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The Power-discourse Relationship in a Croatian Higher Education Setting[1]

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Abstract

Croatian higher education system's public space is researched through a critical analysis of a Croatian faculty's discourse. Representing a typical faculty social situation, two council meetings— recorded in minutes—are critiqued. Both meetings' minutes provide evidence of discourse strategies of deception used by faculty power holders to create an illusion of consent. We attribute the success of the deception to council members' ideas about the Faculty's groups/individuals, relations

and issues related to the Faculty's hierarchy, their rank within that hierarchy, and their position within the Faculty's social network. To support our argument, we explore how the Faculty power holders' discourse is built on a power/ideology/language formation. We conclude that, failing to critique the faculty's discourse, council members neglected their historical task of paving the way to democracy.

Introduction

According to research on the quality of teaching in Croatia's tertiary education conducted by Ledić et al (1998), the position of education and the teaching profession in Croatia is critical (cf. also Marinković Škomrlj 2000). Croatian students demand changes, but know that they do not have the power to initiate them: their role is compulsorily passivised (Ledić et al 1998:633). Students' complaints range from a general lack of communication (mainly due to teachers' inaccessibility and/or unwillingness) to fear (created through teachers' threats /ibid. pp. 630-632/).

Tertiary education in Croatia is financed by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) and regulated by the Law of Higher Education and the Law of Scientific and Research Activity, both passed in 1994, and both marked by numerous "deficiencies, contradictions, lack of clarity and gaps" (Dika 1998:V). In 1998, MOST published a "Blue Book," offering an interpretation of the laws. Responsibility for a Faculty's finances is held by the dean who has the authority to allocate funds at his/her discretion. In Croatia's deteriorating economy with growing unemployment—presently about 25% (out of which only 20% are entitled to some social benefit /Galić 2000:3/)—and low (teachers') salaries (Matković 2000:5), control over finances means power. For example, 10 per diems for travelling abroad approximately equals a teacher's monthly salary. There is a fierce battle going on out there between classes, groups, alliances and individuals: its purpose is to make or break relations of domination (Fairclough 1999a). Whereas the West clearly understands what democracy means, "postcommunist nations do not" (Savitt 1995:17). For them the emerging "new order" is only vaguely defined and understood. The scene, to quote Josip Županov, Croatia's leading sociologist, is a "unique combination of incompetency and corruption" (Srdoč 2000:5), dominated by the need for power and money (Fox 2000; Fox & Fox 2001).

This article researches the Croatian higher education system's public space through a critical analysis of a Croatian faculty's discourse. For the purpose of this analysis discourse is understood as a collection of interconnected texts, i.e. communicative events wherein social, cognitive and linguistic actions converge (Beaugrande 1997:10).

Representing a typical faculty social situation, two council meetings—recorded in minutes—are critiqued. Each meeting minutes is evidence of a discourse strategy (the how and what to say) of an act of deception—an attempt to move "someone's thinking in a wrong direction" (Ng & Bradac 1993:118), where "wrong" means away from the speaker's real intentions or feeling—used by Faculty power holders to create an illusion of consent.

As we shall show, the acts of deception feature knowledge and opinions about teachers'

(actual) selves, other council members (e.g. students), goals of interaction and important social dimensions of the council meeting itself. Critiquing the council meeting minutes, we shall demonstrate how "the semiotic (language, discourse in the abstract sense, text) figures as an element of the social" (Fairclough 2000:186). Put another way, we shall use the council meetings to systematically explore the "opaque relationships of causality and determination" (Fairclough 1999a:132-133) between (a) the council members' discursive practices and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes in the Croatian higher education system and Croatia itself. Finally, we look for a solution.

2.0 Council Meetings

The following two cases refer to council meetings held at the Faculty for Ore Searching, Blue River University, Croatia (henceforth Faculty).

Case 1: A dean election campaign

Setting: The Faculty for Ore Searching suffers from "massivity": over 2000 students in a comparatively small and inadequately equipped building (7 classrooms, 50 PCs). There is a pronounced tendency of increasing the total number of students through enrolling part-time students, paying students and opening dislocated departments. Due to sheer numbers, pedagogical standards defined by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST)—for example, the maximum permitted group size—are not respected. Students feel cheated and, consequently, are dissatisfied.

The winning candidate in a dean election campaign used the slogan "A chair for every student." He expanded the proposition in his program as follows: "From now the number of students to be enrolled will be limited and a new improved organisation of teaching processes will put a stop to overcrowded classrooms and lecture theatres."

He never kept his promise: In fact, the total number of students was increased. The dean's breech of electoral promise invited a reaction on two levels:

1. Teaching and administrative staff kept pretending everything was fine. If, for example, asked how (academically, administratively, physically) this enormous number of students should be dealt with, the vice-dean for teaching would say with a saintly smile: "one day it will be better." Any reference to the mass of students was considered an attack on the Faculty. Teachers who, for whatever reason, had to refer to the issue at the Faculty's council meeting, would ritually start with: "Please do not misunderstand me. I would be the last person to criticise this house, but we seem to have a problem with numbers ...." As a rule, any reference to "massivity" is omitted from council meeting minutes.

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2. Students felt let down and objected—via their representative—to the situation at the council meeting. The students' representative quoted the election slogan *A chair for every student* and openly stated that the promise had not been kept. His objection was disregarded; what is more, he was verbally attacked by his colleague, another student representative, during the meeting. His discussion was not mentioned in the meeting minutes. Following the meeting, he was advised not to "create any more problems." When informed about their representative's failure, students reacted with a graffito scribbled all over the Faculty: *Every student gets a chair, but not at this faculty*. The issue was never referred to again. It was omitted from meeting minutes. The student representative's objection to this omission, raised at the subsequent council meeting, was also omitted from the meeting minutes.

2.1 Case Interpretation

The act of deception here is built upon the metaphor *chair*, a shorthand for the dean's explicit promise stated in his program:

> "From now on the number of students to be enrolled will be limited and a new, improved organisation of teaching processes will put a stop to overcrowded classrooms and lecture theatres."

The success of the metaphor *chair* can be explained through a 3 phase procedure: identification, interpretation and acceptance. The procedure is founded on Kintsch's (1989:185-209) construction-integration model of discourse processing. First, all possible meanings (not just the relevant ones) of a word are initially activated—the identification stage. Following this, non-relevant meanings are soon deactivated—the interpretation phase, while the relevant ones raise their activation and spread into the rest of the discourse—the acceptance phase. Operations within the model make it probable that out of the whole meaning potential of a word, the intended (ascribed) meaning is highlighted.

Related to *chair*, then, identification is the interactants' (dean's, teachers', students') awareness of the existence of the metaphor, enabled through shared social knowledge. In the interpretation phase, non-relevant meanings (e.g., building a new lecture theatre as a possible solution to the space shortage) are deactivated. Interpretation is a result of the interactants' agreement on the ascribed meaning of the metaphor (reducing the number of students). The power of *chair* lay in its transparency and conventionality which enabled it to become a part of the electoral body's social cognition. Captured by their wishes with which the metaphor perfectly harmonised, the voters oversaw its arbitrariness and eagerly consumed the offered virtual reality. Their inability (or unwillingness) for reflective analysis of the Faculty's discourse prevented them from seeing *A chair for every student* as an act of deception. Finally, in the acceptance phase,

the ascribed meaning of *chair* raised its activation and spread into the rest of the Faculty's discourse. Acceptance confirmed the reality of the metaphor. For all those teachers (and students) who saw reality as defined by *chair* (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 156-158), the metaphor was true.

Case 2: Access to information

Setting: The dean is perceived by both Faculty staff and students as an autocratic manager who relies on coercive/reward power and forces compliance. He gives selected Faculty council members (both teachers and students) privileges (e.g., fees, grants) which they—in order to maintain social relationship—have to honour through obedience.

During his first year of office the dean assumed total control of the institution. All information about national/international conferences/events is collected in his office. The dean personally decides on who gets what information. According to him, allocation of information is in the best interests of the Faculty: teaching staff receive information related to their area of teaching and scientific affiliations. Every now and again, however, teachers do complain of not having been informed of a particular event (Note 2). A case in point is the Croatian association of Ore Engineers' annual meeting held in hotel *Glitzy,* Zagreb, which was attended by Faculty management. Surprisingly, teachers actually living in Zagreb were not informed. Another similar example is the International jubilee congress *Ore Searching and the Environment* held in China, which the dean attended. Information about the congress was never passed on to teaching staff. Again, criteria of access to information were questioned by teaching staff. It was pointed out that environmental issues are covered by three Faculty teachers in their graduate and postgraduate courses, who have published in this field both in Croatia and abroad (which the dean has not).

1st Council meeting

A member of the teaching staff, JJ, raised the question of access to information. He stated that not all teachers were being informed about national/international conferences, and that criteria for disseminating information were not transparent. He suggested, therefore, a central information portfolio, which would contain all conference-related information received by the Faculty, to be kept in the library, available to all staff.

The dean objected, claiming that conference information—depending on the conference topic—was allocated to relevant Faculty departments, and that the system worked just fine.

JJ pointed out that what he was suggesting was total communication,

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i.e., all research-related information available to all teachers, which, in his opinion, would be in the best interest of the organisation.

The dean called over three teachers (heads of departments for economics, management and foreign languages). They confirmed that the system worked just fine and there was no need to change it. Students did not participate in the discussion (Note 3).

2nd Council Meeting

JJ objected to the minutes of the 1st meeting. (Council meeting minutes are circulated to council members almost four weeks after the meeting, usually less than a week before the next meeting.) There was no mention of his discussion. He repeated his discussion and requested that it be included in the minutes. The recording secretary declared she would include it in the minutes.

3rd Council Meeting

The minutes of the 2nd meeting noted JJ's discussion as follows: "JJ objected to the minutes of the 1st meeting, as his discussion was not correctly interpreted." Again, JJ objected to this, stating that he had originally objected to the minutes of the 1st meeting because his discussion was *omitted,* not *wrongly interpreted.* The recording secretary consulted her notebook and said: "That's correct. This is my mistake. It will be recorded in the minutes."

4th Council Meeting

There was no mention of anything at all related either to JJ's discussion or secretary's admission of error in the minutes of the 3rd meeting.

2.2 Case Interpretation

The act of deception here is built on a continuum of misrepresentations (cf. Metts, 1989) of JJ's suggestion, ranging from omission of relevant information in meeting minutes to falsification—contradiction of truthful information. Omission is marked by silence; falsification by a particular lexical choice—the use of *interpreted* rather than *omitted*.

It would be a mistake to define the omission of information—in effect silence—negatively, i.e. as a mere absence of speech. All omissions in the meeting minutes had propositional content, which made them equally important to any formational unit of linguistic production and any element of discourse (Fox 2001:23). Both omissions (in the 1st and 3rd meeting minutes respectively) were made to produce an impression of consent, aimed at controlling public space.

Whereas the verb *interpret* represents a cognitive endocentric process featuring "inner"

events and is associated more to mental or data-based activities, *omit* represents an exocentric process, featuring "outer" events and is associated more to behavioral or material-based activities (cf. Beaugrande 1997:208-213). *Interpreting* entails effort and attention on behalf of an agent, it involves a subject (someone who interprets). It is a process open to the agent's control, who can either initiate it or refrain from it. *Omitting* entails a simple non-effortful static quality. It emphasises the process in its own right. Whereas a process of *interpretation* has no direct target, *omission* tends to have a direct target, an affected entity expressed as an object, for example JJ's suggestions.

Use of the word *interpreted* instead of *omitted* in the minutes created inferences crucial to the success of the act of deception. The dean was portrayed as intensely cognitively involved in the Faculty's discourse. At the same time, he was removed from the discourse as the sole agent who had no direct target. The Faculty's discourse became a shared one with no affected entity. Briefly, skillful formulation of meeting minutes created a virtual reality where JJ's objection was lost, and, consequently, the dean's accountability to the objection. A potentially discreditable situation was turned into a creditable one.

3.0 Explaining the success of deception

If, as our above anaylsis suggests, we accept that (1) faculty power holders committed acts of deception, and (2) assume that Faculty council members were cognizant of the deceptions, then, council members' absence of participation and criticism—expressed through their persistent silence—was, in effect, a vote of acceptance. Why did council members accept the deceptions?

We argue that their acceptance was a result of their social cognition of the Faculty's discourse: dominating social norms and rules which were simply translated into "specific constrains of discourse" (see van Dijk 1996:167). Social cognition is a socially shared system of social representations which may be "conceptualized as hierarchcal networks organized by a limited set of relevant node-categories. Social representation of groups, for instance, may feature nodes such as Appearance, Origin, Socioeconomic goals, Cultural dimension and Personality. These categories organize the propositional contents of social representations, which not only embody shared social knowledge, but also evaluative information, such as general opinions about other people as group members' Briefly, social representations include "socially shared cognitive representations, about social phenomena, including social groups, social relationships, or social issues or problems" (van Dijk 1996:166).

Social cognition includes too what van Dijk has called individual "(situation) models", i.e. cognitive representations of personal experience and interpretation, which include personal knowledge and opinions of other persons, of specific events and actions (van Dijk 1996:166). Models are the cognitive counterparts of situations.

3.1 Routine overlearned reaction of compliance

One social representation which perhaps explains council members' reluctance to criticise during the council meetings was a "routine, overlearned reaction" of compliance (Folkes 1985:133), subject to their involvement in the message (the lower the involvement, the less critical the information processing), their preparedness for the

content of the message, and on their need for cognition (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). In a world where information production is much faster than information consumption, an individual's attention is inevitably diverted from message content to message form (Cialdini 1984; Redfern 1989). If the form of a message appears appropriate, the audience will be less inclined to question its content (Ng & Bradac 1993:133-134). The Faculty's council meeting minutes are excellent examples of *appropriate* "orderly interaction" (cf. Fairclough 1999a:28): an interaction which makes most participants feel (or pretend to feel) that things are "as they should be." A perception of orderliness was created by preplanned turn taking (during the meeting), which eliminated the need for a wider discussion. Individual power holders' turns (dean's, vice-deans', secretary's, heads of departments', "initiated" students' representatives") were fitted harmoniously together. Besides two individual challengers, nobody objected to either properties or effects of the discourse.

Both Case 1 (except for the student representative) and Case 2 (except for JJ) are marked by council members' low involvement and low need for cognition. In case 1 there was a manifest difference between teachers' and students' attitude towards the message (*A chair for every student*). Accepting the message at its face value, the teachers demonstrated a low involvement and low need for cognition. As the message was announced well in advance—copies of the candidates' applications for the dean's office were submitted to all members of the council two weeks before the council meeting—unpreparedness for the message is not an explanation (or excuse). Repeatedly questioning the validity of the message, students, on the other hand, manifested a high degree of criticism, high involvement and a high need for cognition. Their individual (situation) model was different to that of their teachers'.

Similar to Case 1, council members (teaching staff) in case 2 again demonstrated low involvement manifested in the absence of discussion (out of 36 teachers present at the council meeting, nobody expressed an opinion). As the agenda for the council meeting was distributed to council members almost a week in advance, unpreparedness, for the message, as in Case 1, cannot serve as an explanation for lack of response. Council members showed too a very low need for cognition. They uncritically processed information, and refused to accept the idea of total communication, which in itself aimed for an increased level of cognition. They rejected the idea of total communication not only within a particular social situation (council meeting), but also on a metalevel. Although aware of the fact that total communication would have been in their interest, students refrained from comments. Their low degree of criticism was a clear sign of low involvement and a low need for cognition. In contrast to Case 1, the students' behavior here was similar to that of their teachers.

To sum up, both case 1 and case 2 council meeting minutes show council members' overlearned reactance of compliance manifested in their low degree of criticism, low involvement in the message and low need for cognition. Individual variations (in Case 1 a students' representative, in Case 2 JJ) were a result of individual cognitive representations which were at variance from the rest of the council. We argue, however, that what really influenced council members' behaviour are social representations primarily related to the Faculty's hierarchy, their rank (title) within that hierarchy, and their position within the Faculty's social network (willingness to participate in relationships of authority, reciprocation and ingratiation). We suggest that it was the dominating group's power/ideology/language formation which influenced council

members' social cognition, which, in turn, enabled the power holders to successfully use the strategies of deception.

3.2 Power

The dean's authority gave him the legitimate right of function "to give orders and expect to be obeyed" (Smith & Vigor 1991:21). Creating obligations through giving selected members of staff extra assignments cum fees, which they had to honour through obedience to maintain social relationships, he was able to influence their behaviour through reciprocity. By enhancing the rewarding aspects of cooperation through pointing out similarities between himself and staff members, through self-deprecation and other-enhancement (Dickson et al 1993:1155), he was able to create ingratiation. For example, in Case 2, the secretary took the blame for incorrect minutes to save her boss from public embarrassment. Acting in line with rules of a reciprocity network, she symbolically reinforced her subordination, and made the dean's face "shine more clearly" (Jackall 1996:99). In return, she could hope for certain perquisites, such as protection for mistakes made, fees for "extra-assignments," benevolent treatment etc., as such is "the business of preservation of privilege" (Lomnitz 1977:206).

3.2 Ideology

Aware of changing alliances and balances, the dean knew that his power depended not only on his hierarchical position, but also on his ability to naturalise (Fairclough 1999a:27-35) his discourse through ideology: the greater the level of naturalisation, the more difficult it is to recognise discourse as an ideological representation of reality. For the dean, ideology became essential to produce and reproduce relations of power and domination (Fairclough 1995:14). He was able to use ideology "in the service of power" (Thompson 1990) simply because he had the social power to make his discourse seem as non-ideological "common sense", opaque and accepted as the Faculty's discursive norm.

Carrying the Faculty's ideology, the dean's discourse had to be perfectly naturalised. The instrument of naturalisation in Case 1 was a metaphor (*chair*) and in Case 2 lexical choice (*interpreted* instead of *omitted*). Naturalisation enabled the Faculty's ideology *The institution will serve personal interests of the power holders* to be turned into an opaque *Individual interests* (meaning, in fact, the interests of the dean's opponents) *must be sacrificed for a common goal.* As any other ideology, the Faculty's ideology was hidden, rendering the dean's power untraceable, and thus establishing an ideal frame for deception.

3.3 Power hiding

As argued by Ng and Bradac (1993:191), power hiding is the most subtle and complex of all power—language relationship models. The power-hiding effect of the dean's discourse is seen in contradictions between publicly declared intentions and actions. Whereas both the electoral slogan and meeting minutes claimed the Faculty's primary objective to be quality, in reality, promises were broken and channels of communication closed. Both Case 1 and Case 2 show a combination of, predominantly individual, *power to* and, predominantly collective, *power over* (cf. Ng and Bradac 1999:3). *Power to* is visible in the dean's efforts to achieve his personal goals and hinder others' achievements

of goals (through total control of the Faculty and personalised criteria). *Power over* is visible in the Faculty's social network through which the dean maintains relations of authority, reciprocity and ingratiation (e.g. the secretary taking the blame for the dean). Both cases confirm Foucault's (1980) great truism that the residence of power is neither an individual nor an institution, but a network of human relations. Is there a solution?

4.0 Towards a Solution

Through control of knowledge and a strategic use of the Faculty's discourse, the dominating group is able to manufacture consent, essential for power/ideology reinforcement. The relationship between power and discourse at the Faculty has simply become a question of democracy, and, as Fairclough (1999a:221) emphasised, "those affected need to take it on board as a political issue."

Both teachers and students are in a need of social emancipation which, inevitably, is about tangible matters, such as the right to work, access to resources and distribution of wealth (cf. Fairclogh 1999b:233-234). With time, the dominated group's (most teachers, students) forced compliance should create a resentment which, if turned into an organised force and used as an impetus for a power struggle, could become an instrument of resistance. The rebellion of the oppressed will of course be resisted by the present power holders. As Faculty management tends to rely on coercive power, the first prerequisite of resistance will be courage (cf. Kreitner & Kinicki 1992). Only if enough audacity and persistence for a prolonged personal struggle is accumulated by the oppressed, can there be a "rising of consciousness" (ibid. p. 234), which in turn will empower the oppressed to engage in a struggle towards emancipation.

In their resistance, the Faculty's oppressed will need a leader, a person who will function as a "catalyst" (Fairclough 1999b:234). It is generally believed that the catalyst should possess two qualities: (1) some theoretical knowledge to be able to assume the role of a coach, and (2) the experience of the oppressed in order to gain trust and be accepted by the group. In real life, however, the catalyst is often a dissident from a dominating group who, anticipating change in the balance of power, somersaults into the new role. At any rate, it is through a catalyst's assistance that the Faculty's oppressed will start learning how to deal with discourse-related issues of power.

The first sign of changing social representations and individual situation models of the Faculty's council members will be questions related to ideology and discourse:

- What is the Faculty's ideology?
- What is the relationship between the Faculty's ideology and the dominant discourse?
- How transparent is the Faculty's dominant discourse?

Learning about the effects of ideology upon discourse, and, in turn, of discourse upon ideology should help the dominated group to denaturalise the Faculty's ideology, i.e. recognize it as such. The bond between social determinations (a struggle for power maintenance) and discourse effects (naturalisation of ideology), previously opaque to many participants, will become clearer. Increased discourse awareness will provide the oppressed with the means to "challenge, contradict and assert" in an environment where the power network expects them to "agree, acquiesce and be silent" (Fairclough 1999b:235).

5.0 Conclusion

In this article, we have argued how a power/ideology/language formation enabled acts of deception to be used for personal gain at the cost of democracy. In both Case 1 and Case 2, we attribute the success of deception to the council members' social cognition of the Faculty's discourse which supported the dean's power and teachers' acceptance. The absence of interface—with exception of student representative's reaction in Case 1 and JJ's in Case 2—between council members and the Faculty's discourse is evidence of compliance for tangible reasons: right to study, right to work, salary and promotion—prerogatives which in a democratic environment are taken for granted.

The capacity for language critique (increased critical language awareness, which enables one's participation in discourse and patterns of social power) is usually given to the individual through educational institutions (Hawkins 1984; Fairclough 1999a:220). Suggesting how to construct a "linguistics for the next century" (Candlin 1999:x), CDA contributes, as pointed out by Urry (2000:174), to assuring full cultural participation—in terms of possessing information, representation, knowledge and communication—of all social groups within world society, thus paving their way to "global citizenship." Failing to critique the faculty's discourse, council members neglected their historical task (cf. Fairclough 1999a:220): inculcation of cultural meanings, social relationships and identities, improvement of communicational skills, and, above all, development of capacity for language critique.

Through manufacturing consent, Faculty power holders naturalised the "subject positions" of Faculty staff and students (Fairclough 1999b:105). Not until the Faculty's discourse becomes more transparently related to ideology, will Faculty staff and students be able to transform from "powerless subjects" to "powerful participants" (Fairclough 1999b), and become part of the *power-language* link. Only then, will discourse at the Faculty for Ore Searching move into an associational public space where "differences are brought together" and become "action in concert" (Arendt 1973:56). Emancipation of the Faculty's staff/students will be attained through language, but also manifested in it. This is inevitable, for power goes to those who are "seen to do well" (Kanter 1977), and who is more aware of that than the oppressed?

Notes

[1] Research for this article was realised within a three year (1997-2000) ALIS (Academic Links and Interchange Scheme) project *Hotel & Tourism Management Education Development*. Supported by the British Council and MOST, it was one of a series of research projects aimed at aiding universities in postcommunist transitional countries in developing their courses and curricula.

[2] Withholding information is typical for authoritarian management, who, perceiving knowledge as power & money, will not share it easily. Anybody who insists on free information dissemination is treated as a menace to the organisation's power structure (cf. Davenport 1994; Legge 1995).

[3] In a more participative climate, JJ's suggestion could have been used for creating a

programmed conflict, i.e. inviting all Faculty council members to defend/criticise the suggestion on the basis of facts, rather than personalities and individual interests (Kreitner & Kinicki 1992: 376-381).

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