Textual Representations of Migrants and Migration in South African Media: A Linguistic Analysis through a combined Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics Approach

Abstract

South Africa has long been associated with racial and ethnic issues surrounding prejudice and discrimination and despite a move post-1994 to a democratic ‘rainbow nation’, the country has remained plagued by unequal power relations. One such instance relates to the marginalisation of migrants which has been realised through xenophobic attitudes and actions, most notably the violence that swept across the country in 2008. Several reasons have been suggested to explain the cause of the violence, including claims that migrants are taking ‘our jobs and our women’, migrants are ‘illegal and criminal’ and bringing ‘disease and contamination’ from their countries of origin. These extensive generalisations have resulted in shaping and reinforcing prejudiced ideologies about migrant communities in the country. Williams (2008) suggests that for many South Africans, Africa continues to be the ‘dark continent’ that is seen as an ominous, threatening force of which they have very little knowledge. For this reason, anti-immigrant sentiment in a South African context has traditionally been directed at African foreigners.

In this research I examine the ways in which African migrants and migrant communities, as well as the overall processes of migration, are depicted by key South African print media: City Press, Mail & Guardian and Sunday Times. Using a combined Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis approach, I investigate the following questions:

i) How are migrants and the process of migration into South Africa represented by these established newspapers?

ii) Are there any differences or similarities between these representations?

iii) In particular, what ideologies regarding migrants and migrant communities underlie these representations?

My analysis focuses on the landscape of public discourse about migration with an exploration of the rise and fall of the terminologies used to categorise migrants and the social implications of these classifications. Additionally, I analyse the expansive occurrences of negative representations of migrants, particularly through the use of ‘othering’ pronouns ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and through the use of metaphorical language...
which largely depicts these individuals as en masse natural disasters. I conclude that these discursive elements play a crucial role in contributing to an overall xenophobic rhetoric.

Despite subtle differences between the three newspapers which can be accounted for based on their political persuasions and agendas, it is surprising to note how aligned these publications are with regard to their portrayal of migrants. With a few exceptions, this representation positions these individuals as powerless and disenfranchised and maintains the status quo view of migrants as burdens on the South African economy and resources.

Now, almost a decade later and with multiple additional xenophobic incidences having occurred both locally in SA and rising around the world, I look back on this work to see what (if anything) has changed to further contribute to existing bodies of research detailing discourse on migrants – emphasising the intrinsic links between language, ideology and society.

Keywords: Corpus Linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; Foreigners; Immigrants; Media; Metaphors; Migrants; Stereotypes; Xenophobia.
Main references:


