

*(Mis)Representing Islam: the racism and rhetoric of British  
broadsheet newspapers*  
**Richardson, J. E. (2004)**

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*(Mis)Representing Islam: the racism and rhetoric of British broadsheet newspapers* takes Critical Discourse Analysis as its theoretical orientation in the study of 'Islam and/or Muslim related' topics in the four months of October 1997 to January 1998. Richardson presents three motivations for the study. First, the book fills 'a yawning gap in empirical literature' (p. xvi) by being the first book-length study of broadsheet newspapers. This gap, he suggests, indicates a general 'under-theorisation of class power and privilege in contemporary societies' (ibid). Second, he argues that very little work has been done on representations of Muslims in newspapers. What work there is, he suggests, is largely non-systematic anecdotal evidence. By contrast, he presents his own study as combining 'both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis' (ibid). The third motivation for the study – and 'the ultimate goal' of the research – is to contribute to understanding of the prevalence of anti-Muslim racism in elite discourses, the forms that it takes, and its potential effects. This motivation appears much in keeping with the activist orientation of CDA.

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The data – drawn from a selection of British broadsheet newspapers, including *The Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Sunday Times* – provides the basis for Richardson's discussions of various aspects of the reporting of Muslim/Islam related stories. The first two chapters dealing with the data (Chapters 3 and 4) use as their organising principle van Dijk's notion of an 'ideological square'. This 'ideological square' is 'characterised by a Positive Self-Presentation and a simultaneous Negative Other-Presentation' and is 'observable across all linguistic dimensions of a text from the lexicon and syntactic structures, the meanings of sentences and the coherence relations between sentences, as well as the broader pragmatic – directed and functional – concerns of the text' (p. 55). This 'conceptual tool' appears also to net in the 'hidden meanings of discourse', such as 'presupposition', 'implicature' and 'entailment' (p. 55). Chapter 3, titled 'Muslim negativity', identifies four 'artetypal argumentative strategies – or *topoi*' (p. 75) through which a negative orientation to Muslim/Islamic people is constructed. These *topoi* are 'military threat', 'extremism and terrorism', 'despotism', and 'sexism'. Chapter 4 details the contrary 'ideological square' running through the data, in which 'The West' is presented as a civilising social force. This chapter is not organised around '*topoi*' as in the previous chapter, but the discussion includes a study of reporting of moves towards 'modernisation' or 'Westernisation' in Iran, and 'the normalisation of Israeli aggression'.

The following chapter considers the domestic reporting of Islam/Muslim related topics. Richardson explores the tendency in his data towards a split between 'British' and 'Other'. He argues that the 'negative "othering" of British Muslims' is constructed through the representation of 'Muslim violence in the public sphere', stories of discrimination, stories on 'terrorism', debates about religious schooling in Britain, and the representation of a report released by the Runnymede Trust on Islamophobia. Chapters 6 and 7 then deal with two international events: the UNSCOM inspections of Iraq (Chapter 6), and the Algerian conflict (Chapter 7). Chapter 6 is 'essentially a study of political rhetoric', in which 'the ability of discourse ... to *do* things' (p. 157) is considered. The analysis includes both 'semantic and argumentative moves', as well as 'lexical and syntactic structuring of expression' (p. 161). The chapter makes the argument that reporting in British elite newspapers during the period of Richardson's study supported the push by the US and UK governments for military intervention in Iraq.

In Chapter 7, Richardson shows the clear preference in the reporting of Algeria in this period for stories of conflict, with reports of civilian deaths, terrorism and civil war dominating the news. He also shows that in 64.9% of articles from the period, the only country mentioned was Algeria, the consequence of which was to frame the conflict as an internal dispute. And in 83.5%

of the articles, 'Islam' was cited as a factor explaining the reported violence. Richardson builds on this discussion by operationalising a set of 'binary argumentative positions' developed by the Runnymede Trust to characterise 'open' and 'closed' views of Islam and Muslims. These include, for instance, a contrast between the view of Islam as 'single, monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive' versus the view of Islam as 'diverse and progressive, with internal differences'. Although he does not specify realisation criteria, Richardson operationalises these semantic distinctions, and codes his data for the presence of tokens of these open or closed attitudes to Islam. Richardson presents by newspaper the findings for total numbers of tokens, the mean, as well as the ratio of 'closed' to 'open' tokens. On this basis, the *Independent on Sunday* was found to have a particularly high ratio of closed to open tokens, and Richardson concludes it produced the most 'Islamophobic' representations of Algeria, with its readers 26 times more likely to encounter a closed representation than an open one (p. 195). The chapters include other very useful statistics on these texts, such as the tabulation of bylines for Algerian by contrast with the rest of his sample, and the frequency of terms like 'violence' and 'terrorism' by date across the data. The remainder of the chapter involves more detailed study of selections of texts, with respect to a range of topic issues, such as elections, evidence of torture, the shifting of blame for civilian killings from militia to government and back again.

As for any linguistic or discourse study, the book is a test case for the theory it applies to its object of study. One cannot look at a body of data in an unmediated fashion; what one sees on looking is enabled or constrained, or both, by the theoretical lens through which a study is conducted. Critical Discourse Analysis is by no means a unitary theoretical orientation. Young and Harrison (2004) suggest there are three main strands of work in CDA. One strand includes work by e.g. Fairclough (1989), Fowler (1996), Fowler et al. (1979), Hodge and Kress (1979), and is firmly grounded in linguistic analysis. A second strand, in which van Dijk's work is central, focuses on 'the socio-cognitive aspects of analysis' and 'macro-structure of texts' (Young and Harrison, 2004: 3–4). The third strand involves work by Wodak and the Vienna School, in which a 'discourse-historical approach' is taken (e.g. Wodak, 2002). Richardson draws from all three strands of CDA, although the work of van Dijk is clearly central – indeed, the book is dedicated to van Dijk.

For van Dijk, CDA needs to be differentiated from other forms of linguistic analysis:

if we want to *explain* what discourse is all about, it would be insufficient to merely analyse its internal structures, the actions being accomplished, or the cognitive operations involved in language use. We need to account for the

fact that discourse as social action is being engaged in within a framework of understanding, communication and interaction which is part of broader sociocultural structures and processes ... Critical scholars of discourse do not merely observe such linkages between discourse and societal structures, but aim to be agents of change, and do so in solidarity with those who need such change most. (van Dijk, 1997: 21, 23)

In van Dijk's view, other linguistic approaches fall short by their inability or unwillingness to relate discourse to its broader socio-cultural context. Discourse analysts who fail to do this will fail in the project of explaining the nature of discourse. Implied by this position is that discourse analysis is inherently an interdisciplinary exercise, and Richardson's first chapter, titled 'Islam, Orientalism and (racist) social exclusion', which draws on sociology, social psychology, history, cultural studies, media studies, as well as discourse analysis, is an important discussion for contextualising his research.

But in relating discourse to social context, how is the expertise of the discourse analyst delineated from other forms of expert knowledge? This is a question for all of us involved in cross-/transdisciplinary analysis. The strength of CDA is its orientation to making discourse analysis socially and politically relevant (Kress, 1995, cited in Young and Harrison, 2004: 2), connecting linguistic knowledge to forms of social action, and Richardson's book is an expansive and significant contribution in this respect. But what is the consequence of CDA's lack of methodology, and lack of attention to the theorising of language (Young and Harrison, *ibid*)?

My only critique or dissatisfaction with Richardson's book arises from this aspect of CDA. Richardson's attention to linguistic/discourse features is certainly wide ranging, including semantic/rhetorical features, and syntactic and lexical selections: for instance, reference is made to 'naming', choice of 'verb phrase', choice of lexis, nominalisation, 'subject deletion', 'discursive strategies' etc. These discussions of linguistic features were at times unclear (e.g. what is meant by the unit 'clause' in Chapter 5, p. 116, or the later part of Chapter 6?). But more significantly, the selection of particular words or phrases as carrying the ideological responsibility of the text – a standard technique in CDA – raises the question of what the rest of the text is up to. If only certain words, or certain features are ideological, doesn't this leave the analyst in the position of saying the rest of the text is an 'objective' representation, or at least some kind of 'default' mode? Can it be that only some linguistic features shape our reality, while others merely reflect it? In addition, while I understood the gist of Richardson's discussion of 'ideological squares', its status as a theoretical tool was not sufficiently elaborated. It was not clear, for instance, how he – or van Dijk, from whom he takes the concept – models the relationship of the

‘ideological square’ to the discourse patterns – does one determine the other, or is there a reciprocal relation between them?

I am not suggesting that an analyst should only ever produce completely exhaustive text analysis. Being selective in text analysis is not in itself a problem, provided one can explain from what one is selecting, and why that particular selection is relevant to the kind of questions being posed. This disagreement in the end is perhaps simply a function of my own preference for the systemic functional approach, as set out by Halliday, Hasan, Matthiessen, Martin and others. The systemic functional model of language has sought to provide comprehensive maps of the dimensions of language as a social semiotic system. It is not possible in practice to look simultaneously from all angles that the model offers, but it is crucial – and it is, in my view, what defines an expert way of looking – that one knows not only the vantage point from which one looks, but the location of the other available points of view. That van Dijk can dismiss the work of modelling and explaining the dimensions of language as ‘merely analys[ing] its internal structures’ curiously privileges theories of non-linguistic organisation, while ignoring the need to theorise language itself. This critique of *(Mis)Representing Islam* is a more general dissatisfaction with discourse analysts who, in my view, misrepresent the complexity of theorising language, and its connection to culture and society. Certainly, much remains to be done in developing accounts of the relationship of language to its context of use. But in linking language to culture and society, at what point do we as linguists/discourse analysts ‘handover’ to those who specialise in other forms of disciplinary knowledge?

Putting aside this disagreement with CDA, Richardson’s book is an important contribution to discourse studies of the media. He neatly combines qualitative, discursive readings of selected texts with quantitative findings – his chapter on Algeria is a particularly exemplary model in this respect. His book is a timely account of the role of elite media in maintaining and promoting pernicious and small-minded interpretations of Islam, and will be required reading for anyone interested in its discursive construction.

### Book reviewed

Richardson, J. E. (2004) *(Mis)Representing Islam: the racism and rhetoric of British broadsheet newspapers*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. xxi + 262 pp. ISBN 90-272-2699-7.

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