

Affordances of descriptive linguistics for gender awareness-raising in pre-service teacher training

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Abstract—This paper reports on the implementation of a project on educational innovation which applies descriptive linguistics to raise awareness about gender (in)equality in pre-service teacher trainers and pre-service teacher trainees at the University of Salamanca. To fulfil these aims, the project adapts multimodal analysis description to non-linguists, and focuses on the existence of gender (in)equality in multimodal texts.

Keywords—gender awareness-raising, descriptive linguistics, multimodal artefacts, pre-service teacher training, multiliteracy

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on the implementation of a project on educational innovation which applies descriptive linguistics to raise awareness about gender (in)equality in pre-service teacher trainers and trainees at the University of Salamanca. The project adapts multimodal analysis description to non-linguists in order to provide tools for raising awareness of gender (in)equality in ‘multimodal artefacts’ or visual/verbal texts, such as children’s picture books or advertising campaigns, among many multimodal genres which are present in our daily lives. Multimodal artefacts constitute a crucial source for acquiring cultural values and stereotypes. In the view of multimodal learning advocates, by exploiting the intertwining of meaning-making resources of different modes (e. g. visual and verbal) to construct specific messages, the assimilation of those messages is more efficient. The motivation for this project lies in the assumption that it will raise awareness in teachers, students and other non-specialists in linguistics about how cultural values and stereotypes are constructed in multimodal artefacts. This will be achieved by exposing them to a linguistic model of multimodal resources, and emphasizing how they are exploited by text producers in order to create meaning.

This approach is consistent with pedagogical practices that advocate the need to train pre-service teachers in multimodal literacy so that they can address current critical literacy issues in primary education. It is also congruent with, and aims to contribute to, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of ‘gender equality’ (Goal 5). Although the primary focus of this project applies the approach to pre-primary and primary teacher training, the paper also considers other applications (undergraduates in English Studies) and describes the different phases of the project so that this model

can be applied to a wider range of learners and educational contexts.

As society is culturally diverse, it poses a pedagogical challenge to educators to commit to finding new teaching strategies and syllabi content that may best address students’ social differences. By raising pre-service teachers’ awareness of gender (in)equality, and providing tools for meeting needs surrounding salient gender issues and social inclusion, pre-service teachers will become better equipped to meet current social conditions and satisfy future student and educational needs in an intercultural world.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

A. Previous research

The project on educational innovation reported in this paper stems from AMULIT research project on the challenging of gender stereotypes in children’s picture books led by Professor A. Jesús Moya-Guijarro (University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain), and funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (FFI2017-85306-P).

B. Focus on descriptive linguistics

Descriptive linguistics focuses on the study of how we use language to communicate in meaningful ways. Different approaches to linguistic description have attempted to help language users to understand messages as well as to communicate more efficiently. We use language for experiencing the world, for interacting with other people, and also for organizing what we say by adapting our messages to the specific communicative situation. Language is understood, therefore, as a social semiotic system [1]. However, verbal language is often used in combination with other semiotic systems, such as visual or auditory resources, and we learn ‘how to mean’ by using them too. For example, multimodal artefacts about gender often exploit colours purposefully relying on cultural associations between pink colour with female gender and blue (or black) colour with male gender. Therefore, colour (together with other visual resources) constitute a kind of language; similarly, auditory resources can be exploited for meaning making. A multimodal artefact is, therefore, a unique product in which the message is constructed by means of different semiotic modes intertwined towards a communicative aim.

III. AFFORDANCES OF DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS FOR GENDER AWARENESS-RAISING

There are two affordances in a descriptive linguistic treatment of gender in text that can be efficiently applied to raising awareness about gender (in)equality: gender as a social construct, and the multimodal construction of gender in texts.

A. *Gender as a social construct*

As a social construct, gender is instantiated by means of language (verbal, visual, etc.) and enacted in communication. A claim is made, therefore, that gender, as represented in texts, is more efficiently addressed from a descriptive perspective focusing on language as a social system rather than, for example, a purely structural approach which only considers how elements, such as words or phrases, combine syntactically. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, and the systemic functional grammar developed from his semiotic perspective on language use and meaning-making potential, constitute such an approach.

B. *The multimodal construction of gender in texts*

In our everyday lives, discourse about gender is not present just verbally, but multimodally, i.e. by means of different modes that combine their resources in order to produce meaning, as different outcomes: multimodal artefacts such as posters, radio programmes, films, etc. New digital genres characteristically combine different modes of communication and are present in public discourse, disseminating massively through social networks or advertising campaigns. Crucially, those textual artefacts which surround us are also (one of) our primary sources of learning about gender stereotypes, which condition our interpretation of the world from an early age [2].

Multimodal artefacts such as children's picture books, in which visual and verbal resources intertwine to create meanings, present a complex but extremely rich array of the resources employed in the representation and enactment of gender. They provide an appropriate 'epistemological site' [3] for studying representations of how (visual and verbal) language is used for the construction of subjective models of gender and gender (in)equality. This is of paramount importance, as "[t]exts for young audiences are not mere narratives, but have an orientation toward models and ideologies already present in culture and, by giving these narrative form, may reinforce them and refract them back to the culture or may propose some modification of them" [4].

C. *Benefits of the approach*

As this project on educational innovation proposes, the fact that children's literary texts and other multimodal artefacts are often used by pre-primary and primary teachers, as well as by pre-service teacher trainers, constitutes an asset for gender awareness-raising in that educational context, as it does not impose a need to adapt to different or non-familiar materials. However, there is a need for explicit training of pre-service teachers in multimodal literacy practices, as they have been typically just consumers of multimodal texts.

Presenting pre-service teachers with real multimodal artefacts in which they can identify gender (in)equalities and teaching them how to identify the visual and verbal elements that construct biased messages about gender will help them mobilise from being just a consumer to a prosumer role as well. This is of paramount importance for their role as educators, so that as in-service teachers they can demystify

negative and stereotyped gender roles and present more realistic and diverse referents, thus enabling their students to construct positive self-perception in their individual identities.

On the other hand, the approach followed is consistent with advocates of the 'pedagogy of multiliteracies' first put by the New London Group in 1996 [5] (e.g. [6], [7], [8]), and it also aims to contribute to 'gender equality' (Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations Development Programme, to which the University of Salamanca adheres).

D. *Theoretical framework applied*

The key referential work for the project was Halliday's systemic functional grammar [9], Kress and Van Leeuwen's [10] visual social semiotic theoretical model, a 'grammar' of visual resources, and its adaptation to the analysis of children's picture books by Painter, Martin and Unsworth [11]. This unified approach has been applied successfully in previous research by scholars including Moya-Guijarro [12] and Moya-Guijarro and Cañamares-Torrijos [13] among others. Consistently with previous literature, the results obtained point to the suitability of children's picture books for addressing sensitive issues like challenging gender identities or gay parenthood, showing how gender stereotypes are contested by the protagonists of 'gender-inclusive' picture books [14]. Classic illustrated books have also proved to be beneficial in raising gender awareness, as outdated or anachronistic representations of social values such as gender values are salient for the modern reader's eye, and therefore are efficient ways of exploiting intuitive approaches to gender bias identification [15]. Other multimodal artefacts, such as advertisements, have also proven to be useful for discussing gender (in)equalities, as authors such as Martínez Lirola [16] have shown, and for this reason their applicability is also considered for the aims of the project.

IV. PROJECT 'WHAT CAN YOU SEE? MULTIMODAL LITERACY FOR GENDER EQUALITY'

This project, starting in 2021, aimed at introducing gender (in)equality awareness in the undergraduate degrees of Pre-Primary and Primary Teacher Training at the Faculties of Education in the Salamanca and Zamora campuses of the University of Salamanca, as part of the programme of English B1 (compulsory course in Year 1).

As the aim of the project is broad enough to have wider applicability, a decision was made in the early stages to replicate the procedure with students of the undergraduate degree of English at the Faculty of Philology, for which another two members joined the team, totalling five in the end. The motivation for this decision is that those students are potential Secondary teachers of English, who also need to be familiarised with the construction of multimodal artefacts in order to adapt to 21st century students' needs and preferences (relevant in adolescence especially), and who are also more text consumers than prosumers.

In this way, by the end of the project, which will span up to May 2022, we will be able to offer contrastive results of the two teaching contexts.

A. *Steps in the project on educational innovation*

The different tasks of the project are listed below chronologically. These steps can be replicated for other educational contexts or target groups.

1) *Step 1: Compiling and analysing multimodal artefacts:* During this phase of the project, a seminar is held in which all the relevant aspects of the project are explained and discussed. After this, teamwork is carried out in order to select the appropriate material. Each team member chooses three multimodal artefacts featuring some sort of gender (in)equality (perceived features related to genre, such as blue/male vs pink/female stereotyped use of colour or doctor/male vs nurse/female stereotyping, are included as sketchy descriptions). In our case, recommended sources are children's literature and advertising campaigns, although other sources could be eligible too depending on the target group. In this fashion, fifteen multimodal artefacts are gathered and (tentatively) described.

2) *Step 2: Describing systematically multimodal artefacts by means of Visual Social Grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001, 2006, 2021):* In this phase, the set of multimodal artefacts is discussed and categorised according to their perceived descriptive features (e.g gender and professions, gender and physical appearance, gender and agency, etc.). The previous (superficial) descriptions are now linked to the analytical models by Halliday and Kress and van Leeuwen, so that the representation of gender in each multimodal artefact is described by linking what we see (and read) in each text in relation to the three dimensions described below. Good examples of operationalization can be found in [11] and [12].

a) *What is represented?* For example, we see the image of a small boy holding the hand of a small girl, both walking away with their backs turned to us, and he wears green scrubs saying 'doctor in training' on his back, whereas she wears pink scrubs saying 'nurse in training'.

b) *How are the represented participant(s) in the action focalised (whose point of view do we have?)?* For example, do we see the children as equal to us, rather than looking at them from a superior angle from the camera perspective?

c) *How are all the elements in the image organized?* For example, the two kids occupy the central space of the image, so the contrastive colours of their scrubs, together with the 'doctor in training'/'nurse in training' labelling on their backs attracts the full attention of the viewer, and any other elements in the image appear backgrounded.

3) *Step 3: Adapting visual/verbal grammar networks for training non-linguists in the analysis of multimodal artefacts:* Adaptation of the model is required, and it refers to two procedures:

a) *Simplifying the analytical system networks:* The degree of delicacy of existing system networks by [9], [10], [11] is not operative enough for the practical application of the model to the target groups, and hence a simplification procedure is carried out by the team, keeping the most broad categories in each taxonomy. Delicacy is compromised in this case at the expense of efficacy.

b) *Jargon avoidance:* The aim of the project is not only to show target groups 'how to look' at representations of gender in multimodal artefacts, but also to teach them how to describe them systematically. In this sense, the system networks used for the analyses constitute their analytical tool

so it is necessary to avoid the use of technical jargon. For this reason, the taxonomies should be kept as intuitive as possible.

4) *Step 4: Classroom implementation:* This phase involves the preparation of the activities that are to be used with the multimodal artefacts in the classroom, whether as a unit of the programme or as part of one. Gender is a topic prone to expressing personal opinions. For this reason, a suggestion is made to base activities on a Pedagogy 2.0 perspective, around personalization, participation, and productivity: "in a networked society, powered by a range of high-speed technologies, learners have access to ideas, resources, and communities to support their learning, are driven by personal needs and choice (personalization), and are able to develop self-regulatory skills. Pedagogies need to engage learners in the social processes of knowledge creation rather than the mere consumption of instructor supplied information (productivity), in addition to scaffolding linkages, dialogue, and connections in and across communities and global distributed networks (participation) for the purposes of idea sharing, inquiry, and problem solving" [17], with an overall aim to promote social justice. Thus, a sequencing of activities is suggested to include (1) one or more warm-up activities for eliciting personal views and intuitive descriptions of gender (in)equality, (2) descriptions and demonstrations of the systematic descriptive tool operating with multimodal artefacts in which gender is portrayed in an ostensible way, (3) one or more activities in which a multimodal artefact dealing with gender (in)equality is designed and produced, and (4) one or more closing activities eliciting new personal descriptions of multimodal artefacts (a more thorough or systematic analysis is expected to be made merging with personal views). However, the feasibility and appropriateness of the activities employed depends on the target group and educational context chosen for applying the model described in this paper.

B. Evaluation of the project

The evaluation of the project is attested by the collection of data in the warm-up and closing activities. On the one hand, written descriptions are collected to compare the achievement in the participants' awareness about gender representation in the multimodal artefacts analysed. On the other hand, the project will quantitatively evaluate the participants' degree of awareness in relation to gender representation in multimodal artefacts when they are at the beginning and at the end of the study. For this aim, a Likert-scale questionnaire will be employed, consisting of statements to which the participants will respond by selecting a number from a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Finally, the degree of satisfaction of the participants, as well as the applicability of the project, will be assessed through a Likert-scale questionnaire that will be administered after the project implementation in the classroom.

The elicited data will be processed and analysed by means of SPSS in order to examine: 1) if there are differences between PRE and POST answers and 2) if there are differences between the two groups of participants.

The present project makes use of different types of data (written descriptions and questionnaire answers), which will also allow data triangulation.

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