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Review of doctoral dissertation
“Critical Discourse Analysis and identity construction in the U.S. magazine *Good Housekeeping* from the 1920s to the 1940s”
by Ester Maurizi

1. Summary and overview of the research project

The dissertation “Critical Discourse Analysis and identity construction in the U.S. magazine *Good Housekeeping* from the 1920s to the 1940s” is an interdisciplinary study of discursive strategies and linguistic resources as used by editors and columnists of *Good Housekeeping* throughout three decades – the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s – with a special attention paid to how identities were modelled and projected for the magazine’s target readership. The work is largely data-driven, with software used to identify characteristic lexico-grammatical patterns, which are subsequently compared across decades and interpreted vis-à-vis historical, economic and social circumstances. The dissertation consists of thirteen chapters of varied length (253 pages altogether) with as many as 76 figures and 17 tables, and with a 7-page-long bibliography/webography of sources both academic and journalistic in nature. I am not aware of the internal requirements regarding design, composition and formatting of PhD dissertations in the authoress’s home institution, so below I focus on the structure of the argument, the analytic framework, the presentation of results and the quality of interpretations and conclusions.

Overall, the thesis is an interesting and in-depth analysis of historical media discourse on the example of a particular lifestyle magazine targeted at American women. The use of computer-assisted analyses to uncover patterning and nuances in mediated presentations of women-oriented issues is a novel endeavor and methodologically the study offers a new level of systematicity of linguistic analysis of journalism. The comparisons made here between peacetime and wartime coverage reveal how journalism can be made to yield to propagandas. Also, the attention to imagery and page layouts garnered from the magazine makes the thesis a rich ethnographic study into the evolving notions of femininity. The choice of Critical Discourse Analysis as a framework through which the material is approached is an apt one, and the critical slant in some chapters allows the authoress to expose the ideological formations of the period that, for example, patronized women or excluded them from public debates.

2. Evaluation of contents, argument and structure

Having given this positive overview, I need to note that the Introduction has struck me as a relatively ineffective preview to what the project really offers. Although it does show the overall context of study with competing paradigms and strands of inquiry, it could have given a better overview of the chapters and the scope and depth of argumentation made in the dissertation. Admittedly, it identifies the gap in research, which is welcome, yet one could claim that the fact that there is a gap in research is not a sufficient warrant to study something, unless the problem is socially relevant. At this stage of reading it was not clear to me why *Good Housekeeping* magazine had been chosen and how influential it used to be in the shaping of American female readers' identities. The title of the magazine implies a patriarchal conservative view of domestic femininity, which is an ideological construct, and yet the notion of "the ideological" in discourse analysis is not shown as a specific (and highly justified) entry point in the Introduction. Also the Introduction could have ideated better the concept of "ideal reader" in reception studies vis-à-vis the concept of "target audience" in media studies.

Chapter Two on the theoretical and methodological choices taken in the project is a lucid overview drawing extensively on Hallidayan functionalism and Faircloughian socio-cultural discourse analysis. The discussion of corpus linguistic tools that were brought to bear on the clearly delimited corpus is more than sufficient. The chapter aims to expand on the key notions of discourse analysis, yet, for me, the notion of being "critical" is again not explored to the fullest and the question of the analyst's own ideological orientation has not been answered, even though raised. This is not a weakness that would discredit the design of this work, because the authoress will indeed return to critical analysis at later stages of the thesis, but, by the end of the methodological chapter, the impression may be that the analysis will be more technical, descriptive and data-driven rather than theoretically underpinned and realized in line with other critically oriented studies (e.g. feminist or race-based critical studies).

The authoress is very confident with the tools chosen to make analyses systematic; however, I would like to alert her to a recent debate among the practitioners about the role of corpus linguistics in CDA, which indicates that even an automated toolbox does not necessarily yield objective analytic results, because many choices related to the design of the corpus, the genres included or left out, the queries, and the interpretations are still subjected to researchers' biases (e.g., Paul Baker, 2012, *Acceptable bias? Using Corpus Linguistic methods with Critical Discourse Analysis*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9(3): 247-56; Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, 2017, *The Discourse of News Values: How News Organizations Create Newsworthiness*, New York: Oxford University Press).

In Chapter Three, devoted to synthetic personalization, the authoress provides a typology of readers – target reader, ideal reader, casual reader, imaginary reader, model reader. This is useful, but I miss adequate references to prominent authors in reception studies or audience design studies who first coined these terms and made some of these distinctions. The simple fact that individual texts in a magazine do not vary too much, either because of the dominant

convention of writing at a given time, or because of the editorial line or accepted stylebook, seems to be presented as a discovery, whereas it is something obvious to media and journalism studies practitioners. Also here, the discursive strategies that are identified as contributing to synthetic personalization (the uses of inclusive/exclusive “we”) are brought into the line of presentation. It would be helpful to have the choices of such lines of analysis not only announced, but also justified.

On a compositional note: the introduction to *Good Housekeeping*'s history and contents given at this stage of the dissertation might read better if it had been placed in the Introduction. Furthermore, results from a short Chapter Eleven that extends the claim that the magazine engages in systematic projection of synthetic personalization could safely be merged with this chapter. Having conducted numerical comparisons between *Good Housekeeping* and the Brown Corpus or the Time Corpus, comparative analysis would give stronger evidence to the conclusions reached in Chapter Three.

On a methodological note: to demonstrate that “we” and “you” are prominent in a corpus, it is not enough to use frequency wordlist alone, because these words are also frequent in standard English (written and spoken). To prove their salience, one would have to offer indicators of “keyness,” which is a measure of how characteristic a given word is for a specific corpus. To my mind, the results of quantitative analyses conducted in this chapter are expectable and thus not very illuminating, but the qualitative critical analysis of how female American readers of the crisis years were interpellated as moral supporters and sympathizers of men is very interesting and insightful. It proves the ways the magazine sanctions the implicit belief that women need to be patronized and instructed what to think and do as citizens. While I personally would have liked the concept of synthetic personalization to be introduced earlier in the chapter and operationalized through concrete linguistic strategies, I believe the authoress succeeded in exemplifying the constitutive discursive strategies that characterize identity construction in this magazine.

In the context of exploration of national identity projected in the magazine, it is actually very useful to contrast peacetime and wartime coverage, as the authoress decided to do in Chapter Four. The identifications of semantic fields pertaining to “war effort” and their comparisons with poster and popular song propagandas of the time are well-done, although, again, not too surprising. It would be rather unlikely for a popular magazine targeted at female housekeepers to overlook the collective mobilization, the shortage of supplies, the reorientation of production, and new requirements in the labor market. It would be even more interesting for the authoress to take another step and to tease out in more detail the discursive strategies of the pro-war ideology and its morale-boosting rhetorical apparatus.

The richly illustrated Chapter Five continues the discussion of the propagandistic aspects at *Good Housekeeping* editors' disposal, especially regarding its rather simple “problem-solution” formats. It also shows the hybrid and constructed nature of journalistic genres that accommodate the messages and appeals around the topical issues of the wartime America. The contrast in “lifestyle columns” between the peace time and the war time is spotlighted. The conclusion is that it were the women of colour who worked in the factories (rather than white middle-class girls), but these workers were made deliberately invisible to white

audiences. This argument is returned to in Chapter Twelve which uses CDA to further study the “silences” and misrepresentations of the women of color.

Chapter Six is devoid of strictly linguistic analysis and reviews a controversy around *Good Housekeeping*'s emblematic “seal of approval” – a ploy to attract readers through an established column devoted to testing and endorsing (or not) some of the domestic products available on the market. The magazine's positioning itself as an arbiter of quality and a servant to female community was perceived as self-interested, which called for a lawsuit from the Federal Trade Commission in 1939. The chapter explores some of the defense strategies and re-branding attempts that arose out of the need to avoid being mired in scandal, such as diversion and stylization onto a patriotic, mobilization-focused outlet. The chapter is interesting, but not really moving the argument further, so it could safely be extracted from the dissertation and presented/published as a separate article (presumably in a media studies rather than discourse studies journal).

The focus in Chapter Seven is on the gendered language forms and their pervasiveness, decade by decade. Using a typology of typically feminine expressions drawn by Robin Lakoff, the authoress is able to trace the gradual emancipation of language use. However, a closer inspection of the prevalent themes indicates the abrupt depoliticization of *Good Housekeeping* in the wartime. In this chapter, for a change, the authoress lets the linguistic data speak, and finds a certain limitation of the lexical data-mining approach, namely that corpus linguistics offers ways to show patterns, but not ways to interpret what they actually mean to readers.

The authoress attends to the ideational function of the verbs in the following chapter number eight. By operationalizing the Material, Mental and Relational processes through verb choice (tense, aspect and voice), it is possible to make multivariate analyses of ways in which political action was represented to readers in the peacetime and wartime coverage. Although one might take for granted the difference in expression between the consumer-oriented 1930s and the mobilization-oriented 1940s, the meticulous analysis of verb forms validates that assumption numerically.

Unlike political coverage, advertising interpellates women as consumers rather than citizens. How this is done by *Good Housekeeping* editorial team is the subject of inquiry in Chapter Nine, which exposes the “motivational,” if not propagandistic, overtones of the adverts in the 1940s. However, the chapter is filled with examples that remain largely unanalyzed, because the analytic categories of critical multimodal analysis are only rarely resorted to in the commentary. The argument about contradictions regarding feminine responsibilities as a worker and a housekeeper during the war years is explored in detail in the next chapter number ten, which highlights the patronizing and disciplining propagandas the magazine engaged in (regarding loose talk, public misbehavior, hospital rules, consumerism, spending and waste). It also colonized advice columns with patriotic appeals setting new standards for austere femininity. This richly illustrated chapter succeeds in showcasing the attempts at molding the reader into an idealized icon of domesticity, sacrifice and obedience by glossing over the oppressive ideology of female subservience.

As mentioned above, Chapter Eleven could safely be merged with Chapter Three, because, as such, it does not make a stand-alone argument very well. Outlets do differ, and comparing them against various reference corpora must be guided by a well-conceptualized research problem. A similar point could be made about Chapter Twelve, which mainly reviews extant literature and offers cherry-picked exemplifications proving a relative shortage of proper representations of Black or Native individuals in the magazine. The racial/ethnic perspective seems to be treated superficially here, while in fact it would make an excellent separate follow-up study.

3. Evaluation of sources used, language and style

The dissertation bases on the corpus compiled by the authoress and on the operations administered to reveal various patterns of expression and representations that collectively project readers' identities. There are chapters where the authoress discusses characteristics of her corpus and interprets their significance. While referring to the founding scholarship on *discourse*, the observations and conclusions reached are not matched with literature and research that attended to similar patterns in *journalism*. This is a pity, because a discussion of relevant studies in which differences and similarities could be found regarding the identity constructions in women's magazines, or lifestyle in opinion-making journalism, would add depth to the dissertation. As of now, this study is relatively isolated from existing media studies literatures and confined to historical linguistic patterns.

This is also why the bibliography is relatively short as for a dissertation on such a broad topic as critical discourse analysis of media language. Even with the historical focus being a priority, the literature drawn on and referred to could have been more extensive. The work would gain value from referencing the work of Michelle Lazar and Deborah Cameron on feminist critical discourse studies, of Jay Lemke and Ruth Wodak on cultural and political aspects of mediation, of John Richardson on the linguistic aspects of journalism, or of David Machin, Theo van Leeuwen and John Bateman on the multimodality and layout of press genres.

A note on language, style and editing is needed. The text of the dissertation is written in an approachable and clear English, however, a more consistent use of capitalization would be advised. Now capitals are overused for different analytic approaches and concepts, even though they are not proper names (p. 115: "In this chapter the selected Corpus is going to be analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Analysis in search for another Identity Construction Strategy: the Gendered Language"). The lack of consistency may insinuate an inexcusable carelessness on the part of an aspiring scholar, if in her text Franco Moretti is quoted as referring to himself (p. 20), Tony McEnery becomes Tom (p. 250) or A. in the references, or if her in-text citations alternate between different styles and standards, i.e. (date: page) and (date, page) (p. 22). The inconsistencies found in the ways the bibliography is compiled would take too long to detail with erratic order of information, American or British spelling, capitalization, italicization, etc.

Also the preferred term on the production side of journalism was supposed to be “text producers” and yet, throughout the work, all kinds of alternative terms – writers, authors, editors, utterers – are used. Proofreading for sentence structures, repetition, spelling and punctuation (especially dashes, abbreviations) would be also advised, because unrevised circular structure makes following the train of thought harder (p. 50: “The selected text is significant not only because of its 1940s wartime patriotic lexicon, but also because in the 1940s the content of the articles starts recalling more frequently the content of advert, to the point that sometimes the article's share the same lexicon and the same semantic field found in the text all the adverts.”?). The unevenness in style and register might arise from the fact that the dissertation was written by a non-native speaker, but also that not enough time was spent to align the text stylistically and re-read it from a reader’s perspective. This could be remedied by having an experienced editor or proofreader helping with the copy including spelling and punctuation. As mentioned, the references would also require alignment and reformatting according to one recognized style.

5. Conclusion

Despite the weaknesses pointed out above, I am ready to offer an overall positive evaluation of this thesis. I believe it meets the criteria required in the international contexts of doctoral qualifications according to the European Qualification Framework – level 8, in the humanities and social sciences. The authoress demonstrates innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new knowledge through independent and critical research.

With an understanding that corrections and revisions are to be introduced to any future publication of this dissertation or its fragments (if planned), I hereby endorse this dissertation and propose to admit it to the next stages of doctoral proceedings.

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