

## STUDY ON THE DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATION OF IMMIGRANT MINORS IN A REGIONAL NEWSPAPER

### *ESTUDIO SOBRE LA REPRESENTACIÓN DISCURSIVA DE LOS MENORES INMIGRANTES EN UN PERIÓDICO REGIONAL*

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#### Abstract

This article analyses the main linguistic characteristics that are used in the regional newspaper *Información* in Alicante to report news items dealing with the arrival of immigrant minors in Spain. Taking Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework, the analysis explores the examples of passive constructions, the use of adjectives and other expressions in order to study the way in which the above newspaper creates the news items dealing with immigrant minors and to observe the different types of messages on this topic. The analysis will point out that immigrant minors appear as passive and are described in a negative way in the news items analysed. These deal mainly with the moment of arrival of small boats (*pateras*) in Spain, which has consequences for the way in which the audience perceives the arrival in Spain of immigrants in general and immigrant minors in particular.

**Key words:** Critical discourse analysis. Immigrant minors. Media. Passive voice. Lexicogrammar.

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## Resumen

Este artículo analiza las principales características que se emplean en el periódico regional *Información* en Alicante para mostrar unidades informativas relacionadas con la llegada de menores inmigrantes. Teniendo el Análisis Crítico del Discurso (ACD) como marco teórico, el análisis explora ejemplos de oraciones pasivas, el uso de adjetivos y otras expresiones con el fin de estudiar el modo en que el periódico mencionado crea noticias sobre menores inmigrantes y para observar los diferentes tipos de mensajes sobre este tema. El análisis pone de manifiesto que los menores inmigrantes aparecen como pasivos y son descritos de un modo negativo en las noticias analizadas. Estas se centran principalmente con el momento de llegada de inmigrantes en pateras, hecho que tiene consecuencias en el modo en que se percibe la llegada de inmigrantes en general y de menores inmigrantes en particular en España.

**Palabras clave:** Análisis Crítico del Discurso (ACD). Menores inmigrantes. Medios. Voz pasiva. Léxico-gramática.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main characteristics of the 21st century is the rapid circulation of information, culture, capital and of course human beings. As Conway and Potter (2009: 1) make clear: “International circuits of migration are no longer bi-polar and more of them are developing as multi-local transnational networks of movement. Immigrant minors are also part of the international circuits of immigration already mentioned. For this reason, one of the main purposes of this paper is to study how minors who migrate are represented in the press.

From the 1980s, Spain has received immigrants from other countries progressively and immigrant minors started to arrive in the late 1990s and 2000. Although some of them have spent many years in our country and their children are Spanish, they continue to be excluded because they do not belong to the majority group and consequently have different habits (Barbosa, 2006; García Borrego, 2003).

Among the immigrants who arrive in Spain, immigrant minors are the most vulnerable group. The majority of these minors start their journey without papers so that the European authorities cannot apply the principle of family regrouping, which is done immediately when minors with no family are found. Not all young boys who arrive are minors as can be proved by bone age testing or documents once they are obtained.

Although in recent years some programmes to increase integration of people from different cultures have been promoted, and some of them are specific for children, integration is still a utopia. There are laws that protect immigrant minors, but stereotypes still exist which support certain forms of subordination of immigrant children (Amador Baquino, 2009; Pedraza, 2007). This is why one of the objectives of this article is to explore the linguistic characteristics that demonstrate this subordination.

The press has the power to spread any message, including news articles on immigration. However, instead of contributing to the elimination of stereotypes, in recent years the press has transmitted a rhetoric of exclusion, which establishes differences between us as the majority group and them as the group of immigrants (Martínez Lirola, 2013; Moore, Gross and Threadgold, 2012; Retis and García, 2010; van Dijk, 1993, 2003, 2005, 2006).

Defining immigration as a problem or as a threat (for example as an “invasion of refugees”) instead of considering it as a cultural and economic contribution to a city or country, is a form of persuasion that a dominant speaker or writer, in this case the press, can use if the people being informed, in this case, the Spanish population, do not have an alternative representation of immigration. For this reason, one of the main objectives of this paper is to observe how a sample of the Spanish press creates and transmits the image of immigrant minors as well as to observe the different types of messages that are spread and their characteristics.

This article is organised in the following way: the next section is devoted to the literature review and it justifies using Critical Discourse Analysis as the theoretical framework; section three deals with the data and the methodology used in a general sense. Then, the main results are presented paying attention to the linguistic characteristics of the texts analysed. Section five concentrates on the discussion of the results obtained. The article ends with some conclusions drawn from the study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has as its main aim to observe social problems, unequal situations and misuse of power through the analysis of authentic texts that are framed in their social contexts. In Woods’ words (2007: x):

“Discourse is, at the very least, language plus context- by which I mean the context that we bring with us when we use language; the context that includes our experience, assumptions and expectations; the context we change (and which is itself changed) in our relationships with others, as we both construct and negotiate our way through the social practices of the world we live in”.

CDA has been chosen as a perspective because it allows us to understand how texts make meaning and the different communicative forms in which those meanings are conveyed (language, image, sound, etc.). Deconstructing how meaning is created allows us to understand how audiences engage with the texts under analysis (Crespo and Martínez Lirola, 2012; Hidalgo Tenorio, 2011). Moreover, CDA allows us to establish a relationship between the multimodal characteristics of texts and the social, political and economic

contexts that frame them (O'Halloran and Smith, 2011). As van Leeuwen and Jewitt, (2001: 7) make explicit: “[...] text analysis can show what representations include and exclude, what they prioritise and make salient, and what differences they construct between different people, places and things.”

There is a vast bibliography on the construction of the image of immigrants in the press (Alonso Belmonte, McCabe and Chorlet-Roses, 2010; Bañón, 2002, 2007; Crespo and Martínez Lirola, 2012; Martínez Lirola, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; van Dijk, 1993, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008; Wodak and Reisigl, 2001). However, there are not so many studies on immigrant minors in the Spanish press, and in general they concentrate on the problems caused by gangs of young Latin-Americans (*vid.* Patiño Santos and Martín Rojo, 2007; Retis and García, 2010; Soriano Gatica and Perez-Neto, 2008) or on the problems associated with young offender institutions (Ardévol Abreu, 2009; Lorente y Rubén and Jiménez, 2006).

CDA highlights that discourses create social realities and that is why associating the group of minors with criminal and punishable behaviour does not contribute to understanding the situation in which this group of people live, the reasons why they migrate, etc. In addition, there are few discursive studies on the linguistic representation of topics relating to immigrant minors (Almeida, 2009; Berman, 2000; Cheong and Halverson, 2010; Faucher, 2009; Hester and Hester, 2010; Nippold and Scott, 2010). In general, the studies referred to in the previous paragraphs point out that the media show a subtle and moderate discourse against immigrants, especially in the most progressive press (van Dijk, 2003: 39). The main characteristics of this kind of discourse are the positive representation of the main group and the negative representation of immigrants; it also shows that the measures created to control immigration are positive for the majority group (van Dijk, 2005: 28).

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We collected all the news stories dealing with minors in the newspaper *Información* in 2011, which is published daily in Alicante (Spain). The corpus of examples consists of 19 articles. This provincial newspaper was selected because a significant number of immigrants reside in this province. In fact, people of 142 different nationalities live in Alicante, which makes the way in which immigrant minors are portrayed in this newspaper relevant.

A general overview of the data reveals that the codes of good practice are not respected because the nationality of immigrant minors is mentioned in several news articles (42.10%), and they are identified as being sub-Saharan or from Magreb in all the examples, as illustrated in the following:

Twenty-one sub-Saharan immigrants, including two women and seven minors, arrived in Melilla in a rubber dinghy (22 October 2011)<sup>1</sup> (*Un total de 21 inmigrantes de origen subsabariano, entre ellos dos mujeres y siete menores, llegaron a Melilla a bordo de una lancha neumática de 3,5 metros* (22 octubre 2011).

However, the voices or testimonies of immigrant minors are not present in any of the news items analysed but, although the voices of people who belong to the main group are not present either, the State Social Forces or members of NGOs appear as agents of the actions as the analysis that follows makes clear.

This study is just an approximation to the news items in which immigrant minors appear in a local Spanish newspaper. We intend to contrast the data and results with the representation of immigrant minors in one or several national Spanish newspapers in the future; consequently, this paper is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis.

The method used to analyse the texts is CDA (see section 2) and the analysis and results are presented in the next section. Our analysis is mainly qualitative, following the tradition of CDA.

## **RESULTS: APPROXIMATION TO THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF IMMIGRANT MINORS IN A REGIONAL SPANISH NEWSPAPER**

This section will concentrate on the main linguistic characteristics of the news items that deal with immigrant minors found in the corpus of examples. These characteristics are chosen in each text by journalists with a defined purpose: to persuade the audience to perceive minors as these journalists suggest; they create immigrants' representation by the words they use, and this gives them power to shape public opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> All the examples in Spanish have been translated into English by the author.

Following discourse analysis, it can be observed that the language used creates an image of minors as conflicting and irremediable. Emphasis is put on the number of minors who arrive and the term “an avalanche of minors” (*avalancha de llegada de menores*) is used. It is also highlighted that they arrive in irregular conditions by using expressions such as “they enter (the country) clandestinely” (*entran de forma clandestina*). The news stories analysed also point out that the majority come from Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa and that they lack documents by using nominal groups such as: Young Moroccans without documents, etc. In this way, the great number of minors arriving is highlighted and these messages try to create social alarm by referring to idle minors that arrive in our country and need the support and help of social services to provide them with a place to stay.

In the newspaper *Información*, 19 news items dealing with immigrant minors were published between 1 January and 31 December 2011. As already mentioned in section one, in general, the press mentions negative behaviour when referring to immigrant minors such as the fact that they may be members of gangs or have been expelled from immigrant shelters. Other topics that appear less often in the press are bone age testing, sexual crimes that some immigrants are victims of, the death of immigrants arriving in small boats (*pateras*), prostitution of immigrant minors, second generation immigrants, the hiyab or Islamic veil, or some aspects related to the education of these immigrants.

However, in the corpus analysed, the news articles on immigrant minors deal with their arrival in small boats at the Spanish coast. These articles normally differentiate between the number of women, men and children, as the following example makes clear:

State security officers arrested yesterday 25 Magrebi immigrants, including five minors, on their arrival. The immigrants, all male, [...]. (4 October 2011) (*Efectivos de los cuerpos de seguridad detuvieron ayer a 25 inmigrantes de origen magrebí, entre ellos cinco menores, después de que llegaran [...]. Los inmigrantes, todos varones, [...]*) (4 octubre 2011).

A general characteristic in the news items under analysis is that immigrants appear as passive and those performing actions belong to the security forces (police, civil guards, etc.) or to members of NGOs. Sometimes it can be observed who the agent of the actions is, as in the following examples:

The Red Cross took eight pregnant women last night to the local hospital in Motril. They were part of a group of 61 sub-Saharan immigrants that were rescued yesterday by the Coast Guard 40 miles off the Granada coast (13 February 2011). (*La Cruz Roja trasladó anoche al hospital comarcal de Motril a ocho mujeres embarazadas que viajaban en una expedición de 61 inmigrantes subsabarianos que fueron rescatados ayer por Salvamento Marítimo a unas 40 millas de la costa granadina*) (13 febrero 2011).

The ‘without documents’ including two women and two minors were rescued by the Coast Guard and taken to Motril (23 May 2011). (*Los “sin papeles” entre los que viajaban dos mujeres y dos menores fueron auxiliados por Salvamento Marítimo y trasladados a Motril*) (23 mayo 2011).

Members of the Almeria and Motril Coast Guard rescued yesterday 54 Moroccan immigrants, including four babies, two children and six women, from a boat intercepted four nautical miles south-east of the limit of the territorial waters between Spain and Morocco (24 June 2011). (*Efectivos de Salvamento Marítimo de Almería y Motril rescataron ayer a 54 inmigrantes de origen marroquí, incluidos cuatro bebés, dos niños y seis mujeres, de una patera interceptada a cuatro millas náuticas al sudoeste del límite entre las aguas territoriales de España y Marruecos*) (24 junio 2011).

The use of the passive voice marks very clear roles and social relations between the participants represented - between the performers of the actions (agents or actors in interpersonal terms) and the recipients of the actions (patients or goals) (van Leeuwen, 2008: 32). Immigrants are always the people to whom the action is done.

The previous examples make clear that immigrants’ voices are not present, they are treated as a group and, consequently, the number of immigrants who arrive is always specified using numeral adjectives. The objective of these stories is thus to offer a figure as precise as possible in order to make the main group of the population conscious of the number of people that continue to arrive even though Spain is currently suffering an economic crisis. The following examples are representative in this sense:

Moreover, the Civil Guard intercepted another 17 sub-Saharan immigrants that arrived in Melilla in two separate arrivals, including four minors and five women, one of whom was pregnant. This makes a total of 144 people rescued (24 July 2011). (*Además, la Guardia Civil interceptó a otros 17 inmigrantes subsabarianos, que llegaron a Melilla en dos entradas*)

*independientes, entre los que se encontraban cuatro menores de edad y cinco mujeres, una de ellas embarazada, lo cual elevó la cifra total del día a 144 personas rescatadas* (24 julio 2011).

The officers found the corpses after rescuing the 271 immigrants travelling on the boat, including 36 women and 21 children (2 August 2011). (*Los agentes encontraron los cadáveres tras socorrer a los 271 inmigrantes que viajaban en la embarcación, entre ellos 36 mujeres y 21 niños*) (2 agosto 2011).

There are other examples in which the agent is not explicit but is understood to be *Salvamento Marítimo* or *Fuerzas de Seguridad del Estado* (State Security Forces), as we can see in the following example:

The dead bodies, which were recovered yesterday afternoon 23 miles off Cape Sacatraf, belonged to two men, a 3-year-old boy and a 1-year-old girl (7 May 2011). (*Los cuerpos sin vida, que fueron recuperados a lo largo de ayer tarde a unas 23 millas del cabo Sacatraf, pertenecen a dos varones, a un menor de unos 3 años y a una niña de un año*) (7 mayo 2011)

Finding so many examples of the passive voice reinforces the fact that immigrants belong to a minority group in society and it is the majority group that is in a position of power and the one in charge of doing the actions: rescuing, to transferring immigrants, intercepting, etc. In this way, the newspaper's audience is invited to establish a clear division between the main group (white people) and the rest of the ethnic groups; between those considered citizens and those considered immigrants, between 'us' and 'them'. Pointing out these differences in news items contributes to racism and discrimination because immigrants are presented as subordinated, negative or partially. This idea of establishing a great difference between the people who arrive and the majority group is even further reinforced in news articles that inform about the arrival of more than one boat with immigrants, as in the following excerpt published on 16 August 2011 in the newspaper *Información*:

The Coast Guard and Civil Guard also intercepted yesterday in the Straits of Gibraltar a boat in which 27 sub-Saharan immigrants were travelling, including 14 women- four of whom were pregnant- and a baby. All of them were rescued and taken to the port of Tarifa. [...] The last boat, with 22 (people) without documents on board, including five minors, managed to get to the coast of Melilla. (*Salvamento Marítimo y la Guardia Civil también interceptaron ayer en el Estrecho de Gibraltar una embarcación en la que viajaban 27 inmigrantes subsabarianos entre ellos 14 mujeres- cuatro de ellas embarazadas- y un bebé. Todos fueron*

*rescatados y trasladados al puerto de Tarifa. [...] La última embarcación, con 22 indocumentados a bordo, cinco de ellos menores, consiguió alcanzar ayer la costa de Melilla, [...]”.*

Another important linguistic characteristic is the adjectives used to classify immigrants and the negative connotations that they evoke in order to present the migratory phenomena as something that does not favour the welcoming society: clandestine expedition of immigrants (*expedición clandestina de inmigrantes* [...] - 7 May 2011), illegal immigrants, immigrants “without papers” (*inmigrantes ilegales, inmigrantes “sin papeles”* -16 May 2011), clandestine immigrants (*inmigrantes clandestinos* -3 June 2011), 1162 people without documents (*1162 personas indocumentadas* -7 August 2011) and massive arrival of immigrants (*entrada masiva de inmigrantes* – 24-25 December 2011).

These adjectives contribute to the representation of immigrants as *impersonalised* without evoking the semantic feature of human, as opposed to *personalised* that would highlight their human characteristics. Following van Leeuwen (2008: 46) the examples analysed contribute to impersonalization by means of abstraction: “Abstraction occurs when social actors are represented by means of a quality assigned to them by and in the representation”.

There are also other expressions used to name immigrants (note the ellipsis of the noun immigrants in most of them); they make specific reference to the fact that they have no official documents (i.e., European passport or work permit), which places immigrants on the fringe of society without the status of active citizens: illegal (*ilegales*), the “without documents” (*los indocumentados*), the number of irregular immigrants in the whole of the EU (*el número de irregulares en el conjunto de la UE*) (16 May 2011), the “without papers” (*los “sin papeles”*) (23 May 2011).

These examples of nominalizations allow the exclusion of social actors since they are referred to in a way that pushes them into the background of discourse and the frame of society on purpose since these ways of referring to immigrants create fear in society. In this case we agree with van Leeuwen’s statement (2008: 28): “Some of the exclusions may be ‘innocent’, details that readers are assumed to know already, or which are deemed irrelevant to them; others tie in closely to the propaganda strategies of creating fear and of setting up immigrants as enemies of ‘our’ interests”.

All the news items analysed specify the number of immigrants that arrive and in particular the number of minors, which is sometimes made explicit from the heading of the article: Small boat rescued with 61 sub-Saharanans aboard, including five babies and eight pregnant women (*Rescatan una patera con 61 subsabarianos, entre ellos cinco bebés y ocho embarazadas*- 13 February 2011); More than 140 immigrants arrive in small boats at Melilla and Andalucía (*Llegan más de 140 inmigrantes en patera a Melilla y Andalucía* - 24 July 2011).

In other cases, this kind of information appears in the subtitle of the news item: A total of five boats rescued with several pregnant women and children on board (*Un total de cinco embarcaciones son rescatadas con varias embarazadas y niños a bordo*- 24 July 2011); 53 women and 8 children were among those on board (*Entre los tripulantes de la embarcación había 53 mujeres y 8 niños*-7 August 2011); The last boat with 22 undocumented immigrants, five of them children, reached the coast of Melilla (*La última embarcación con 22 indocumentados, cinco de ellos niños, logró alcanzar la costa de Melilla* - 16 August 2011).

The news item published on December 17 (see example below) is unique in the sense that apart from pointing out the number of immigrants that arrive in Spain, it is the only one that specifies in the heading and text that more than one small boat (*patera*) arrived. Moreover, this is the only one in which minors, in this case babies, are said to be accompanied by their mothers, and it is pointed out that one minor was not accompanied, whereas in the other news items it is understood that minors travelling in small boats are accompanied by one of the adults on board:

Two boats with 19 immigrants arrive in Melilla (heading) (*Llegan dos pateras con 19 inmigrantes a Melilla*).

Three boats tried to enter Melilla yesterday, although only two, with 29 sub-Saharanans aboard, were successful. There were two babies with their mothers and an immigrant minor travelling alone. The third boat could not enter because it was intercepted by a Moroccan patrol (17 December 2011). (*Hasta tres pateras intentaron entrar ayer en Melilla, aunque sólo lo consiguieron dos, en las que viajaban un total de 29 subsabarianos. Entre ellos, dos bebés que iban con sus madres y un menor no acompañado. La tercera patera no pudo entrar porque fue interceptada por una patrullera marroquí*) (17 December 2011).

The linguistic analysis done in the previous paragraphs points out that the generic masculine is used when the news items talk about the arrival of immigrant minors and therefore we do not know if young girls also arrive. The only cases in which the newspaper analysed refers to girls are in the articles on the use of *hijab* (Islamic veil), the controversy its use generates in society and some news items dealing with prostitution. Moreover, the examples presented in this section show that lexical dysphemisms are used in the use of adjectives or nominalizations in order to highlight negative aspects of immigrants, such as the fact that they have no official documents, which does not allow them to be active citizens in society.

## DISCUSSION

The lexical elements described in the previous section transmit a negative image of immigrants, which contributes to their social exclusion because they are represented as individuals to be avoided; it is implied that they are poor and therefore a burden on Spain. Moreover, nothing positive is said about them and therefore their contribution to the Spanish society is hidden, as van Dijk (2005: 5) makes clear: “The everyday lives and concerns of minorities are seldom covered. Their negative acts, and especially crime and drugs, are enhanced, whereas their major contributions to culture and society- except in sports and entertainment- tend to be ignored or belittled.”

Consequently, the news items should point out and make explicit that immigrant minors come because they have a migratory project, they want to work as soon as possible and they want to improve their economic situation. Minors see in immigration an opportunity to prosper. Therefore, an in depth analysis of the cultural, demographic, economic and social situations that surround minors in their countries of origin is necessary (Ourkia and Mulero, 2010; Esteban de la Rosa, 2010).

The news articles in the newspaper *Información* specify the number of minors that arrive, the sex of the adults and the number of pregnant women. In the case of minors, the newspaper just reports that children arrive and therefore it is not possible to know if they are all boys or there are also girls, except in the example of 7 May 2011 mentioned in section four in which the arrival of a girl is made explicit. From the previous statements it can be deduced

that minors are not the protagonists of any news item in the newspaper *Información* since in the examples analysed they are put together with the arrival of adults.

The analysis done in the previous section shows that the media have the power to modify or to shape our attitudes because each linguistic component is not chosen at random but, on the contrary, is motivated and created as a result of a complex phenomenon that can specify meanings (Bañón, 2007; Martínez Lirola, 2010; van Dijk, 2008).

The news items analysed show that the press does not promote a discourse highlighting that they are foreign minors in a situation in which they lack protection and are far away from their families. Therefore, they need help and guidance because they are minors and for this reason the press should promote discourses and programs to protect them. Hence, the different institutions, NGOs, the press, etc. should cooperate to find solutions and improve the perspectives of these minors instead of concentrating on presenting them as a threat to the country. They are always presented as belonging to a subculture of being on the fringe, of extreme poverty, which makes them steal to survive.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has pointed out that the different linguistic characteristics and their meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged since the intention is to transmit a specific image of immigrant minors, which presents them as vulnerable and dependent on the Spanish society.

The previous statement implies that it is essential that readers assume an active role in the process of observing how immigrants are represented and of interpreting the values associated with them in the news articles studied in this paper. Generally speaking, immigrants in general and immigrant minors in particular are presented as “the others”, those that are not like us, the majority group, and will never be like us.

The press should encourage talking about immigration in positive terms, which will imply making reference to the increase in the birth rate, to the cultural enrichment or to the economic benefits, among others. However, talking in negative terms evokes problems related to integration, delinquency, unemployment, etc.

The analysis has shown that immigrants, including minors, tend to be portrayed as poor people living in a dramatic situation that makes them leave their countries of origin and try to start a new life in a European country, in this case Spain. They are also represented as a burden on society because they invade our country and request medical, economic or social help or protection, which is reinforced by the visual representation of babies. In general, visual dysphemism implies discrimination against the group of people represented in the image, i.e., immigrants in our case, and usually combines with lexical dysphemism in the expression of offence and disrespect.

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Recepción: 22 de mayo de 2013

Aceptación: 19 de noviembre de 2013