

Activating the Cheater-Detection Module in Immigration Discourse: Where Communication meets Cognition.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) highlights the role of discourse in reproducing xenophobic attitudes and thus legitimising discriminatory actions. A number of important argumentation strategies have been identified (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2001). What is missing in CDA, however, is a cognitive-evolutionary explanation as to the impact of strategic discourse (cf. Chilton 2004, 2005; Hart 2005, 2010). In this paper I present an analysis of eight particular topoi in immigration discourse and seek to explain their cognitive impact in terms of Evolutionary Psychology.

Evolutionary Psychology views the mind as a mass of functionally specific modules adapted to the problems presented by an ancestral environment but which remain in modern cognition to be activated by representations predicating equivalent problems (Cosmides and Tooby 1997; Pinker 1997). One significant problem presented by group-living would have been individuals who renege on the so-called 'social contract' (Cosmides and Tooby 1992). That is, those who reap the rewards of group-living but fail to contribute to group effectiveness. Cosmides and Tooby propose that a 'cheater-detection' module would have evolved in response to this 'freerider' problem. The cheater-detection module is automatically alerted in social contract situations and if 'cheating' is found promotes particular decision-rules regarding future actions.

In immigration discourse, several topoi are recurrent which, either independently or via intertextual interaction, predicate that immigrants and asylum seekers are 'social cheats'. The impact of these topoi (and their interaction) might therefore be explained in terms of activations of the cheater-detection module and resultant decision-rules adaptive in the ancestral environment but counter-conducive to social inclusion in the modern world.

On this account, topoi in discourse can 'tap into' decision-rules to provide the antecedent that triggers consequent decisions and actions. The conclusion rules in topoi might not then be arrived at through reason but may be automatic, adapted responses. In this sense, prejudice arises when communication meets cognition.

References

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