

## MATTHEW VOICE

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Murphy, J. (2019). *The Discursive Construction of Blame: The Language of Public Inquiries*. Palgrave Macmillan. 310 pages; ISBN: 978-1-137-50721-1; £95 (hbk), £76 (e-book).

At first glance, blame is a straightforward concept: seemingly a gut response, easily recognised and performed in everyday life. Understanding how blame can be reasonably apportioned in legal contexts, however, requires a more considered approach to the ways in which the conditions for considering actions as blameworthy are perceived and produced. James Murphy's *The Discursive Construction of Blame* examines how language performs and mitigates the presentation of blameworthiness through the lens of the most high-profile public inquiries in recent British legal history, and how their participants structure their questioning, testimony, reports, and apologies.

Beginning with a brief history of the public inquiry (Chapter 1), Murphy sets out a clear introduction to the structure and nature of inquiries for readers unfamiliar with the specifics, including a helpful timeline of standard procedure from the establishing of the inquiry through to the publication of its final report. The book's central analytical chapters focus in turn on key aspects of the inquiry process, beginning with opening statements (Chapter 2) and working through linguistic strategies relating to questioning (Chapter 3), blame avoidance (Chapter 4), the (non-)assignment of blame (Chapter 5), and the apology process both as part of public inquiries and after the fact (Chapter 6). Each chapter draws on a new inquiry as its main focus, ranging from the Inquiry into the Outbreak of *Clostridium Difficile* in Northern Hospitals (Chapter 2) to the Shipman Inquiry (Chapter 5). Extracts from 25 separate inquiries are examined in total, and the book gives a holistic overview of the language of blame across the inquiry system as opposed to extended analyses of specific case studies. In structuring the book to address each aspect of the inquiry process in turn, Murphy does not simply examine the role of blame in witness testimony and judgement, but also traces the attribution of blame in discourse from the inception of proceedings through to public statements following an inquiry's outcomes.

Murphy's linguistic framework evolves throughout the book, adapting to best explore the aspect of the public inquiry process around which each

chapter centres. This ranges from lexical semantics to speech act theory and conversational implicature, with close readings of individual extracts supported where necessary by corpus linguistic analyses, comparing the frequency of key linguistic features in the language of inquiry to comparable genres of discourse, such as courtroom trials. A pre-existing knowledge of pragmatics and discourse analysis is assumed on behalf of the reader, as the book primarily aims to introduce the context and structure of public inquiry as a discourse genre rather than novel methods of linguistic analysis. This allows Murphy to dedicate the majority of his study to the practical work of identifying the key linguistic features of each aspect of the inquiry process, and examining their role in the construction or avoidance of blame. In general, these analyses draw on examples from across the full range of public inquiries discussed, meaning that Murphy achieves an overview of the genre of public inquiry discourse as a whole, rather than focusing on particular cases at once. An exception is made for the Shipman Inquiry in Chapter 5, however, as it deals with the issue of blame far more explicitly than any other modern inquiry. This close lexical analysis produces fascinating results, as Murphy finds that 'blame' as a performative speech act is still almost entirely absent from the report. This serves as a valuable case study of blame as an implicit feature of the language of inquiries, and demonstrates the possibility of analysing a specific inquiry in further depth. It would be interesting to see more of these close analyses of particular inquiries, and the general features Murphy catalogues provide the resources to make such a study possible in the near future.

As the book's structure follows the development of the inquiry process, it is not until Chapter 4 and the topic of blame avoidance that one of the book's key theoretic subchapters, 'What is Blame?', is introduced. Starting from Shaver's (1985) system of blame, Murphy begins this chapter by developing his own model of the conditions under which blame might be perceived and assigned. Murphy describes this model as drawing on 'a range of prototypicality' (p. 117) in the act of blaming, with greater and lesser 'blame potential' to which various dimensions of intentionality and causality, as well as the perceiver's determinations, contribute. Rather than setting out specific conditions for blameworthiness, blame potential allows Murphy to explore throughout the book the various linguistic strategies through which blame might be constructed in inquiry without privileging any one aspect of the process. Moreover, it provides the reader with a flexible model of blame which could be readily applied to social or linguistic analyses in a range of further contexts.

Despite the political focus of his chosen texts, Murphy is clear that he does not consider his work to be situated within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, as following Widdowson (1998) he views CDA as 'elevating the analyst's interpretation over those made by other members of the speech community' (p. 10). Murphy also expresses concern over the subjectivity of CDA, and he explains that his analysis is explicitly informed by Wilson's view that the focus of linguistic commentary should be 'how did they do it, not whether they should have done it or not' (Wilson, 1990: 15). Although he acknowledges Breeze's (2011) point that choosing not to take a critical stance does not equate to objectivity, Murphy does not respond to this, or explain how his own framework might overcome such a challenge. Likewise, his suggestion that CDA employs 'too narrow a range of analytical tools' and that 'developments in linguistic theory have been neglected in the textual analyses

produced' (p. 12) draws largely on older criticisms of CDA, with no clear indication of which particular analytical methods are to be considered too narrow. Overall, it would have been helpful to see a more extensive theoretical discussion which engaged with recent scholarship to see how Murphy's views relate to Critical Discourse Analysis being produced today.

Murphy's commitment to a descriptive approach is evident within the book's individual analytical chapters, which focus on the discursive features of blame in each inquiry rather than a moral or social critique of the inquiries themselves. While each chapter does conclude with some commentary on the individual inquiries examined, these are primarily descriptive assessments of the key linguistic features examined, as opposed to commentary on its content or outcomes. As a result, while each chapter offers some insight into the language of the inquiries it discusses, Murphy's key conclusions are more general claims regarding the relationship between language and blame, meaning that the book's findings and approaches will be readily transferrable to research into discourse beyond public inquiry. For example, the analysis in Chapter 4 of the Leveson Inquiry into the News International phone hacking scandal results in an overview of the ways in which blame avoidance is structured and informed in this inquiry in particular, while the keyword analysis of linguistic features used throughout will be a useful reference for future blame avoidance analysis in any number of other texts and genres.

Given this express avoidance of social or political commentary from the outset, it is somewhat surprising that the book's final conclusions provide explicit recommendations for changes to the organisation of future public inquiries. Murphy discusses his uncertainty at including these suggestions, but ultimately concludes that 'for all the talk of evidence-based policy making in government circles, there is precious little of it about' (p. 271). One of these suggestions, a recommendation that future inquiry chairs' executive summaries should clearly state who in the inquiry is being blamed and why, draws on Murphy's observations throughout the book that witnesses are often unsure of the role that blame allocation should play in their testimonies. The two other proposals focus on advocating for an empowered parliamentary role in establishing public inquiries and calling for greater pressure on the government to implement any inquiry findings, and are less obviously linked to the data collected and analysed throughout the book. Clearly, Murphy recognises that there is a role for discourse analysis to play not just in the critique of political and legal discourse, but also in its development and future betterment, and it would have been interesting to see these concerns more closely integrated throughout the book's analysis.

*The Discursive Construction of Blame* will be of interest to anyone seeking to learn more about the role of language in blaming, especially within the context of public inquiry. Although its presentation makes it most accessible to those with an existing familiarity with its linguistic frameworks, its structure offers helpful guidance and clarity to readers considering public inquiry as a genre of discourse for the first time. Scholars working within Critical Discourse Analysis will find the book's descriptive approach produces a rich set of resources which could readily be applied to more overtly critical textual analysis. With its detailed taxonomy of linguistic strategies for blame, blame avoidance, and apology, *The Discursive Construction of Blame* establishes a clear framework for the identification and analysis of blame in language, and it will be interesting to see how this is adapted and developed in

future research to explore the linguistics of blame across a range of texts, genres, and modes.

### ***References***

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