

PUBLIC SELECTION BASED ON QUALIFICATIONS AND INTERVIEW FOR THE AWARDING OF NO. 1 GRANTS LASTING 36 MONTHS FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ACCORDANCE WITH ART. 22 OF LAW OF 30.12.2010 NO. 240 AT THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, LITERATURES AND CULTURES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BERGAMO (ACADEMIC RECRUITMENT FIELD 10/H1 – FRENCH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE – ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE L-LIN/04 – LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION – FRENCH AS PART OF THE PLAN FOR EXTRAORDINARY RESEARCH CALLED ITALY® (TALENTED YOUNG ITALIAN ® RESEARCHERS) - YOUTH IN RESEARCH INITIATIVE FOR THE YEAR 2016 – TYPE D – CUP: F12I14000230008

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RESEARCH PROJECT

“The linguistic expression of empathy in French specialized discourses”

Project objective

The project aims to analyze French specialized discourses from the perspective of empathy. Taking the assumption that there are emphatic strategies and effects in such discourses, the objective is to identify and classify linguistic and discursive features which make possible to establish an empathic relationship with the interlocutor.

Theoretical framework:

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing and to place oneself in another's position.

To investigate the notion of empathy from the linguistic point of view, the project will involve two research areas: discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics. The former approach studies linguistic phenomena in relation to the contextual and social conditions of production. The latter explores the relationship between language and the human mind, in order to interpret reality. The concept of enunciation is arguably suitable to the synergic exploration of both approaches.

The first definition of enunciation, elaborated by Benveniste (1974, ch. 5), emphasizes space-time parameters and the expression of subjectivity in speech acts. In their turn, these spatiotemporal parameters and the presence of an enunciator may be analyzed both in socio-anthropological and cognitive terms.

The socio-anthropological approach allows to define several concepts: the universe of discourse, the discursive positions of the enunciators within these universes, the discursive genres, i.e. the set of practices and textual rules that allow an utterance to fit in with a given universe of discourse (Maingueneau 2014).

The cognitive approach allows to treat the manifestation of the enunciator's personality in terms of skills and cognitive and logical operations. The enunciation of one's own identity (“the self”) and the identification of spatiotemporal co-ordinates presuppose a cognitive activity of self-consciousness and awareness of the external reality one interacts with (Fauconnier, Turner 2002).

As Rabatel (1998, 2008), inspired by Damasio (1995, 2000, 2003) claims, any cognitive activity gives the enunciator the possibility to understand and espouse the others viewpoint.

The cognitive operations resulting from this adoption of “the other's point of view” can be traced back to the notion / concept of empathy (“to place oneself in another's position”).

This empathic understanding of the other's point of view may happen at both the rational (reasons and opinions) and emotional (emotions) levels. In the former case empathy can be defined as strictly cognitive, in the latter, as affective (Giusti, Locatelli, 2007).

The peculiarity of empathy lies with the unexpected relations which arise between the speaker's stance and utterance and those of the interactant. In actual fact, speakers refer to and encode the interlocutor in their utterances not to enmesh the ‘other’ into their own discourse. Instead, empathy implies the subversion of such a perspective to favor the speaker's entrance (or at least its attempt) into the interlocutor's universe.

In the context of linguistics empathy has not yet been the object of in-depth research, which justifies the present project.

Research project description

The project consists of the qualitative analysis of a selected corpus with the aim of eliciting the linguistic and discursive encoding of empathy in French specialized discourses.

Drawing on the joint insides of discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics, the project will focus on speakers interaction with their interlocutors within specific contexts. Despite a number of variables (situational and social context, interaction with the outside world and with the psyche of the interlocutor) that make it unlikely to predict the linguistic features to analyze, some guidelines can be legitimately anticipated. The analysis will concentrate on:

- microlinguistic features (i.e. verbs, pronouns, syntactic constructions ...)
- macrolinguistic features (discourse structure and genres).

Since it will be articulated over three years, the project will go through various steps starting from a focus on political communication and electoral rhetoric. Two main criteria will be followed in the compilation of the corpus:

- the interlocutor or target of the political / electoral discourse
- the type of media (TV, radio, the internet social networks ...)

After highlighting micro and macrolinguistic markers of empathy in political/electoral discourses, further contextual and social spheres will be explored.

Still within the remit of political context, parliamentary debates will be investigated in a comparative perspective. To widen the research field, the analysis will focus on health-related discourses (in particular TV programs like "Allo docteur" and internet forum dealing with health issues), and on professional interactions (to observe empathy markers in business meetings and negotiation).

Wherever possible, corresponding specialized contexts in Italian will be identified and explored contrastively in order to retrieve any similarities with, or differences from, specialized communication in French.

Key words

French linguistics, empathy, specialized discourses, discourse analysis, cognitive approach

Time

- Literature review (3 months)
- Compilation of a corpus of documents (9 months not necessarily consecutive). The first corpus will focus on the discourse (oral and written) of the Front National, in the context of the French Presidential election of 2017
- Coding of the data collected (8 months)
- Analysis of the data adopting the approach described in the project (12 months)
- Conclusions, Dissemination of research results (4 months)

Expected results

The project will open a new perspective on the dynamics at work in communication in French.

Two kinds of results are expected:

- knowledge acquisition of the linguistic encoding of empathy,
- the collection of several corpora of French specialized discourse (if necessary also in Italian in a contrastive perspective), analyzed with empathy as the main focus.

Besides workshops, conferences presentations and publications, another potential outcome of the research could be its impact on the teaching of French as a Foreign Language.

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