

Legitimising assertions in political discourse: A cognitive and evolutionary analysis

In the last decade, approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have emerged which adopt cognitive theories of language in their method of analysis. The most recognised of these is, of course, critical metaphor research, which applies conceptual metaphor theory. More recently, though, other cognitive theories of language use have been applied in analysing the language of legitimisation in particular (Chilton 2004; Cap 2006). This research has focussed on legitimisation in its broad sense as the legitimisation of actions. This macro-strategy is achieved through the interaction of micro-strategies, where those identified include reference, predication and proximation (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Cap 2006). But legitimisation in this broad sense also relies on legitimisation in a narrow sense as the legitimisation of assertions.

In order to achieve legitimisation (broad), the text-producer must present the propositions realising referential, predicational and proximation strategies in such a way that the text-consumer will accept them as true. Chilton (2005) argues that humans have an evolved module of the mind, adapted to check for signs of commitment and coherence in discourse as a defence against deception. Controversially, Chilton suggests that CDA may be redundant if people are naturally capable of scrutiny during discourse. However, Chilton fails to recognise that the presence of such an ability in text-consumers, on evolutionary logic, would lead to text-producers displaying the very commitment and coherence that text-consumers are expected to look for (Sperber 2000). Here, various lexical and constructional resources, which may have evolved primarily for this purpose, are available in the semantic domains of modality and evidentiality.

Critical linguistics recognises the role of these semantic categories in strategic discourse (e.g. Fowler 1991) but so far as the author is aware has never analysed them in cognitive terms. In this paper, I present precisely such an analysis. I apply cognitive linguistics, and in particular, Langacker's (1991) notion of epistemic distance, to discuss the impact that choices within these categories can have on the text-consumer's construal of the statement and subsequent acceptance of it as true.

I analyse various modal and evidential resources used to realise legitimisation (narrow) in discourse on immigration and asylum in the genre of print news media.

References

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