Research report: AFLS bursary 1995–6

In 1995-6 I received the AFLS bursary towards funding an M.A. in Linguistics at Lancaster University. My M.A. research used Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse French media texts — newspaper articles in this case — reporting on the 1989 « *affaire du foulard* », when Muslim girls wishing to wear the veil were expelled from French classrooms. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach to the analysis of texts that situates them within the social world and examines the interaction between texts and the social world. A detailed analysis of the text itself is combined with an analysis of the processes of production and interpretation of the texts and an analysis of the social context within which the texts are written and read. It is therefore an approach which combines linguistic theory with social theory. In particular CDA is concerned with issues of power and how power relations in the social world can be textually mediated (see for example Fairclough (1989, 1992)).

My study, "Veiled meanings: an analysis of discourses of national identity and 'otherness' in the French press" examined the role of media language in the construction of racism in French society. French racism relies heavily on discourses of national difficulties — national levels of unemployment, for example — being due to immigration. The media play an important role in reproducing this kind of racism. A national media allows people to "experience" (mediated by the interpretation of the media producer) what is happening in that part of the country that is beyond their local experience, and gives people the opportunity to make connections between national events and their everyday lives.

My focus in this research was the way in which discourses of French national identity, particularly about the role of secular education within the formation of the Republic and about what the French conception of citizenship means, were used to construct veil-wearing Muslim girls as a threat to the identity of France as a whole. I examined how different newspapers / newsmagazines represented the same issue as having very different implications, focusing on two articles taken from *Le Point* and *Libération*.

My analysis demonstrated that this incident was not constructed as an isolated one but was historically positioned as being linked to the processes of the

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construction of French national identity. From the time of the Revolution onwards, the concept of a French national community made up of French citizens has been a key part of the dominant conception of France as a country. Being a French citizen involves particular formal rights and obligations. While France is traditionally a country which has allowed its citizens a good deal of liberty in their private beliefs, French citizens are expected to live publicly in a secular way and to keep their religious beliefs and behaviour in their private lives. Since the days of Jules Ferry secular education has played an important role in the formation of new citizens, and is seen as being without question part of the public sphere in which the secularity of the Republic comes before private beliefs. The choice of Muslim girls to wear veils in school was presented in the media as a direct challenge to this tradition, and thus as a threat to French national identity and social stability.

However in a wider context this construction could be challenged. Other religious groups had before this incident been allowed to wear articles of clothing demonstrating their own religious affiliation in schools. The case of the Muslim girls was different because underlying these arguments was a discourse of Islam as a threat, constructing a fear of Muslim fundamentalism becoming powerful in France. My analysis of the media articles demonstrated that while the overt discourses drawn on in these texts were those of secular education and national identity, a discourse of "the Islamic threat to France" constructing the Muslim community as a dangerous "other", not part of the French national community, was implicit in the texts. This construction is clearly one of the dominant discourses, both around the « *affaire du foulard* » and around immigration in general in France, and is an important part of French racist discourse.

I am currently working on a Ph.D. at the Linguistics Department at Lancaster University looking at the role of texts in the construction of identity.

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The winner of this year's ᴀꜰʟꜱ Postgraduate Bursary

Martin Howard of University College, Dublin

Research Proposal

As teachers responsible for the language acquisition process of our learners, the one external variable that is within our control is the input we provide them with. However input does not exist as an isolated force, but rather interacts with the internal processes of the learner. The general objective of this Ph.D. thesis is to examine the nature of this interaction, particularly from the perspective of the cognitive limitations placed on the role of input by these internal mechanisms. Specifically the thesis will examine Interlanguage permeability.

Within the university system it is generally presumed that less-proficient learners are able to draw on the input available to them to become more advanced learners: their less developed interlanguage systems are quite permeable to characteristics in the input. On the other hand, more advanced learners (e.g. final-year students) tend to reach a plateau. in the sense that they become quite proficient. but they rarely achieve bilingual status.

By looking at the interactions of university learners of French under different task conditions, it is hoped to see a relationship between the factors of availability of feedback under different communicative situations and the incorporation of that feedback into the learners' interlanguage system, depending on their proficiency level.

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