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Abstract

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1. Introduction

In this article, I present a working model for analysing collective identity in discourse which integrates a socio-cognitive approach as a major strand in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This choice is motivated by an understanding of collective identity as a mental model that comprises cognitive and affective components and is further to change through negotiation in discourse. The linguistic and discursive analysis of such a model necessitates a theoretical and methodological framework that can account for the complexity of collective identity. I will present that framework in section 2 by elaborating on the notion of collective identities as sociocognitive representations and outlining the socio-cognitive approach in CDA. The third section is dedicated to indicating parameters for analysis and formulating general research questions at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of discourse. The emphasis will be on the detailed analysis of linguistic features, to which end I will suggest an open-ended list of linguistic parameters that have proved useful in the analysis of collective identity. The reason for focusing on the micro-level is the fact that in the framework presented in this article, the results of text analysis are seen as evidence and serve as an entry point to interpreting that evidence. Linguistic analysis is paramount because it is the foundation upon which further context analysis relies. In section 4, the general framework will then be illustrated by the analysis of the gender and sexual identities constructed in a retailer's catalogue as an instance of advertising discourse. The gendered nature of advertising has of course been researched thoroughly (e.g. Cook 2007: chapters 42-46; Goffman 1979b; Lazar 2006), so the point here is not to add yet another study to an already sizable body of work but to illustrate a particular methodology that relies on the notion of collective identity as a socio-cognitive representation. Another rationale behind the choice of data is the idea that hegemonic ideologies work implicitly, as 'common sense', in mundane texts, so normative gender and sexual identities may work most effectively in texts which are not explicitly addressing those identities but construct them as part of another communicative purpose, in this case persuading consumers to shop at a particular retailer. The article closes by sketching the implications that the sample analysis has more generally on the linguistic and discourse analytical study of group identities. First, however, the next section will sketch the theoretical background to analysing identities in discourse.

2. Socio-cognitive Approaches to Collective Identity

This section introduces the notion of collective identities as socio-cognitive representations, which are held by people who identify as members of a group. They are further theorised as being constructed, negotiated and changed through discursive interaction within and between groups. In discourse as a social practice, socio-cognitive representations that a text producer holds about a social group, be it their own or another, translate into the textual construction of a collective identity for it. Hence, a socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse studies seems pertinent when analysing collective identities.

Drawing on a concept from social psychology (Moscovici 2000), social representations — or socio-cognitive representations (SCRs) as they can be called more accurately — have been defined as 'organized, coherent, socially shared set[s] of knowledge about an object or domain of objects' which combine with 'affective structures with inherent normative and evaluative dimensions' (Augoustinos et al. 2006: 42, 94; note that 'objects' can here also mean abstract notions such as group identities). As such, they comprise beliefs and/or knowledge, including second-hand knowledge gained through media consumption, the norms and values held by members of a discourse community, the attitudes and expectations deriving from the combination of beliefs/knowledge on the one hand and norms and values on the other, and the emotions that accrue to all of these elements.