e.g. Harper, 1997; Nabors and Keyes, 1995) seem to be unfavourably disposed towards disability and disabled people, although their views have been found to be also influenced by many factors, such as gender (e.g. Eichinger et al., 1991; Woodard, 1995), amount of contact with disabled

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people (e.g. Folsom-Meek et al., 1999; Hutzler et al., 2007), type of disability involved (e.g. Nowicki, 2003; Pearson et al., 2003), and (in case of children) age (e.g. Hazzard, 1983). Although relevant research is vast, it has mostly examined views on people with disability as derived from closed-form questionnaires and structured interviews using various attitude-scales (Antonak and Livneh, 2000). In contrast, there are few studies that have explored the way persons with disability are represented in people's speech or writing (Ferri et al., 2005; Rogers, 2002; Stamou and Padelia, in press), and even lesser, in children's texts (Magiati et al., 2002). Yet, various social research approaches are needed in order to handle the multifaceted nature of attitudes and perceptions.

This study is situated in the framework of a non-essentialist and narrative conception of attitudes and identities, which are regarded as non-fixed but dynamic entities (re)structured through discourse and closely knitted to the situational context (e.g. Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). More specifically, by adopting the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997), we explore the way primary school children conceptualise people with disability in their texts. Critical Discourse Analysis is a theoretical nexus of different approaches sharing a common view on text and talk as a form of social practice. Hence, it explores how texts build representations of the world, social relationships, and social identities, and there is an emphasis on how such practices and texts are ideologically shaped by relations of power. Views on disability play a crucial role not only in the social integration of disabled people but also in projects of inclusive education, in which Greece makes its initial steps (Magiati et al., 2002). Thus, studying children's representations of disability, not having been fixed yet, is a first step towards the development of intervention strategies forging positive attitudes towards disabled people. On the other hand, such a study also involves an exploration of children's identity construction. Since social identity is primarily constructed by separating the self from the other (e.g. Turner et al., 1987), it particularly concerns how children shape an identity of able-bodiedness/ non-disability ('Us') in relation to an identity of disability ('Them') (Stamou and Padelia, in press; Thomas and Smith, 2003).¹

Methodology

Study design

31 Greek primary school children of 9 years old (16 boys and 15 girls) from a rural area in Northern Greece (Chalkidiki) were asked to produce a multimodal text (a drawing and a linguistic message) about people with disability without any discussion about this topic with them prior to the research. Since children's understandings can be influenced by teaching practices, in order to minimise the effect of explicit information, we chose to investigate the views of children where no explicit interventions were in place. Adopting the analytical framework of Systemic-Functional Grammar of Halliday (1994), in this paper we focus on the analysis of linguistic messages included in 20 texts.

¹ For denoting people without disability, there are the discrete terms 'able-bodied(ness)' and 'non-disability/ non-disabled', reflecting the traditional (=people without individual deficits) and progressive (=people without social barriers) perspective on these people, respectively (Devlieger, 1999). We keep this distinction throughout the paper.

Systemic-Functional Grammar constitutes a major analytical resource employed by Critical Discourse Analysis, and especially by the Fairclough's approach (Titscher et al., 2000), since it attempts to explain how language serves the aims and intentions of the speaker/ writer, depending on the way it is used each time. From this perspective, language is seen as a network of options from which language users make selections that are ideologically significant. Moreover, language is regarded as being multifunctional, namely, as performing simultaneously an 'ideational' (represent the world), an 'interpersonal' (position the hearer/reader in terms of that world) and a 'textual' (construct a meaningful and coherent world) function. Halliday (1994) has developed a toolkit for the analysis of these three functions of language, connecting them with specific lexico-grammatical features. For the aims of our study, we focused on the tools of 'vocabulary' and 'transitivity' (ideational function), as well as of 'personal deixis', 'speech acts' and 'evaluation' (interpersonal function).

Analysis of the ideational function of language

Language users shape their ideational meanings by drawing primarily upon selections of vocabulary and transitivity (Fairclough, 1992). Vocabulary gives labels to the world (e.g. naming of people), whereas transitivity gives causal meaning to the world (e.g. determination of what people do). This happens by determining 'processes', namely, actions in a broad sense (i.e. actions, states, feelings, intellectual procedures etc.) and 'participants', namely, entities and objects that are linked to processes (Halliday, 1994). Transitivity is realised by means of the fundamental categories of language grammar: by means of verbs which typically determine processes, and by means of nouns which typically signal participants. Halliday (1994) distinguishes among 'material', 'mental', 'relational' and 'verbal' processes, based on the way processes are worded. Specifically, material processes concern processes of doing (e.g. help); mental processes concern processes of sensing (e.g. love); relational processes concern processes of being in a broad sense (i.e. become, express etc.), relating to attributes ('attributive': e.g. 'Mary is beautiful') or to identifications ('identifying': e.g. 'Mary is blind'); verbal processes concern processes of saying (e.g. state). For the determination of causality, a distinction is drawn between participants that initiate processes, the 'agents' ('who does') and participants that receive processes, 'the affected' ('to whom something is done'). Ergativity is 'at the heart of the expression of ideology' (Trew, 1979, p. 123), since it allocates responsibility for processes. Depending on the semantics of processes, some have only agents, namely, they are self-engendered, called 'non-transactive' (e.g. work, go), while others have both agents and affected, called 'transactive' (e.g. throw, destroy). In most of the cases, all processes except for material ones are non-transactive.

Analysis of the interpersonal function of language

For the analysis of the interpersonal function of language, there is a distinction usually drawn between lexico-grammatical features that are linked to the interaction between speaker/ writer and hearer/ reader and those that relate to the speaker's/ writer's stance towards his/her utterance. Regarding the writer-reader interaction, the lexico-grammatical features analysed are those of 'personal deixis' and 'speech acts'. Regarding the writer's stance, the lexico-grammatical feature examined is that of 'evaluation'.

Personal deixis involves all allusions made in a text to the text producer and/or consumer, which is mainly expressed through the use of personal (e.g. 'I', 'we', 'you') or possessive pronouns (e.g. 'my', 'our', 'your') (Fowler, 1991). A speaker/writer may choose to include (personalised style) or exclude (impersonal style) personal deictic elements, depending on the relationship he/she wishes to build with the text's recipient.

Speech acts (Austin, 1962) are rooted in the branch of linguistics called 'pragmatics', which departs from a view of language as a medium of reference to the world, to one which focuses on the view of language as an instrument through which language user expresses his intentions and acts. Specifically, according to the theory of speech acts, when using language, people perform certain acts. Here we refer to two of those speech acts, which were found in the data. One type of speech acts is the 'assertive', through which language users express their belief towards something (e.g. state, notify, inform). The other type of acts is the 'directive', through which speakers and writers ask addressee to do something (e.g. request, urge, recommend). Consequently, speech acts assume specific speaker/ writer and hearer/ reader positions. Assertive acts are oriented to the speaker/ writer him/herself, while the role of the hearer/ reader is that of someone being told. Conversely, directive acts are highly interactional in character, being oriented to the hearer/ reader, whose role is that of someone being asked for something. The determination of the speech acts performed is made by looking at several linguistic features, such as mood (e.g. directive acts are typically performed with the use of imperative and subjunctive mood) and performative verbs (e.g. claim, order). Besides these linguistic elements, the context of situation and paralanguage (e.g. intonation, body movements, punctuation marks) are also considered.

Evaluation relates to the writer's/ speaker's stance towards his/her utterance. In other words, it has to do with the insertion of the writer's/ speaker's feelings, emotions, comments and evaluative judgments into the utterance (Biber and Finegan, 1989). The most obvious way by means of which a writer evaluates his/her utterance is through the use of adjectives (e.g. beautiful), adverbs (e.g. unfortunately), adverbial phrases (e.g. of vital importance) and emotive lexis (e.g. disaster).

Results of the analysis

Although no specific direction was given to children as to what 'disability' involves, they only included physical (hemiplegia) and sensory (mainly blindness) types of disability in their texts. One reason for this could be the fact that these types of disability can be easier depicted than learning and mental disabilities. On the other hand, young children tend to identify disabilities that have clear physical manifestations (Magiati et al., 2002); motor and sensory disabilities are visible not only because of their salient characteristics, but also because they require suitable equipment (e.g. wheelchair, hearing aid) (ibid.).

The analysis of the linguistic signs accompanying the children's texts led to the identification of three representational resources employed: a 'deficit' and a 'guardianship discourse', relating to the traditional construction of disability, and a 'disability-as-social-problem discourse', linked to the progressive conceptualisation of

disability. In what follows, we provide a description of each discourse at the ideational and interpersonal level of language.

The deficit discourse

It was employed in 47% of the texts. At the ideational level of language, most clauses were nominal rather than verbal (e.g. 'blind children', 'a child with no hand') and the linguistic signs had the role of explanatory captions to the children's drawings. The processes employed were relational identifying, through which the condition of people with disability was described, and in particular what makes (identifier) a person disabled. Only once there was a mental process used (e.g. 'I can't hear'). The sole participants of the deficit discourse, namely, the carriers of the identifying processes, were people with disability, or less frequently an object belonged to them (e.g. 'a book for people with special needs'), constructing disability as a personal matter of the disabled people. At the interpersonal level of language, there was no writer or reader inscription, and an impersonal (third person) descriptive style was adopted (e.g. 'a school with disabled children'). The only exception was a text in which the designer-writer was included with the use of first person singular 'I': 'I'm drawing people with special needs'. All of the speech acts performed were assertive, which go together with the impersonal descriptive style prevailing in the deficit discourse (e.g. 'a wheel-chair with a disabled little girl with no legs and which is a little blind'). Regarding evaluation, people with disability were mainly referred to in a generally neutral, non-emotive lexis, such as 'people with special needs', 'disabled children' and 'blind children'. Less often, they were named in a rather neutral but detailed way (e.g. 'a wheel-chair with a disabled little girl with no legs and which is a little blind'). Finally, there were sparingly some non-politically correct wordings used, such as 'sordino'. In sum, the deficit discourse focused on the description of the condition itself of people with disability, and thus it also took the form of captions, approaching disability as an individual problem residing in people themselves.

The guardianship discourse

It was drawn upon in 35% of the texts. Contrary to the deficit discourse, most of the linguistic signs embedded in the drawings enriched them having the form of a bubble and giving voice to the people with disability depicted. At the ideational level of language, the processes were material, putting able-bodied individuals in agent position and people with disability in affected one (transactive), and were lexicalised as 'help' (e.g. 'help people with special needs'), or around this meaning (e.g. 'take my hand. Show me where the line is'). Thus, people with disability were represented as completely depending on able-bodied ones. In most of the cases, these able-bodied people were neither named, nor depicted in the drawings. Therefore, children did not determine whom exactly they meant as agent of disabled people's help. On the other hand, in most of the cases, people with disability were lexicalised in singular, namely, as individuals rather than as a social group, a collectivity with common needs (e.g. 'be compassionate of the blind person'). At the interpersonal level, the linguistic signs were highly interactional by referring to the recipient (standing for able-bodied people) with the use of second person plural 'you' (e.g. 'be compassionate of the deaf person'), and

less of second person singular 'you' ('show me where the line is').² All but one of the speech acts performed were directive, which go together with the interactional style of guardianship discourse. Through directive acts, people with disability were put in a position of soliciting the care of able-bodied ones (e.g. 'help people with special needs'). Regarding evaluation, the sporadic use of obsolete lexis (e.g. 'be compassionate') by children was striking, probably echoing a stereotypical media portrayal of people with disability (e.g. the image of the blind street beggar in the old Greek movies). In sum, the guardianship discourse focused on the help people with disability (as individuals) need by some undetermined able-bodied ones, and viewed charity and compassion as solution to their disabling condition. Therefore, this discourse put in juxtaposition an identity of able-bodiedness with one of disability.

The disability-as-social-problem discourse

This discourse was peripheral to the data, by being employed only in 12% of the texts. All of these texts depicted pages of books or notes, and thus the linguistic signs were longer (around 30 words) and constitutive of the drawings. In this sense, they were supportive to the construction of disability as an issue of social exclusion for which people with disability claimed their rights through the writing of pamphlets. At the ideational level of language, the processes were mainly material when they were initiated by non-disabled people (e.g. 'schools should be made for people with problems') and mental when they were initiated by people with disability (e.g. 'we want a better future'). Thus, non-disabled people were represented as makers of the claims and wants of the disabled ones. Unlike the guardianship discourse, the entity that was standing for the non-disabled agent was determined, by a reference to the 'State' (e.g. 'the State should listen to us'). At the interpersonal level of language, although all the speech acts performed were directive, the recipient (standing for non-disabled people) was mostly indirectly addressed to, with the use of third person singular (e.g. 'there should be books for blind persons'). This is probably due to the fact that contrary to the guardianship discourse which addressed charitable able-bodied people (personalisation), the disability-as-social-problem discourse addressed social structures (impersonalisation). On the other hand, allusions to the text producer (standing for people with disability) were also frequent but direct, by using the second plural collective 'we' (e.g. 'we want books for people with problems of sight'). Hence, contrary to the guardianship discourse, the text producer was speaking on behalf of all people with disability with the use of first person plural 'us' (e.g. 'the State should listen to us'). With respect to evaluation, it is noteworthy that people with disability and their condition were frequently lexicalised in a non-discriminatory way, such as 'people with problems', 'problems of sight' and 'special problems'. In sum, the disability-as-social-problem discourse focused on the claims of people with disability (as collectivity) for services and infrastructures as provided by specific non-disabled ones (the State), and viewed social care as solution to their disabling condition. Finally, this discourse also put in juxtaposition an identity of non-disability with one of disability.

² The distinction between the second person of singular and that of plural number is grammatically signalled in Greek.

Concluding remarks

The linguistic analysis shows that children mainly focused on the representation of the condition itself of people with disability (deficit discourse). By defining disability as an individual limitation, they constructed an identity of able-bodiedness (guardianship discourse) rather than one of non-disability (disability-as-social-problem discourse), through which they view charity rather than social care as the solution to the disabling condition of some individuals (and not of a specific social group). Seeing disability in terms of guardianship rather than in terms of disability-as-social-problem discourse also implicates the identification of a different agent providing for people with disability. In the former case, it is 'people' who offer charity. In the latter case, it is the 'State' that gives social care. In her analysis of environmental discourse, Schleppegrell (1997) suggests that the use of generic expressions such as 'humans', 'people', 'we' diffuses responsibilities for the environment, considering that 'we' have caused environmental problems. From this perspective, environmental issues are viewed as to be solved by individual rather than institutional agents. In a similar vein, putting responsibilities on 'us', the social aspects of disability become obscured.

In conclusion, this study reveals that children, pervaded by the traditional discourse of disability, reproduce the dominant meanings in their texts, through which they place people with disability within the realm of the 'Others' of society. Unravelling the representational resources employed for the depiction of disability is an important step towards the design of intervention strategies for subverting the dominant meanings framing disability and disabled people. If one of the major objectives of education is to promote acceptance of difference, the structures developed by schools become of central importance (Bunch and Valeo, 2004). Teaching the children systematically about disability could support conceptual change. For instance, samples from the texts produced by children but also media texts could be brought to the class in order for students to reflect on and/or analyse the stereotypical representations involved in the construction of issues of disability.

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