



Book Review

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Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines

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CLARA NEARY

Queen's University Belfast

c.neary@qub.ac.uk

Zottola, A. (2021). *Transgender identities in the press: A corpus-based discourse analysis*. Bloomsbury. 210 pages; ISBN: 9781350097544; £28.99 (pbk), £95.00 (hbk), £85.50 (e-book).

The aim of the author of *Transgender identities in the press: A corpus-based discourse analysis* (2021, Bloomsbury) is admirably transparent from the outset. Following her growing awareness that 'the topic of transgender identity was first completely absent in discourses and then suddenly present' (p. 46), Zottola sets about conducting a corpus-based discourse analysis (CBDA) of the representation of transgender identity in the British and Canadian press over a 3-year period to understand both *why* transgender identities are increasingly present in the media and *how* transgender identities are being constructed by the media. Her secondary focus is on investigating whether there are differences between, firstly, the representations found in the British and the Canadian press, and, secondly, the representation of transgendered identities in the British "quality" press versus the British "popular" press. Operating within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, which considers ideology to be discursively constructed and highly influential, Zottola's broader aims are twofold: firstly, she wishes to gain 'a better understanding of the impact that the linguistic representation of these identities may have had' on media consumers (p. 8); secondly, she does so to 'possibly highlight ways to engage with more inclusive and non-discriminatory linguistic practices' (p. 8).

To achieve these aims, Zottola builds the TransCor (Transgender Corpus), a two-part corpus consisting of British (the TransCorUK) and Canadian (the TransCorCan) newspaper texts which contain at least one reference to transgender people and were published between January 2013 and December 2015. The TransCorUK contains 3,138 articles from eight national newspapers

with high circulation figures, five of which were ‘more conservative’ and three ‘more liberal’ (p. 36) and is further sub-divided into two corpora representing quality (QualCor) and popular (PopCor) press representations respectively, with four newspapers in each sub-corpus. The TransCorCan of 2,730 articles was compiled using the same criteria as the UK corpus, although there are some necessary differences (for example, as Canada only has two national newspapers, eight newspapers were chosen to represent eight provinces, with three provinces unrepresented). The data for the TransCor was retrieved from the LexisNexis database using several key search terms arising from previous research (such as “transgender”, “transsexual” and “trans”) and subsequently modified following a pilot study. To investigate *when* (and therefore *why*) transgender identities are represented, the analysis commences with an investigation of the frequencies of these search terms, with some concordance analysis to gauge context; it then proceeds to consider *how* newspapers differ in their linguistic representations of transgender identity through analysis of the frequency and context of use of *naming strategies* (nouns and pronouns) and *semantic prosodies* (largely via collocation analysis of pre- and post-modification descriptors and use of verb choice to encode grammatical agency). The TransCorUK is analysed via AntConc while CQPweb is used to analyse the TransCorCan. The results are then discussed in terms of the British or Canadian social and ideological context in which they occur.

At the outset, the author foregrounds her awareness that any discussion of gender identity involves ‘stepping on very sensitive ground’ (p. 9) and indeed a commitment to abiding by both academic and ethical standards is evident throughout. Examples of this include the author’s own explicit and ongoing attempts to adhere to guidelines collated from four different transgender rights organisations on the use of inclusive and non-discriminatory language (though further detail on these guidelines and how they compare across organisations is needed), as well as the author’s open presentation of her personal position on the group identity at the heart of this research.

A thorough and detailed theoretical and scholarly background is provided for each aspect of the study. Given this sensitive research area, nothing is taken for granted, and there is discussion of both core and more tangential aspects of the study. These include the detailed tracing of interrelations between language, gender and sexuality (via introductions to a necessarily wide range of topics from Lavender Linguistics and Queer Linguistics to Butler’s notion of performativity); the detailed unfolding of the historical, political, social and formal evolution of the British and Canadian press; and introductions to the study’s wide-ranging methodological underpinnings via detailed discussion of the term “discourse” and overviews of the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics. The processes involved in the creation and analysis of the TransCor (Transgender Corpus) are described in some depth and explicitly aligned with current best practice in the field of CBDA.

The study reveals some interesting insights: for example, delving into the context of use of the term “shemale”, initially assumed to construct a negative representation, Zottola reveals it to be one of several terms reclaimed and reappropriated, in this case by a transgender advocacy group (p. 73), though

further engagement by Zottola with this issue of reclamation would have been welcome. Furthermore, compelling evidence from the corpus highlights that the press's use of the new name of a transgender person is 'akin to a pseudonym', as though it is unreal and temporary, resulting in a negative representation of transgender people as though 'they were not "real" people' (p. 92).

The extended application of van Leeuwen's model of social actor representation (1996) carried out in conjunction with the semantic prosody analysis proves particularly useful in the analysis. For example, it reveals that the Canadian press's use of personal details (pre- and post-modifying collocates referring to personal information such as, for example, the race, religion or age of a social actor) is largely semantically positive. Zottola interprets this as representing the Canadian press's desire to discuss issues which could improve the lives of transgender people; as such this group is portrayed as 'beneficialized social actors' (p. 99; see van Leeuwen 1996, p. 45). Zottola identifies similar attempts to create a more inclusive discourse on transgender issues in the British quality press.

Perhaps an inevitable consequence of the sheer breadth of coverage is some occasional sacrificing of depth; for example, there are instances in which terms that are key – such as Zimman's (2012, 2014) notion of the 'true transsexual' – require further elaboration. Similarly, when relevant scholarship is discussed, there is some variation in the level of detail provided. In particular, the centrality of Baker (2014) to Zottola's study necessitated a more thorough presentation of Baker's results. In one instance, Zottola mentions that, alongside the predominantly negative representations of transgender people retrieved by Baker from his data, there are some infrequent "positive representations"; this seems an important point but the nature of these positive representations is not elaborated upon further (p. 23).

At times, also, facts and figures are provided as though they speak for themselves, when in fact an accompanying narrative is necessary. For example, comparison of the representation of transgender identity in the UK versus the Canadian press is a key research question; however, while the relevant aspects of the legislative history of both countries are detailed at the outset, the distinctions between these histories are not articulated at that point, making it initially unclear why the UK and Canada were chosen as counterpoints, although later analysis reveals the more liberal and inclusive practices found in Canadian media representations of transgender identities.

Finally, again a likely consequence of the breadth of this study, there are some minor structural issues: for example, different research on the role of the press in representing gender identities is reviewed in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 rather than together (apparently due to an attempt to group research by methodological approach, in this case, CDA versus CBDA), while both of the above sections are followed, rather than preceded, by a summary of general research on the language of newspapers.

The monograph's wide-ranging subject matter will make it of interest to scholars working within a broad range of disciplines, including linguistics, gender studies and media studies, as well as being of specific relevance to

proponents of Critical Discourse Analysis. In addition, its detailed yet accessible written style makes it suitable for both novices and experienced practitioners of CBDA approaches. Finally, on a more general societal level, there are learning opportunities throughout this book available to all readers. The book's sensitivity, accessibility and painstaking commitment to both academic and ethical standards are to be commended, and its timeliness makes the opportunities for learning that it provides all the more valuable.

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Biography

Clara Neary is Lecturer in Stylistics at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests are interdisciplinary in nature, and cover the areas of Discourse Analysis, Stylistics, Cognitive Stylistics, Multimodality, and Indian Literature in English.