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Contesting Key Terms and Concepts in the Civil Sphere

A Neo-Gramscian Analysis of Language Awareness

Tom Bartlett, Nicolina Montesano Montessori and Harriet Lloyd

Introduction

The fields of language awareness and language attitudes have been taken up within the political realm under the broad title of Critical Language Awareness, an approach to discourse analysis that focuses on “important social aspects of language, especially aspects of the relationship between language and power which ought to be highlighted in language education” (Fairclough, 1992: 1; see Cots, 2006 for applications in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language). In this chapter, we take up this theme to consider the ways in which language is used to shape public awareness of key social issues such as sustainability and democracy. We demonstrate how the concepts such words represent and the associations between these and other ideas are not given, but are the result of prolonged and occasionally intense processes of negotiation. Such negotiation takes place amongst diverse groups and interests within government and the civic sphere and is played out across various media. While this process is simply the way language and society work together and often takes place through the mundane interactions of everyday life, there are times when the process is thrown into sharp relief as seemingly stable (and even invisible) systems break down and the linguistic and conceptual alignments that served to unify and justify these systems as coherent wholes are opened up for contestation and renegotiation within wider civil society. At such times the struggle over meaning as shared linguistic-conceptual awareness becomes an ideological battle; often, but not always, overtly so.

We consider three examples of contested ideological meaning within the civil sphere and between the civil sphere and politicians: local considerations of sustainability as negotiated between an international development organization and indigenous communities in Guyana, South America; the more global deployment and recalibration of sustainability and the unequal competition between small business federations and big business; and the emergence of mass movements challenging the very nature of the relationship between civil society and government, as exemplified in Spain by the Movimiento 15 de Mayo (15M). We draw heavily, but in different ways, on the theoretical
Contesting Key Terms & Concepts

concept of hegemony, most famously developed by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). This refers, in simple terms, to the linguistic development of shared and taken-for-granted political and social beliefs that enable the ruling class (the dominant elite) to remain in power without recourse to physical force. This is done by promoting concepts, such as patriotism, marriage, religion or national security, all of which carry associated rights and obligations, and by interconnecting these concepts in a seemingly coherent way under the umbrella of a particular political or social doctrine. This requires language work, and the elite and those that keep them in power (The press? The church? The army? The school?) are constantly producing discourses and promoting behaviours that reinforce the assumed logic of the ideology. Concepts never stand still, however, and there are times when maintaining the status quo reaches breaking point or is challenged by the emergence of new and opposing groups and ideologies; at such times, it becomes necessary to widen the scope of the dominant ideology (again, through language work) so as to incorporate elements of the opposing view into the mainstream. This is what is meant by hegemonic control and Gramsci recognized this as the mechanism by which dominant groups most successfully maintained their power. Gramsci’s radical approach therefore abandoned the classical Marxist notion of a war of manoeuvre, a direct confrontation between the proletariat and the elite, and advocated a war of position, the development of an opposing hegemony that encompassed the different histories and interests of the oppressed classes under a single ideological banner.

Gramsci’s approach has been further developed to account for the increasing diversity of experience and issues in postmodern society (such as the environment, minority rights and gender equality) and the means of articulating these different discourses in opposition to neoliberal capitalism in particular. These interests can be seen as representative of a new politics and new struggles based not on material demands but on issues of identity, culture and lifestyle that are primarily contested in the civic sphere. This gradual detachment of the concept of hegemony from purely economic issues and class struggles has meant that the concept and associated methodologies can be applied wherever there are contested discourses, from individual boardrooms or blogsites and onto regional, national and global discourses. In our case studies, we orient to the approach to Discourse Theory developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the key terms of which are explained below.

Following Gramsci, hegemony is a means of control that stands in contrast to rule by force, or “the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates” (Eagleton, 1991: 112). A hegemonic order is held together when enough of the people agree (or fail to disagree) enough of the time on the defining characteristics of their society and the rights and responsibilities that are needed for such a shared understanding to be possible. This shared conception of society relies on the maintenance of a commonsense understanding of abstract terms such as democracy or conservatism or civil rights. Such terms are known as empty signifiers (Howarth, 2000: 119), as they have no set meaning and are continuously negotiated and redefined, with opposing groups attempting to populate them with their own meanings. In order to do so, they have to articulate (Howarth, 2000: 95–96) their key principles into a coherent set of meaning relations that, taken together, come to fill the empty signifier and what it means in that society. Thus, concepts such as democracy have no meaning beyond the sum of their parts and their place within wider webs of signification. When these concepts are coherent, they take on the status of myths (Howarth, 2000: 11) that serve as rallying calls or
points of shared awareness for different groups. More significantly, when these mythical concepts become the implicit norms to which (the significant majority of) the population orients its behaviour (most of the time) they become social imaginaries (Howarth, 2000: 111). For example, there is no such concrete reality as ‘marriage’, it is a socially constructed institution, yet members of society accept it as a reality and faithfully (or not...) adhere to its attendant norms, rights and obligations. The fact that marriage is different across cultures and that its status in Europe and elsewhere is undergoing dramatic change both demonstrates the imaginary status of the concept while testifying to its importance as a concept in people’s lives.

In sum, then, opposing groups attempt to define key signifiers according to their own beliefs and to have these concepts taken at face value (i.e. below the level of conscious awareness) by a large enough section of the population to guarantee their maintenance as guiding principles. This involves consistently interconnecting a variety of concepts under the umbrella term so that these individual ideals are all “publicly understood” as necessary components of the whole. Thus, the political term conservatism carries with it/is defined by attitudes and beliefs relating to the economy, patriotism and select civil rights and obligations, all of which have to be taken together as a bundle. However, while it is in the interests of the ruling classes (or local elites/power brokers) to maintain the myths that keep them in power, no discourse can ever fully close on itself as external ideas will always enter into it. To maintain control, therefore, the elite will at times need to extend the social scope of these imaginaries and to recalibrate key concepts in order to admit oppositional voices and ideas rather than risk the existing balance of powers. Thus, the ideas that make up conservatism are very different today from what they were a hundred years ago, with each small change artfully integrated so as to maintain the purity of the myth. However, at times of severe social pressure there is a dislocation of existing ideas, when “the contingency of discursive structures comes to be seen” (Howarth, 2000: 109) – that is, when the commonsense understanding and interconnection of ideas comes undone and the public become aware that their social and linguistic articulation was no more than a political strategy. At such times, there is either an intense ideological turf war and a radical reconceptualization of the existing terms, or new concepts are brought into the arena to take the place of the failed myths. In the following examples, we will look at both of these scenarios and explore the concepts and issues raised in this section, with a particular focus on the extra-linguistic factors that provoke hegemonic shifts and that influence the potential for alternative articulations to be established and accepted and alternative awarenesses to be formed.1 The three studies focus, in their individual ways, on a relatively old concept and a notorious empty signifier (Brown, 2015): sustainability.

The first case study focuses on local negotiation over the meaning of sustainability and how the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) of those involved in the discourse affects what articulations are possible and can lead to the development, at the local level at least, of new social imaginaries that attend to the sustainability of local cultural practices as they are articulated into larger socioeconomic systems. While these negotiations are carried out in a largely collaborative context (Bartlett, 2012), the second study considers the antagonistic contestation of sustainability on a more globalized scale. In this study a local civic group struggles to rearticulate the component meanings of sustainability (as a nodal point) in ways that allow them to maintain their livelihoods, while for international business concerns what is being contested is not so much the internal composition of sustainability but its function as one element within the wider imaginary
of free-market capitalism. This gives international businesses an advantage over more localised civic organizations who are trying to compete on a continually changing playing field. While both these examples are situated within the established framework of civic society-government engagement, the third example considers what happens when the pact between state and civic society is so severely ruptured that the focus of contestation is on the meaning of democracy itself and the complementary relationship between state and society within it. Extreme situations such as the global economic crisis can lead both to unexpected alliances across the whole social spectrum and changes in discourse through the introduction of neologisms and innovative practices that capture the new antagonisms brought to the fore by the crisis. In such cases sustainability takes on an added and more radical meaning as the continuing viability of the political and economic status quo is challenged in its entirety (Brown, 2015).

Localized Negotiation Over the Concept of Sustainability: Local Capital and the Significance of Space and Time

While the theoretical concepts discussed in the introduction to this chapter were largely oriented towards political debate and control on the national scale and beyond, this section focuses on how the same concepts can be applied to local negotiations over the meaning and impact of keywords within the civic sphere or, more specifically in this case, in negotiations between local communities and external institutions over the concept of sustainability. As an empty signifier, the concept of sustainability can be defined in many different ways or, more accurately, through the interplay of myriad related meanings. As such, the concept is a potential battleground for opposing ideologies or worldviews, the proponents of which seek to heighten public awareness and ultimately acceptance of their own ‘mythical’ interpretation of the concept. This is in part a question of continually expounding upon and consolidating the conceptual links that together define the concept in a particular way. However, it is not simply the coherence of such networks nor the frequency of the collocations expounded that determines public awareness of and attitudes towards the opposing myths: there are various non-linguistic factors that serve to strengthen or undermine competing representations, and this section focuses on the importance of local cultural capital (i.e. prestige) in promoting myths into the social imaginaries to which communal behaviour is oriented.

The doctoral fieldwork on which this section is based (see also Bartlett, 2012) was carried out between 1999 and 2002 in Guyana, South America. The research focused on negotiations over sustainable use of the Iwokrama rainforest between the local, indigenous (largely Makushi) community and governmental and non-governmental agencies. The main forum for these negotiations was the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB), which took place every two months and brought together representatives of the 13 local communities within the rainforest, the Iwokrama International Rainforest Conservation and Development Programme (Iwokrama for short), the national government and various NGOs. These events were funded and largely organized (at least at first) by Iwokrama, which had been set up under the Burnham government to undertake biological and zoological research in the area and who had control of what activities could be undertaken within it. The research was originally very firmly embedded in the critical discourse mentality that control over the meetings would reflect the imbalance of material power between the groups at the national and international level, but detailed analysis of recorded data demonstrated otherwise, with one
particular meeting standing out. In this meeting members of Iwokrama were attempting to explain the concept of Sustainable Utilization Areas (SUAs), in which the natural resources of the forest could be sustainably exploited. However, where several speakers had tried and failed to get the details of the concept across, Uncle Henry, a local elder, had succeeded. This was evidenced by comments at the time of the meeting and backed up in interviews afterwards. A comparison of Uncle Henry’s language with that of Sarah, a social scientist working for Iwokrama, suggested that Uncle Henry’s success could not be explained in terms of structural features, as his language was more complex in terms of both clause structure and the technical vocabulary used. However, analysing the two speakers’ contributions for markers of solidarity and power (pronoun use and modality), levels of contextualization or abstraction (through the interplay of tense and deixis), and the means of representing the SUAs in experiential terms (i.e. through their relations to other concepts), suggested that their representations of the SUAs can be seen not simply as alternative explanations of the concept, but as competing ideological conceptions of sustainability itself. From this perspective, the understanding and uptake of one explanation rather than the other can be seen as its acceptance as a localized social imaginary, particularly as the focus of the two explanations was as much on the regulation of practices (rights and responsibilities) within the SUAs as on defining the concept in experiential terms.

Figures 30.1 and 30.2 capture in synoptic form the relations between concepts that made up each speaker’s final representation of the SUAs via relations of synonymy (equivalence), metonymy (part-whole) and hyponymy (class-subclass). These depictions present strikingly contrasting representations of sustainability underlying the SUAs: for Sarah, it is primarily a process of meetings and regulation, whereas for Uncle Henry it is the community way of living within and as part of the forest.

There is only space here to provide a brief analysis of the two contributions from an interpersonal perspective (but see Bartlett, 2012). Firstly, in terms of identification and othering, Sarah almost exclusively refers to the community as YOU in distinction to Iwokrama as WE, though she uses inclusive WE when the two groups work together.
Sarah thus sets herself and Iwokrama apart from the communities, as external advisers, a stance which is consolidated by her use of impersonal language to describe the behavioural changes necessitated by the SUA programme. Similarly, when describing the forest and the SUA process, Sarah tends to use highly decontextualized language such as generalizations and hypotheticals that remove the description from the lived experience of the communities. In contrast, Uncle Henry’s explanation is highly contextualized, with references to everyday events, familiar features and customary community practices. The immediacy of Uncle Henry’s explanation is matched by the interpersonal features he uses, such as an inclusive WE to talk of his shared experience of the forest as part of the community, often in opposition to Iwokrama as YOU or THEY, and his use of modal verbs such as MUST and CAN to lay down injunctions and to grant permission, as befits a community elder. It must be noted, however, that at times Uncle Henry distances himself from the community, referring to them as YOU, particularly at those moments when he is criticizing common farming practices that endanger resources rather than celebrating the communal history of maintaining the forest sustainably.

An interpretation of Uncle Henry’s success, however, involves moving beyond a study of the linguistic features in isolation. In global terms sustainability is well recognized as a contested concept, or in the terminology of Discourse Theory, an empty signifier. Within international development the term has generally been applied to the long-term effects of economic activity on the one hand and environmental exploitation on the other, though generally with the intention to reconcile the two. And it is within this larger context that the NRDDB and Iwokrama are situated; however, in creating the NRDDB as a space for indigenous civic society to contest the meaning of the term as it impinges on the lives of the local community, not only has the locus of contestation been localized but, in this process, we can identify a dislocation in that the accepted definitions of international development and neoliberal economics are now challenged and open to recalibration as sustainability comes to take on the meaning of maintaining the community ‘way of life’ while adapting to the inescapables of globalization. Thus we can see in the different representations of the SUA from Sarah and Uncle Henry two competing representations or understanding of sustainability as a process, one as a

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**Figure 30.2. Uncle Henry’s construal of SUAs.**
heavily monitored semiotic practice and the other as an organic development of existing community practices. This is, of course, a generalization in itself, as each group would recognize and accept elements of the other and the willingness of Iwokrama to incorporate community voices is one of the external factors that made this discourse shift possible. Amicable and mutually facilitating or not, however, the two contributions still represent opposing views on sustainability. As the sum of the parts that comprise them – the various other terms and discourses to which they are articulated – the two representations are alternative myths competing to become social imaginaries. And what the analyses above suggest is that it is not Uncle Henry’s representation *per se* that gains acceptance, but that this acceptance is enabled by his cultural capital as an elder of the community, indexed through the features of his interpersonal language and his highly contextualized reference to space and time – indexing a community *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1981; Blommaert, 2015) which he and the community inhabit together and which he legitimately claims authority over.

**Contesting or Welcoming Sustainability: The Case for Considering More Than One Imaginary**

This section develops the idea that discursive struggles over terms such as sustainability must be considered in terms of the other imaginaries that they stand in relation to. As indicated in the introduction and the preceding section, contestations over definitions can be seen in terms of a competition for control over imaginaries – things which exist only discursively, but which cause us to act in different ways. In the instance of sustainability, the imaginary functions to change behaviour principally in relation to environmental practices. For example, if a given person, organization or group commits themselves to act sustainably, they should use fewer exhaustible resources and reuse or recycle materials where possible. However, sustainability is an imaginary that interacts with other imaginaries: nation-states, political parties and knowledge, for example. In the context discussed here – organizations’ mission statements about sustainability on their websites – a particular imaginary seems to envelop sustainability in a wider web of meanings that changes how it is viewed. This is the imaginary of *free-market capitalism*. Those businesses that operate as successful multinationals are able to use their privileged position in this imaginary to appropriate the term as just a part of corporate responsibility, which is part of the market, while smaller companies or individuals must resort to contesting sustainability in order to appear morally responsible. Both these types of business meanwhile continue to use some practices that could be considered unsustainable.

This section is based on work carried out on a larger project on ‘sustainability on the web’, for which a data set was compiled using a number of different engines to provide an overview of the most visible data. Six broad types of source for the term ‘sustainability’ were identified and classified as follows. The first were definition-providers, including online dictionaries and information pages such as Wikipedia. The second were businesses and the complementary organizations (including charities and governmental bodies) that are involved in advocating for sustainable business practices. The third were broadly government bodies, including education institutions such as universities, national governments and international bodies such as the UN. The fourth were charities – both those involved in conservation issues and others that focused on, for example, providing training to local people as
part of projects aimed at either long-term benefits or immediate disaster relief. The fifth were religious or otherwise spiritual organizations for whom sustainability is a key aspect, often linked to utopian or dystopian ideas about the future. Finally, the sixth group were individual bloggers, who often provided information or advice on lifestyle changes that could or should be made by the reader in order to make his or her purchasing choices and activities have less of a negative impact on the environment. After this initial scoping exercise, four key themes were identified as present across the different types of website: 1) relationship with the future; 2) differing emphasis on environmental, societal and economic strands; 3) differing degrees of radicalism (the extent to which current practices should be modified and/or overhauled for the sake of viability of certain structures; 4) business uses as cynical or sincere. These themes, of course, overlap to some extent; businesses, for example, typically put forward visions of the future in which they will continue to operate, emphasize economic strands, and call for the adoption of a relatively conservative model of sustainability that leaves the market intact. The present section focuses on the analysis of two business sites examined as part of theme 4, although the examples could also be studied from the point of view of themes 1–3. The specific sites (Innocent, a drinks manufacturer, and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, a collective body of fishermen’s associations in Scotland) were chosen on the basis of their shared business sector (food and drinks) and their contrasting sizes (indeed, the second site represents a collection of small businesses, few of which have a website themselves) and their particular positions in relation to sustainability debates. The analysis below gives a short and illustrative impression of the pages from these two sites that deal specifically with sustainability; however, points are discussed that are representative of the data studied as a whole, rather than those that apply only to these examples.

Scottish fishing practices (particularly trawling and dredging) have attracted criticism as forms of ‘unsustainable’ use of the marine environment. Campaigns to create ‘Marine Protected Areas’ where such practices are prohibited are supported by a number of agencies, such as The National Trust, RSPB and WWF, operating under the banner of ‘Save Scottish Seas’. The Innocent drinks company, by contrast, won The Guardian’s Sustainable Business Award in the ‘water’ category in 2016. However, Coca Cola has been a shareholder in Innocent since 2009, becoming a majority shareholder in 2013, and now owns well over 90% of the business. It was in this same year that Belching out the Devil (Thomas, 2009), was published, a book criticizing Coca Cola’s business and environmental practices such as employing child labour and, significantly, causing droughts. The book was written by comedian and journalist Mark Thomas, off the back of researching an episode of Channel 4’s Dispatches programme in 2007.

Two short sections of text follow. The first is from the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation (henceforth SFF) website and the second is from Innocent’s.

1 Sustainability initiatives
Scottish fishermen have been at the forefront in pioneering a range of conservation and sustainability initiatives in recent years. We are proud of our record and are determined to continue our work. Change is happening, and happening at a good rate, but it needs to be done so in a carefully managed and coherent manner to give the fleet time to adapt. It is all too easy to impose sudden ‘knee-jerk’ fisheries management responses without giving due consideration to the impact it may have on our
fishing communities and the supply of an incredibly important food resource. If there are no fishermen left because of ill-judged management, then there will be no more seafood on our tables. Here are some of the sustainability initiatives Scotland’s fishermen are currently involved in. ... [examples follow].

2 Being sustainable

We sure aren’t perfect but we’re trying to do the right thing. It might make us sound like a Miss World contestant, but here at Innocent, we want to leave things a bit better than we find them. We strive to do business in a more enlightened way, where we take responsibility for the impact of our business on society and the environment, aiming to move these impacts from negative to neutral or (better still) positive. It’s part of our quest to become a truly sustainable business. Below you can see our strategy for doing so, although we must apologise that some of the facts and figures are a bit out of date. We’ll be sprucing things up shortly. Promise.

The most important difference between these two statements from the point of view of this analysis is that SFF is attempting here to contest a key aspect of sustainability (the implication that unsustainable practices should be changed) whereas Innocent appears to be integrating it into a larger imaginary – that of free-market capitalism. Innocent does not contest the term, but indicates that it is just one of a number of concerns that might change the way that companies such as itself ‘do business’. In this way, sustainability is subtly reconfigured as something that is part of this business’s unique ethos, rather than as something that might threaten its existence entirely.

The term ‘sustainability’, as indicated above, has often been discussed as an empty signifier – as a term to be filled with meaning by groups with different interests. Although many terms have been analysed in this way, ‘sustainability’ is particularly open to such difference of emphasis as its overarching aim is to reconcile the competing forces of the environment, society and the economy. One way of lending weight to a given definition is to claim that it is the original definition, or the definition that is referred to by authorities such as academics/universities or political institutions such as the UN; another is to argue that a given interpretation is the most useful one. The latter might be argued from a standpoint of considering what is most likely to serve the purpose for which the term was coined (for example, environmentalists argue that the role of sustainability as a concept is to radically alter society to a form that does not deplete natural resources), or from the perspective of providing measurable, tangible results (which businesses use to allay the concerns of potential consumers). However, what is important here is not which devices are most successful when they are used, but the degree to which different social actors are enabled by their pre-existing conditions to use different definitions (in the broad sense of where this signifier stands in relation to other key signifiers).

As in the Guyanese case, above, the use of different definitions appears at first glance to be a struggle between discursive powers, so that those with most discursive power are likely to define it. As suggested in the previous section, this discursive power might be provided by social capital that allows a person or group to lay claim to a privileged position in terms of what is being discussed. Alternatively, it might be provided by the ability to be heard or read by more people that often comes with elite status. The ownership of mass media outlets by those seeking to uphold their position of power by persuading readers or viewers
that the status quo should be maintained is therefore a concern for those interested in hegemony and how present forms of rule might be overthrown or altered.

For this reason, the internet provides a particularly interesting set of data: compared with mass media forms such as radio, television and newspapers, it is a relatively egalitarian tool that different groups can use to access and influence others (although of course the visibility of these websites is often unequal as search engines are optimized by those with more capital). On the web, there is, at least theoretically, the opportunity for both sides of a given debate to put their points across. Indeed, as detailed above, searches for the project revealed an array of sources, disparate in their goals and size. Both sites chosen for this analysis, in themselves, have an equal opportunity to convince their readers of their own definition of sustainability. Yet one has been far more successful (in this or other media) in convincing others of their point of view in relation to the term. This is not just because of their different discursive resources and how effectively or otherwise they employ these. Rather, the material conditions in which the businesses associated with these websites operate allow them to deploy the term in more or less convincing ways.

Some have argued that the term ‘sustainability’ (like its corporate social responsibility forerunners such as ‘business ethics’ and ‘corporate citizenship’) has been used strategically or even cynically by businesses seeking to shore up their market position and head off potentially costly criticism from trade unions, charities and workers (see Sachdev, 2006 for an overview). Others, often including the businesses themselves, argue that attempts to rectify harmful practices are genuine responses to situations that were not known about or considered fully before.

Leaving aside debates about whether attempts to show transparency and innovation in addressing social or environmental shortcomings by businesses are cynical or sincere, it appears that the ‘sustainability’ web pages under scrutiny here differ in some fundamental ways. What they share is a defensive stance: they each contain positive statements about what has been done, with caveats about what is possible. The main point of contrast appears to be the locus of the problems identified. SFF positions the challenge of sustainability as an external force acting on it (the unrealistic nature of demands on fisheries), whereas Innocent positions sustainability as an internal challenge (part of the intrinsic nature of businesses like themselves being to cause negative impacts, despite best intentions). This is also realized in the titles of these statements: the former promises to give information about initiatives, while the latter offers to discuss part of the nature of the business. Each of these statements provides a definition of sustainability – a necessary evil, or an ideal to strive towards – but importantly, the statements themselves gesture towards wider definitions in terms of where this nodal point sits within a network of other ideas.

Most businesses now seek to give the impression that they operate in a morally responsible manner. Paradoxically, as a result of public pressure to address interests other than the profit motive, it is now no longer financially viable for many organizations to be seen to be pursuing financial gain at all costs. Mission statements, charitable foundations and green initiatives such as reduced packaging are all ways of allaying potential consumers’ fears about the negative impacts of their buying habits. Corporations withstand the most horrifying exposés in two ways. Firstly, as is typical of hegemonic orders, they convince those they subjugate that the pursuit of profit is necessary and beneficial for all. Secondly, they appear to agree with criticisms levelled against them, and provide evidence of improvements in working conditions,
environmental performance and corporate philanthropy. This agreement is facilitated by their material conditions, which include, but are not limited to, capital. For Coca-Cola, working across continents, a huge amount of improvement in one area might be enough to keep buyers satisfied. Scottish fishermen each operate in a relatively small area of the sea. Agreeing that any part of their practice is unsustainable therefore impacts on the whole of their business, rather than one part or even many parts of it. In contrast, from a practical point of view, even if one government banned the selling or production of one or even all of Coca-Cola’s products, the company would nevertheless survive.

Put simply, multinational corporations are currently bigger than attempts to subject them to any set of conditions can be, whereas local businesses are smaller and therefore more exposed to such pressures. This difference in material conditions affects the way in which each type of business responds to the demand that they address issues of sustainability. Even without corporations’ attempts to emphasize the economic aspects of sustainability over environmental or social ones, they are likely to succeed in quelling criticisms simply because they have the resources with which to address them. These resources are partly material: they operate across national and continental borders and therefore can negotiate which parts of their business they can operate in which places, whilst adhering to national laws. However, international businesses are successful in this instance because they can utilize a discursive resource more effectively than small businesses can – namely the imaginary of free-market capitalism. What is important in these instances is not only the ways in which language is used, but the ways in which these companies have (or have not) been judged as fitting the definition of sustainability that is recognized by those with the power to shape future discussions of the topic. International corporations need not contest sustainability’s meaning (or the science behind its claims about the future), because they can address its concerns and survive.

The Discursive Struggle of the Indignados in Spain (2011–2015)

This section provides a detailed example of a collective process of language awareness in direct relation to acquiring socio-political awareness derived from an earlier study on the Indignados (15M movement) in Spain (Montesano Montessori and Morales López, 2015; see also Montesano Montessori, 2016). The movement started as a spontaneous occupation of the main squares in Spain, notably at the Plaza de la Puerta del Sol, the centre of both Madrid and the entire country, against the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, European austerity programmes and the lack of democratic control on the national economic and political system. Soon, massive demonstrations were held in all major towns. Specific features of this response to the crisis were the lack of ideological leadership, the ample use of internet and social media, and the climate of peace and inclusion, which were in fact representative for the entire 15M movement. The study focused on the placards designed by the Spanish people and traced how this particular semiotic operation of constructing mini-narratives, which were expressed collectively, led to the construction of a radical renarrativization of the experienced crisis and a reconstitution of the very identity of citizens from victims of the crisis to critics of the – corrupt – political and economic system. All this was done without any ideological leadership. The counternarrative was constructed as the demonstrations and the general struggle were taking place and shape, through creative slogans, visual metaphors, the use of cyberspace and of real and symbolic places, such as the capital...
squares. In other words, citizens constructed a semiotic landscape (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) which allowed them to make new meanings and create new relations and identities. It is this particular complex process of semiotic awareness, collective emotions and a shared, new understanding which eventually led to a rearticulation of the crisis from an inevitable event of which citizens were a victim to a social construct, which served the global economy and benefitted the national political and financial elite at the expense of the middle and working classes.

The 15M struggle played out at macro, meso and micro levels and challenged the sustainability of current practices within each. The macro level was the part that resonated in the global (occupy) protest movement against globalization and the free-market economy. The meso level played out on the squares, while the micro level implied neighbourhood actions, such as preventing the confiscation of homes due to mortgages not being paid off as a result of the crisis. The slogans, which we analysed equally, referred to the macro level, as some were directed against the global economy, to the meso level of the neighbourhoods or subjects such as education, and to the micro level of day-to-day life. The analysis focused on these micronarratives and the many semiotic elements, discursive strategies and linguistic features that were employed to construct them and that eventually led to the grand narrative or the rearticulation as described above. The eclectic theoretical and analytical framework employed equally elements that allowed for the analysis of the emerging discourse at the macro, meso and micro levels. Hence, the analysis started with the rhetoric and visual analysis of the placards, songs, theatre and other semiotic devices employed during the demonstrations. It then looked through a social constructivist lens at the general process of meaning making and analysed discursive strategies of dismantling dominant economic and political structures and their representatives, and the subsequent/desired transformation and reconstruction towards a desired new reality. At the macro level a narrative analysis (Somers, 1994) was performed to connect the micro, meso and macro elements of the 15M struggle. It interpreted these changes in terms of a ‘myth’, an alternative to an existing dominant reality (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). For the purposes of this chapter, this section now zooms in on the semiotic processes of dismantling, transforming and restructuring the socio-political and economic status quo.

The discursive strategy of deconstruction is meant to dismantle parts of an existing national identity construct (Wodak et al., 1999: 33). In the case of 15M, this strategy was directed both at the two main political parties, the Populist Party and the Socialist Party, as well as the financial sector. The placards show the construction of a deictic opposition between politicians and citizens in contrastive slogans such as: *lo llaman democracia y no lo es* – ‘They call it a democracy, but it is not a democracy’. The slogan is derived from a popular song, a phenomenon frequently observed. Hence, a deictic opposition is created between the claim of the ruling class ‘they’ and the implicit voice of the people who depict that this claim is false. This divide between politicians and citizens is artfully depicted in a placard which shows a face composed of the faces of the leaders of the two parties: José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and Mariano Rajoy. Their names are also conflated as Luisano R. Zapajoy. Taken together, the conflated picture and the names represent a metonymy of the parties which both act against the interests of the people. This opposition is further expressed through the slogan: *Si es bueno para ti, no es bueno para nosotros* – ‘If it is good for you, it is bad for us’. This again represents a deictic opposition between politicians – two supposedly opposite leaders identified as one single entity – and the people who have opposite interests. The slogan deconstructs...
the common assumption that politicians are supposed to serve citizens and therefore acquires a sense of irony, thus showing by implication the alleged corrupt character of the leaders of the two parties that have dominated the democracy that Spain painfully constructed following the dictatorship of Franco (1939–1975).

The relation to the Francoist era is made in another placard, which shows two heads under the same crown, probably again representing the leaders of the Populist and Socialist parties. Above the two crowns we read Del Absolutismo and below the figures of the leaders al bi-partidismo, which means ‘From absolutism to the dual-party system’. It recontextualizes earlier slogans such as ‘from fascism to democracy’ that were popular after the death of Franco, connecting to Spanish history which has known two unsuccessful Republ…

In terms of dismantling the unsustainable financial sector, during the demonstration people pointed fingers and chanted culpables, culpables – ‘guilty, guilty’ – when passing by the stock exchange and houses of administrators. The chant started with a small group, and was then adopted collectively, thus representing a moment of shared emotions and shared awareness and embodiment of a collectively felt disapproval. It thus connected the microlevel of personally pointing a finger and chanting to the mesolevel of the buildings which represented these resisted policies. Particular slogans against the financial sector, were no hay pan para tanto chorizo – ‘there is no bread for so much sausage’. In Spanish, ‘bread’ is slang for ‘money’, while ‘chorizo’ is slang for corruption, thus operating as a metonymy in linguistic terms. There is a double meaning here, stating that the basic layers of society cannot sustain the weight of the new economy on the one hand, and that society at large will not survive the corruption due to the erosion of the public sector on the other. Again, this slogan cuts through the various levels and addresses sustainability at each: it addresses malpractices at the macrolevel using day-to-day slang to capture the financial unsustainability of the corrupt system while also symbolizing the intolerable consequences for the lower classes who can no longer afford to sustain themselves on what would be considered an everyday lunch of bread and sausage.

The strategy of transformation presents placards which address and clarify the relation of citizens to the system from the point of view of the movement. One slogan reads indignados y organizados – ‘indignant and organized’ – with a friendly young, male face
next to it, while another slogan states *no somos antisistema; el sistema es antinosotros* – ‘we are not against the system; the system is against us’. The first slogan challenges the general assumption that rebellious groups are unorganized or violent and the implicit antagonism between the two terms ‘indignant’ and ‘organized’. In the second slogan, ‘antinosotros’ is a neologism derived from the existing word ‘antisistema’. It expresses a paradox and indicates the inhuman behaviour of the elites who exclude the human dimension from their politics. In these slogans, a discursive strategy of contesting and of elevating the position of citizens who reinsert themselves in the political equation is, indeed, a strategy of transformation and of emancipation. In terms of strategies of reconstruction, two slogans were analysed. One indicates a hashtag Spanish Revolution and expresses a list of demands. The other mentions a system error and proposes to introduce a citizenship 2.0 (*ciudadanía* 2.0) in order to reinstall a real democracy, listing a series of suggestions. The interesting point is that this slogan shows a recontextualization from computer language: every innovation to an existing computer program has a number. Apparently, a democracy can be reinstalled, like a computer program. This slogan alludes to older and younger generations through this very recontextualization. Democracy is desired by older generations due to their memory of the Franco era. Computer language appeals to the younger generation.

Significant semiotic aspects that allowed for this remarkable process of collective language and socio-political awareness and emancipation included the creativity of the slogans – during demonstrations and on the internet – which entailed recontextualizations from art (songs, movies), visual metaphors, turning upside-down common assumptions, using slang to refer to politics at a macro level, thus connecting micro and macro levels. This showed how the fate of ordinary people was connected with – and suffered from – macro finance and its representatives. Taken together, these slogans represent a metanarrative, which depicts politicians as a mediocre group, dominated by the two main parties who divided power between themselves and the financial elite, while serving global capitalism at the expense of the national, civil interests. The ontological aspect of the narrative contrasts this resisted current situation with the imaginary of a sustainable world with an economy that serves – rather than exploits – the people. The public narrative demands a restructuration of the political and the financial system by opening up politics to a bigger variety of parties and by establishing state guaranteed banks where the money of citizens will be secured. In the process, new connections between classes and generations had formed itself, a new collective understanding of the negative effects of the free market economy had been created and citizens had emancipated themselves while demanding a new democracy and a new economy that would serve the Spanish people. In the light of a counter hegemonic struggle, 15M has represented a radical restructuring of the relationship between civil society and the government, which is seen as no longer sustainable. The pressures experienced brought lower and middle classes together in their struggle for a socially just economy to serve the Spanish people rather than global capital. The struggle also connected younger and older generations in a struggle for a democracy 2.0: a renewed uncorrupted democracy made to represent Spanish citizens rather than global interest. 15M created a discursive divide between an elite in which both socialists and right-wing populists ignored their ideological differences in their efforts to prepare Spain for the global economy and to obey demands imposed by the EU on the one hand and a bottom-up creative discourse of Spanish citizens in the direction of a socially just economy and democracy. These demands
were then taken over by Podemos, a new populist left-wing party which emerged in 2014 and directly won five seats in the European Parliament. Its socialist leader, Pablo Iglesias, understood that the demands of the social struggle of 15M should be translated into politics by creating a political party (Morales López and Montesano Montessori, 2016). In this case, we see sustainability taking on an added and more radical meaning as, in Brown’s words:

At various ruptural points, it becomes apparent that many features of the global capitalist system cannot be sustained into the future, and that a radically different approach is required. In acting as an empty signifier, sustainability allows these multiple ruptural points to be condensed in a generalised concern for the future. This opens possibilities for the development of a critical stance upon the system as a whole, overcoming the impasses of isolated, particularistic critiques. At the current historical juncture, this kind of articulation is most likely to occur within civil society, as states remain committed to the practices that have produced the key dislocations in the first place. It is in this space that we may see sustainability come to maturity as a signifier for the kind of ecologically and socially harmonised society to which we aspire, and the multiple, creative attempts to realise it.

Brown, 2015: 131

Final Reflections and Conclusion

In these three examples, we have in our own ways provided linguistic analyses of texts as the mediational means by which key terms are negotiated, focalised as myths and potentially become ‘publicly understandable’ as social imaginaries. Each study is quite clearly only one fragment of a larger picture and, in order to enhance and extend that picture, and to see how, ultimately, all imaginaries are played out and contested at the local level against larger backdrops, we have to consider both the range and scope of data we analyse and the complementarities afforded by different methods of analysis.

Within political science, work based on Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory (DT) tends to focus on the broader sociopolitical narratives of change with only occasional reference to texts – and even more rarely any detailed analysis. From a linguistic point of view, this approach relies on very piecemeal and often impressionistic evidence, with significant conclusions being illustrated through a small number of texts. Hence, a major failing for the current authors, as discourse analysts, is that while DT offers rich explanations for changes in dominant discourses that have been identified, there are few mechanisms beyond individual insight and political instinct for distinguishing between nodal points, myths and social imaginaries and in tracing the evolution of concepts to uncover the real-time social mechanisms by which the former become the latter. From another angle, the recent rise in corpus linguistics, with its potential to identify synchronic and diachronic patterns across vast amounts of data, and the integration of corpus methods within a critical discourse framework, has provided a robust means for verifying the existence of nodal points and the interplay of signifiers in complex webs. Such work, however, often stops at this very point of identification, informing the interested reader that a change has indeed happened, often co-locating the change with a contemporary social shift, but providing little explanation for this change beyond this parallelism, and without accounting for the myriad social interactions and power plays that gradually alter the system. These are problems (or better a single Janus-headed
problem) which one of the current authors, Montesano Montessori, begins to address in her doctoral thesis (2009) through the adoption of corpus methods within a political science framework, and there is an increasingly sophisticated body of corpus-based work within the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (see www.gabrielatos.com/CLDA-Biblio.htm). But much work remains to be done in uniting robust descriptions of change with convincing interpretative methodologies and more specifically in drawing on richer sociological and anthropological accounts of context in order to understand how the micro- and macro-events of language interact to influence and shape our awareness of the discourses that both comprise and regulate the societies we live in and co-construct.

We finish with a handful of questions that might usefully be asked in undertaking research in this area:

To what extent are individual texts reflections of broader discursive trends?
In what way are broad discursive trends enabled or challenged through individual acts of discourse?
How can corpus methods and qualitative analysis be combined in approaching such questions?
What are the discursive mechanisms in individual texts that provoke change?
What are the non-linguistic factors that facilitate these discursive mechanisms?
How can linguistic analysis be integrated with other social scientific approaches in approaching such questions?

Related Topics
Critical Language Awareness; hegemony; sustainability; Discourse Theory

References


