

ATHEISM IN BRITISH RELIGIOUS DEBATES: A CRITICAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Atheism is a controversial concept that has been studied in the field of theology and anthropology. To the best of the researchers' knowledge atheism has not been studied from a critical sociolinguistic view. This paper will tackle the concept critically. The data of the study consists of a British public religious debate that is A live interview with Annie Laurie during the Christmas holiday. Annie Lauri wants to reveal the ideology that there is no god and there is no need to celebrate the birthday of Jesus by posting an advertisement in Las Vegas as part of a campaign called "war on Christians". The research tries to answer the following questions: (1) Which kind of atheism that is critically manipulated in the American and British religious public debates? (2) What are the dialectic and persuading strategies used by atheists to reinforce their ideologies? (3) What are the socio-cognitive techniques that are manipulated by the speakers to reveal the ideology of atheism? (4) What are the social variables that contribute to revealing atheism in the selected speeches?

The main approach of the study is Fairclough's approach, the study will focus on the meso and macro levels of the approach. After analyzing the excerpts from the interview, the researchers reach to the following: Annie Laurie adopt the explicit stance of atheism to reveal her ideology.

Keywords: Atheism, critical sociolinguistics, Religious Debates, ideology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Atheism has been studied in theology an anthropology, but in linguistics, studies are very few, this research tackles the language of atheist scholar who want to want to spread their ideology. The study adopts Fairclough's approach to analyse the data of the study. The data of the study is a debate as a live interview with Annie Laurie during the Christmas season. The study wants to diagnose the meso and macro linguistic devices that are manipulated to reveal the ideology of atheism. The study tries to answer the following questions:

1. Which kind of atheism that is critically manipulated in the American and British religious public debates?
2. What are the dialectic and persuading strategies used by atheists to reinforce their ideologies?
3. What are the socio-cognitive techniques that are manipulated by the speakers to reveal the ideology of atheism?
4. What are the social variables that contribute to revealing atheism in the selected speeches?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Critical linguistics

The term “critical linguistics” emerged for the first time as a sub-branch of linguistics in the works of Fowler et al (1979) and Kress & Hodge (1979). In Europe, the pioneer contributors to this field are Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk and Ruth Wodak. In America, Lester Fraigley, and Jay Lemak are the pioneer contributors to the field. Simpson (1993) states that Roger Fowler and his associates were the main first scholar who have broken the ice of the discipline of critical linguistics in the 70s of the twentieth century.

At the very beginning of its emergence, critical linguistics has come from several routes. Hallidayan Systemic functional grammar, Neo Marxist, Sociolinguistics and applied linguistics (Wodak R., 2011).

The term critical linguistics can be confused with critical discourse analysis (CDA: henceforth) as they are interchangeably used by academics and researchers. Furthermore, CDA, in particular, has never been a single theory or methodology but quite the opposite, the research in CDA is derived from different theoretical frameworks and directed by various sources of data. Due to this variety of fields and data, the programme of CDA has been open-ended and has the potential to be innovative (Anthonissen, 2001).

It is notable to say that the field of CDA is heterogenous and this view is approved by van Dijk (1993) as he states that CDA and CL have shared perspectives in tackling linguistic, semiotic or discourse studies. What is highly important about CL in general and CDA in particular is that language is a social practice and the discourse of any piece of linguistic data is an integral component of that social practice (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

The sociolinguistic school that focuses on the problematic view of language has come to be known as "critical linguistics" and then it is modified to be "critical discourse analysis". The term “critical sociolinguistics” is coined to be an umbrella term to cover these two approaches in addition to others such as the approach of symbolic power by Bourdieu’s and Foucault's approach of ideology. One of the main issues that CS tries to solve is the analysis of language samples to uncover how language produces, sustains and duplicates major inequalities in society. This approach is more dependable and wider open to insights from other fields such as sociology and its main subfields as social organization, inequality, power and conflict (Mesthrie, 2009).

The idea of the criticality of a language in society has come to exist since the sociolinguistic work of Hymes (1962, 1972, 1996). After that, several works and studies have emerged and argued that language is not only an innate cognitive apparatus as Chomsky claimed but also a social phenomenon that is subject to the influence of social regulations. The evidence to prove this socialized side is in the speech community when the distinctive unique linguistic resources and strategies come to be socialized to achieve communicative goals, without restricting the prescriptive sides of a specific language. The hidden social nature of a language means that language is a human means of evaluation when people can claim how that language operates in society. This process creates power inequalities among speakers of different linguistic varieties in which several conventions and claims dominate others.

Hymes (1996) states that there is no experimental reason to say that languages by themselves can be unequal but matters such as linguistic diversity, the medium in which language is expressed, the structure of language and its function turn to be various vantage points of problematization, debate and critique. So, certain beliefs come to be socially conventionalized or even hegemonic. At this point, critical implications come up when those socially constructed conventions about language encounter complex linguistic repertoires and change linguistic practices whereby non-conforming language and speakers are marginalized.

According to the critical sociolinguistic viewpoint, researchers have to question, research, and challenge social beliefs and conventions about language in terms of diversity and give the right to marginalized people to speak about their rights. For instance, linguistic knowledge that binds language to a specific nation and assigns a specific variety as the standard and excludes other varieties will inevitably lead to critical linguistic problems. (Wright, 2007). These critical linguistic situations have inspired scholars like Hornberger (2003) to conduct critical ethnographic work in the United States to discover how the normativity of English monolingualism is operationalized in classrooms and other linguistic literacy is excluded or neglected. However, CS is not limited to ethnographic studies, critical discourse analysis as a sub-field of CS uses an interdisciplinary approach to analyze written and spoken data as social practices where language use reflects and replicates specific beliefs, power relations and views of the world (Mesthrie, 2009). The purpose of CDA here in CS is to investigate those written and spoken texts from linguistic, political, psychological, sociological and historical perspectives in addition to their contexts carrying a view that anything that is always perceived as common sense or a belief is questionable and power-laden (see Schütz, 1962 and Weiss, 2007). This makes CDA a valuable methodological instrument to identify and expose inequalities in society, there are hundreds of examples of such studies, like research, dissertations and books such as the edited book of Wodak, KhosraviNik and Mral (2013) which includes a critical political analysis of the right-wing populist discourses in Europe which highlights the discursive construction of nationalism in media and political texts of the immigration policy which lead to producing winners and losers and to hegemonic identities and cultures. (Simpson, 2015)

Discrimination of individual speakers is also a concern of CS. Studying discrimination is categorized under Critical conversation analysis (CA) which is a research method that investigates natural social interactions in detail in addition to the structure of the speech concerning linguistic choices, pragmatics and semiotics (Sidnell, 2012).

2.2.1 Ideology in Critical Sociolinguistics

One key aspect of ideology in critical sociolinguistics is the idea that language is not a neutral tool for communication, but rather is shaped by power dynamics and social hierarchies. This means that certain language varieties, accents, and dialects may be valued more highly than others depending on the social context. For example, in many societies, Standard English is often seen as the "correct" or "prestigious" form of language, while other varieties such as African American Vernacular English or Southern American English may be stigmatized or seen as inferior (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999).

Ideology in critical sociolinguistics is also concerned with how language use can reinforce or challenge social inequalities. Language can be used to perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices or to resist dominant power structures and promote social change (Bourdieu, 1991; Pennycook, 2017). For example, the use of sexist or racist language can reinforce gender and racial hierarchies, while the use of inclusive language can promote social justice and equality.

In addition, critical sociolinguistics recognizes the role of language ideologies in shaping our understanding of ourselves and others. Language use can contribute to the formation of social identities, such as gender, race, class, and nationality (Ochs, 1992; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Language can also be used to construct and negotiate social boundaries, such as the boundaries between different social groups or communities (Gumperz, 1982).

To sum up, ideology is a central concept in critical sociolinguistics, highlighting how language reflects and reinforces social power structures and inequalities. By examining how language is used in different social contexts, critical sociolinguistics seeks to better understand and challenge social inequality and promote social justice.

2.2 Atheism

Atheism is a diverse philosophical concept which involves a wide range of meanings. Generally, atheism simply means the belief in the lack of evidence of God's existence. Atheism includes a significant categorization within this umbrella term. The first important distinction is between strong and weak atheism. Strong atheism means that an atheist believes that God does not exist. Weak atheism, on the other hand, means that atheists are not sure of God's existence, in other words weak atheists are those who are not certain about god's existence and they are not very interested in this matter. Weak atheism includes a further distinctive category, such as agnosticism which means that the existence of God is unknown or unknowable. The other category is apatheism which means that the person has no interest in questioning God's existence (Martin, 2006).

The same categorization of atheism is recategorized as implicit and explicit atheism. Implicit atheism means the lack of any belief in God without giving the matter any importance or consideration, but on the other hand, explicit atheism means that the atheist argues and defends his thought explicitly and consciously that there is no God or gods. There is also a wide range of philosophical and ideological positions that fall under the umbrella of atheism. For example, naturalism is the belief that the natural world is the only reality and that supernatural entities do not exist. Secular humanism is an ethical and philosophical stance that emphasizes human reason and values rather than religious dogma (Nielsen, 2005).

In addition to the above categorization which is mainly ideological and philosophical, other religions indirectly include atheism. Firstly, there are atheistic religions which include indirect disbelief in God such as Buddhism and Jainism but they have their religious practices. Another social category is anti-theism which means that the belief in God is something harmful to society and should be banned strictly (Zuckerman, 2007).

To sum up, the range of atheism is wide and varied, encompassing a diverse array of beliefs, attitudes, and philosophical positions. In this study, explicit positive atheism is

operationally defined as the explicit declaration that there is no God to be existed and there is no real proof of God's existence, the most important aspect of atheism that we need to focus on here is that positive explicit atheists adopt a frank stance against the idea of God's existence and try to approve this claim with all their efforts and means as debates, challenges and argumentations.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

3.1 Model of Analysis

The study will depend mainly on the approach of Fairclough. Norman Fairclough is one of the leading scholars who first theorizes in the field of critical studies, his approach is a dialectical social one to critical issues. His approach is on the intersectional relationship between language and social structure to unveil the asymmetrical use of power, exploitation, manipulation and structural inequalities. According to Fairclough's perspective, CDA aims to question the overt or covert mutual determination relationships between discursive practices and social structure on one hand, and between process and relation on the other hand. Fairclough tries to reveal how such practices, events and texts show up, how these are shaped ideologically by power relations and power struggles, and how non-transparent relations between discourse and society work out as a factor that is used to prolong power and hegemony (Fairclough, 1993:35).

More specifically, Fairclough explained the purpose of his approach to discourse analysis as it contributes to raising awareness of abused social relationships by focusing on language. In the process of developing the analytical framework of his method, Fairclough made use of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, Foucault's order of discourse, Gramsci's hegemony and Habermas' colonization of discourse. Fairclough's approach has been the cornerstone of critical discourse studies for the last two decades because it is one of the most comprehensive frameworks in critical discourse analysis. His approach integrates social science, and linguistics in one theoretical and analytical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995).

Fairclough proposed that the textual analysis of any discourse goes through three steps (Fairclough, 1989:110-111):

- 1- Production
- 2- Consumption and distribution of the text which is called interaction.
- 3- Interpretation of text in its social context which is called contextual analysis

The analysis of discourse according to Fairclough is categorized according to three levels: micro level, meso level and macro level.

The micro level which is also called description, analyzes the linguistic formal features of a text. The meso level or (interpretation) focuses on the intertextual relationships and situational contextualization to derive explicit and implicit references in the discourse of the context. The last level is called the macro level or (explanation), this level tries to reveal the relation between discourse and social context and what discourse wants to do with language (Fairclough, 1989). The three levels of Fairclough's approach will be explained in some detail.

3.1.1 Interpretation level (Meso level analysis)

The interpretation process is a dialectic one that analyzes the relation between what is in the interpreter and what is in the text. The relation between the text and the social structures is established by mediating discourse and its context. The textual features are socially functioning as a part of the struggles between institutional and social processes only that are part of the social interaction. According to this common sense, assumptions in discourse involve ideologies that are

coherent with power relations. the text is created and interpreted in this social interaction process and its background is structured depending on that common-sense assumption, so studying the discourse process and its relation with the background assumptions is involved in the interpretation process (Fairclough, 1989:140).

The comment that is generated by the interpreter is a combination of the content of the text and the previous personal experience of the interpreter. The formal linguistic features of the text are regarded as hints that provoke the interpreter's personal experience. In other words, the comment can be regarded as a product of interaction between the formal features of the text and the experience that creates the member's resources (Fairclough, 1989:141). The member's resources are the individual's presuppositions and frames of meaning for the world which are used to generate a meaning or interpretation (Fairclough, 1989:11).

In the stage of interpretation, the researcher or analyst tries to inquire about the interpretation of participants related to situational and intertextual content, taking into consideration the existence of internal coherence and discourse types (Fairclough:1989:162).

3.1.2 Explanation (Macro Level Analysis)

The explanation level structures two aspects, emphasis on power struggles (process) and power relations (structure). Discourse can be considered as a part of social struggle, and those struggles can be conceptualized in the meaning of broader struggles and the effects of these struggles on the structure. This level of analysis emphasizes the creativity of discourse and its social effect in future, or it can be demonstrated which power relations identify the discourse, those relations are the results of these struggles and forcefully set naturalized. The analysis at this level stresses the discourse decisiveness, and the history and the result of its past struggles. when social structures demonstrate power relations, social progress and practices represent power struggles. Finally, it can be said that discourses are regarded as a part of processes of social struggle within the matrix of relation of power (Fairclough, 1989:162).

The main purpose of the explanation level is to explain discourse as a social practice as a part of the social process. This can be done by demonstrating how the discourse is determined by social structure and how the cumulative reproductive forces influence it by sustaining or changing it. Fairclough (1989:163) explained this as follows: "Social determinations and effects are 'mediated' by member's resources. Thus, social structures shape members' resources, in turn, members' resources shape discourses and discourses sustain or change member's resources which in turn member's resources sustain or change the structures."

Social effects and determinants of discourse must be investigated according to three levels of social organization: any discourse has social level, institutional level and situational level determinants and influences. This means that the same discourse can be analysed differently according to one of the three different levels. In this case, a discourse is determined by institutional and societal power relations or constructs the societal and institutional struggles. There is a set of specific questions to investigate the meaning of those levels (Fairclough, 1989: 162):

- At situational, institutional and societal levels which power relations (PR) help shaping of the discourse?
- Which factors of the PR are ideological characters?
- How does the discourse take place at the situational, institutional and societal level about the struggle?
- Are these struggles explicit or implicit?

- Is the discourse normative or creative regarding the MR?
- Does it contribute to sustaining or changing current power relations?

3.2 Social Variables

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. It investigates how social variables such as age, gender, social class, ethnicity, and education influence language use and variation. Social variables are essential aspects of sociolinguistic research, as they provide insight into how language is used in different social contexts. The social variables contribute to the studies of several disciplines that have a kind of a link or a relation to the field of sociolinguistics such as stylistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics and critical linguistics. Our concern in this section is to see how the social variables are manipulated by authorities, people or others to manipulate certain ideologies. The social variables that are included here in the study are religion, ethnicity, class, education, and gender.

3.3 Debate Number one

A live interview with Annie Laurie during the Christmas holiday will be analyzed. Annie Laurie wants to reveal the ideology that there is no god and there is no need to celebrate the birthday of Jesus by posting an advertisement in Las Vegas as part of a campaign called “war on Christians”, the advertisement says:

“heathens greetings and yes Virginia there is no God”. Annie Laurie explicitly calls for adopting the doctrine of Atheism and leaving Christianity, so this is an explicit stance against deity religion and adopting an atheistic stance. According to the model, Annie Laurie starts to establish her claim, this stage is depicted in the following speech here:

“yes, Virginia there I know God signs in Las Vegas and they were censored so obviously there's no problem having religion in Las Vegas there is a problem having atheism now”

it is obvious that Annie Laurie wants to establish the idea that there is no problem to have atheism side by side with other deities like Christianity. Then Laurie moves to normalize the idea that there is no such an occasion to celebrate Jesus’ birthday and it is only a holiday of winter solicits as in the following speech:

“The real reason for the season is the winter solstice and people in the Northern Hemisphere celebrated this time of year for millennia with evergreens and festivals and gift exchanges.”

3.3.1 Meso Level

The second level is the meso or superstructure which consists of the schema, script. The contextual factors are also included in this level. This level of analysis enables the listener of the text to frame a comment or explanation about the main subject or topic. The listener uses the schema and script to get an explanation out of the data. In the case of the interview of Annie Laurie posted on 05 / December 2016 by the FFRF YouTube channel. The setting of the interview is an online interview conducted by the program Bill O’Reilly on Fox News. The participants in the interview are only two, the interviewer and Annie Laurie, the co-president of the Free from Religion Foundation. The purpose of the interview is to explain the meaning of an advertisement

posted in Las Vegas which is against Christians. The instrument of the interview is a live interview on the Bill O'Reilly program broadcast on the Fox News channel. The genre is a TV interview.

Concerning schema and script of the data, Annie Laurie depends on the schematic structure of the shared knowledge in her mind and the mind of the hearers. The linguistic and textual hints that are mentioned and analyzed earlier in the microstructure are used by the speaker and are regarded as tools that mediate the text with the shared knowledge in the mind of the hearers. Laurie uses the defects in the Christians' procedures to mitigate their evidence of the righteousness of Christianity, the child indoctrination. As in text number

“There's no problem having religion in Las Vegas, there is no a problem having atheism now,” Laurie presented the idea of atheism in a specific script to grasp the attention of the audience to the possibility of existing deities and atheism in the same society without fighting or struggling. Laurie uses a statistical scale to picture the very small number of atheists in her organization compared with the number of Christians in America to refer to the fact that the number does not matter, what matters is the quality.

3.3.2 The Macro Level

The final level of analysis is the macro level which includes several elements that are taken successively according to what is available in the text. The macro level includes social cognitive elements. At first, the main theme of the text is atheism which the speaker Annie Laurie tries to convey. Laurie tries to raise the emotional state of the audience when talking about the indoctrination of children and how they are attributed to a specific religion by their parents as in the following excerpt:

“I think children got Mike I think children should be allowed to or up and make these decisions for themselves so a six-year-old meant a lot of children grow up in great fear they grew up in great fear for example of hell.”

The text also includes the process of mitigating evidence when Laurie speaks about the absence of evidence about god existence and calls people to deny the god existence. Her stance is that there is no evidence to believe in God and she never gives supportive evidence for her denial or proposition as in the following extract:

“You yeah I think that that you can certainly say that the God of the Bible cannot be proved to be true if there is no proof for something we should not believe it and more people have been killed in the name of religion for something that cannot be proved than for any other reason and I think that many people might be pleased to know there is no God.”

Laurie tries to glorify her organization to grasp the attention of the audience by saying that the number of the organization members is only 14000 but they are quality or elite members of the society where the majority of it are Christians. This is clear in the following extract:

“I would also point out that a quarter up to a quarter of our members the last time we surveyed them I remember too many people, members in the Freedom Fountain Religion Foundation 14,000 members nationwide.”

3.3.3 The Social Variables

The final category of analyzing the data is the level of social variables, namely, gender, race and education. Concerning this text of Annie Laurie, the language of her interview is characterized by the language of a woman who is characterized by cooperative language. Annie Laurie is the co-president of the Free of Religion organization so, being a woman, she tries to grasp the attention of everyone in general and women in particular to join her organization and adopt her ideology. Concerning education, the public figures like Annie Laurie who call for atheism are highly educated and sometimes are best-selling authors (Grauvogl, 2009), it is very rare to find such figures to be illiterate or with low education. The level of education of the audience is also important as those public figures try to take the attention of people with low or moderate levels of education but this firstly cannot be scaled easily and it is outside the scope of the study.

Finally, from all the components of the model of analysis that have been analyzed above, it can be concluded that Annie Laurie tries to reveal the idea that atheism is a dogma or doctrine that can be spread just like other deities such as Christianity and Islam, but by using her linguistic and cognitive abilities, she tries to convey this ideology without giving any scientific or logical proof of her claim.

4. RESULTS

Annie Laurie adopts an explicit stance of atheism against Christianity to reveal her ideology.

Annie Laurie uses the persuading techniques establishing, normalizing and legitimizing to reveal her ideology of atheism.

Annie Laurie uses the socio-cognitive techniques theme, mitigating evidence and glorification of the party to support her ideology. She focuses on the main theme of the study which is atheism against Christianity, then she uses the technique of mitigating the evidence of god's existence with giving any concrete evidence of her own to support her ideology, finally, she uses the technique of glorification of her part of proponents in numbers and standards.

The prominent social variable that is prevail in the study is gender. Annie, being a woman, she uses a cooperative language to call for woman to join her a theist foundation. Concerning education, Annie Laurie is highly educated.

5. CONCLUSION

Depending on the above results, the following conclusions can be deduced:

- 1- The American atheists take a frank explicit stance of atheism not implicit one to reveal their ideology among society.
- 2- They use different dialectic persuading techniques to convince their audience to adopt their atheist ideology.
- 3- The American atheist use social-cognitive techniques to influence their audience and make them change their attitudes and therefore change their dogma.
- 4- Sometimes, American atheists make use of social variables such as gender to influence their audience. They invest gender discrimination for their own purpose to call for their ideology.

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