Discourse practice and news online: comparing discursive constructions of Romanian immigrants in articles published by the Daily Express with readers' comments

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Introduction

This paper presents results of research into the representation of Romanian immigrants in online news articles, and readers' comments on those articles from a corpus-assisted critical discourse studies perspective. Focus on European immigration into the UK (especially Eastern European countries such as Romania) is a timely political issue in the UK where nationalistic, anti-immigration political parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) have grown rapidly in size, votership, and influence – the 2015 UK general election saw UKIP secure 12.6% of votes (a rise of 9.5% compared to the previous election, and the highest rise of any party). More recently, on 23 June 2016, a national referendum was held across the UK to decide whether the country should 'Remain' in or 'Leave' the European Union, popularly referred to as Brexit ('British Exit'). 51.89% of the votership voted 'Leave' as opposed to 48.11% voting 'Remain'. Following the vote, a poll of over 12,000 people carried out by Lord Ashcroft gave the top three reasons for voting Leave as 'decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK', 'the best chance for the UK to gain control over immigration and its borders' and 'remaining meant little or no choice about how the EU expanded its membership or powers'. Regarding Romania specifically, Romania joined the European Union in 2007 but a transitional cap on migration meant that Romanians were not able to become resident in the UK until the beginning of 2014 (unless they were self-employed or worked in seasonal jobs).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (which is being increasingly combined with Corpus Linguistic (CL) approaches (Baker and McEnery, 2015)) understands discourse as being socially constructive and constitutive; discourse "constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people" (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). As such, much research in the field has focussed on the representations and discursive constructions of identities including, for example, gender and sexuality (Potts, 2015, Turner, 2015). And given that a central interest in CDA concerns the critique of power relations and ideology (especially those that are inequitable; Wodak and Meyer, 2009), much of this work has sought to interrogate those constructions that create or reinforce states of social inequity with regards to, inter alia, sexism (Lazar, 2005), xenophobia (Baker et al., 2013), and racism (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). Our focus here on Romanian immigrants contributes to this body of literature and extends current understanding about discourses surrounding RASIM (Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants) in the UK press (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008, KhosraviNik, 2010, KhosraviNik, 2009).

Concerning the press, news media is a site of particular interest for CDA researchers due to the powerful social position it holds (Fairclough, 1995). Scholars recognise that journalistic discourse can be socially constitutive and transformative "through shaping understandings, influencing audience attitudes and beliefs (particularly through their reinforcement), and transforming the consciousness of those who read and consume it" (Richardson, 2007: 29). However, the idea that readers uncritically consume news media has been roundly problematized by CDA researchers. Fowler, for example,

argues that readers are not simply "passive vessels or sponges, absorbing an ideology which the source of the text imposed on them" but that "[t]here is every reason to propose that being a reader is an active, creative practice" (1991: 43). Indeed, following a shift to the distribution of news online, the role of the reader in the construction of news events is being given greater attention (McEnery et al., 2015) and O'Keeffe notes that "the reader is no longer reading an article in protracted isolation; s/he can comment on it via a website, email it to a friend, post it on a social network for others to discuss it" (O'Keeffe, 2011: 450).
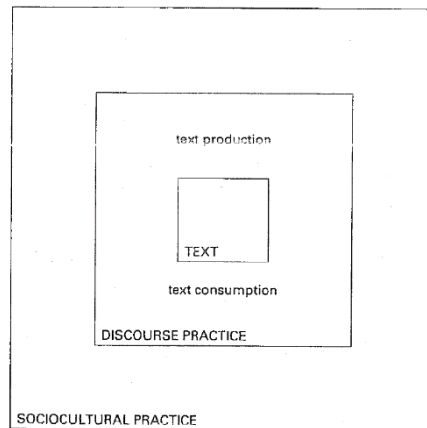

Figure 1: Fairclough's (1995: 58) framework for critical discourse analysis of a communicative event

Recognising this, our paper focuses on this changing relationship between text and 'discourse practice' – i.e. the "various aspects of the processes of text production and consumption" (Fairclough, 1995: 58; figure 1) – and attempts to address Richardson's claim that "this aspect of CDA remains the most under-developed" (Richardson, 2007: 39). We suggest that CDA has been slow to address this underdevelopment largely due to a lack of available methods for data collection rather than deficit of theoretical or analytical approaches, and so present a method for constructing corpora of online news texts and their readers' comments which can then be analysed to examine and compare the relationships between the content of the news articles and readers' comments on (i.e. consumer responses to) those articles. We suggest that comments on online news articles act as type of proxy for reader reception/consumption and thus fit well with CDA's understanding of the contextual 'situatedness' of a text.

Research questions

As this study is interested in discourses around Romanians in articles printed by the Daily Express, our first research question is:

1. How were Romanians typically represented by the Daily Express in the time leading up to Brexit?

Moreover, because of our further interest in comparing discourses found in both articles and readers' comments on the online versions of those articles and what this tells us about discourse practice, our second research question is:

2. What were the differences/similarities in representation between articles and reader comments?

Sampling & data

In order to focus on both news articles and readers' comments on those articles, we collected both forms of data by building a 'web scraping' tool using Python and the Python libraries BeautifulSoup and Selenium to extract all text in the articles and comments of pages containing the term 'romanian' published by the Daily Express online between 24th July 2006 and 23rd June 2016 (the date of the Brexit vote).

These sampling criteria returned 2 discreet corpora: a 771,878-word articles corpus containing 1,945 texts, and a 2,166,148-word comments corpus. A timeseries analysis (Figure 2) showed an increase in the number of texts in the articles corpus during – and especially towards the latter part of – 2013 when the EU lifted restrictions on Romanian and Bulgarian workers' ability to take up residency in the UK.
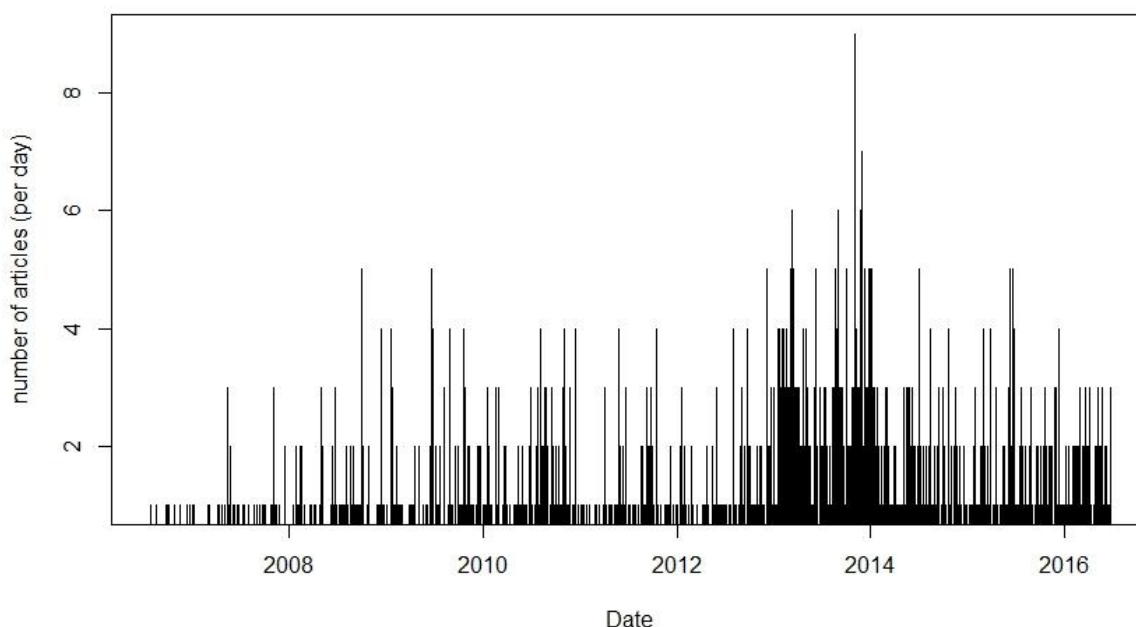

Figure 2: timeseries analysis

Methods, initial findings & further work

Keyword and word-cluster analyses were employed to identify similarities and differences between the articles and comments corpora. During keyword analysis the comments and articles corpora were compared to the BE06 – a 1 million word reference corpus of written British English (Baker, 2009) – and, concentrating on the 50 most statistically significant keywords, found that several keywords were shared between the corpora. These shared keywords related to:

-   politics (*UKIP, Cameron, Labour, Farage*)
-   nationality (*EU, Romania, Romanian, Romanians, Britain, British, UK, Europe, countries*)

- movement of people (*migrants, immigration, immigrants*)
- other unclassified terms (*will, benefits, racist*)

One dominant theme in the corpora found through keyword analysis was a focus on the quantification of Romanians and focus on their movement (e.g. 'It *estimates* that about 50,000 *Romanians* and Bulgarians will arrive on our shores'). This finding is consistent with previous research on the representations of immigrants (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008).

Initial word cluster analysis was performed by producing a list of 3-word clusters for the articles and comments corpora both, which were then intersected to produce a list of shared clusters. Numerous clusters including the keyword UKIP were identified as being shared between the articles and comments corpora and an initial investigation focussed on frequently occurring clusters which contained grammatically open-class words (e.g. *'ukip leader nigel', 'farage and ukip', 'support for ukip'*) but not those containing closed-class words (e.g. *'ukip in the', 'to the ukip'*). One cluster – *'attack on ukip'* – was found to occur in both the comments and the article relating to a page entitled, ''It's the politics of anger' Cameron launches *attack on Ukip'*. The article focuses on responses to a statement made by Nigel Farage that he would be uncomfortable if Romanians became his neighbours. The cluster *'attack on ukip'* is found in the headline for this article but also in a comment that appears to respond directly – and critically – to this headline. The comment begins:

1) Well apparently according to the Daily Fail Cameron has launched yet another *attack on UKIP* and the people choosing to vote for it. Calling us party of angry politics

[…]

The comment goes on to distinguish UKIP from mainstream political parties, creating in/out groups:

2) Cameron, Clegg etc have all taken turns to accuse British patriots and ordinary people of being racists, bigots, loons, fruit cakes etc and I am sure none of those big three parties would want bigots, racists and fruitcakes voting for them would they?

The commenter continues by imploring that readers vote for UKIP – something not found in the article. Results suggest that by combining keyword and word cluster analysis this method enables a corpus-driven 'way in' to quantitative and qualitative analyses at the level of the text as well as discourse practice. The work also demonstrates how the building ad hoc web scraping tools for specialised corpus creation can benefit CL research/researchers.

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