

METHODOLOGICAL COMPLEXES IN AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the reasons why specific methodological approaches for the analysis of immigrant students' discourse were selected in an ethnographic case study research and the presentation of the limitations and the possibilities that derive from those methods' utilization in an intercultural school environment.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Intercultural Education, Social Semiotics.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Having to deal with the new multicultural and multilingual student population that expanded significantly in the decade between 1990-2000, the Greek Ministry of Education was obliged to regulate the adjustment of the Greek educational system to the new academic reality. Hence, Reception and Remedial Classes for foreign students, active since 1980, were extended and, along Schools for the Repatriated¹ active since 1985, Intercultural Schools were established in 1996, so that foreign students would be integrated in a school environment that would respect cultural difference and facilitate the coexistence of local and foreign students, and in which cultural specificity would be validated – legally, at least. This paper aims to present the structure and the methodology of a doctoral research conducted in an intercultural junior high school, where the ways and discursive practices in which foreign students construct their national identity were studied, the interpretation and explanation of which delineates the respective subject positions they occupy. This paper focuses on:

- the reasons why the specific methodological tools for analysis were selected in an ethnographic field research and
- the presentation of the limitations and the possibilities that derive from the tools' utilization in an intercultural school environment.

In the fields of both deconstructionism and social constructionism (Burr 1995: 16-26 & 61-63), identity is defined as a social construct, constructed and approached as it is actively

¹ These are repatriated Greek immigrants from the countries of former Soviet Union, their number calculated at 350.000. They constitute the vast majority of all immigrants arriving from the countries of former Soviet Union (Sapountzis, Figgou et al. 2006, Christopoulos & Tsitselikis 2003)

structured in the acting social subject's discourse. This paper adopts the thesis that discourse is a social practice, constructing subject positions for the subjects participating in communication in any social situation, while the models of Gunther Kress (1988, 1989), Robert Hodge & Gunther Kress (1993[1979]) and Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) are used as epistemological framework and as methodological tools for discourse analysis. For the analysis of the data Discourse Analysis is used in conjunction with elements of Social Semiotics (Robert Hodge & Gunther Kress 1988), especially at the level of text analysis and its relation both to the context of the students' discourse and the social situations in, and due to, which this discourse is produced. The more recent approach is adopted, according to which a multi-dimensional national identity is constructed by subjects who represent it through their discourse at the same time that they are constructing their own subjectivity (Henriquez, Julian & al 1984, Turner 1984, Kress 1988, 1989, Potter & Wetherell 1987, Hall 1996, Yudell 2006, Ross 2007, Dragona 2008).

Contemporary approaches reify the concept of national identity and attribute a social and political origin to it, juxtaposing it to the idealist concept of a national identity and the 'natural' inclusion of the individual in a particular dialogue with the ethnomethodological approach (Atkinson, Delamont & Hammersley 1993: 22).

1.1 Research aims and framework. Selection of the population and field of research. Conditions and context of research

The research was conducted in the Intercultural Junior High School of Thessaloniki. Before the actual study, there were visits to the school, observation of the lessons within the Reception and Remedial Classes, and contact with educators and students alike. The study began in January 2005 and concluded in December 2005. It is a case study utilizing the techniques of the ethnographic method. 31 interviews, of 16 male and 15 female students, were based upon a loosely structured protocol of questions which constitute the research material. The questions' guidelines were configured according to the research aims and the common elements of the theories for the construction of national identity, such as language, tradition, historical memory, common rights and responsibilities in the name of the students' shared attributes as members of the same ethnic group, common ethnic origin. The students' linguistic level and the special conditions of their particular descent were taken into account. Students come from Albania, Russia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Germany, Kazakhstan, St. Dominic, Armenia, Azerbaijan. The basic research questions were as follows:

- What are the students' conceptions of the national self? What are the characteristics of national identity that they employ in their discourse? Do they create a consistent or ambivalent national identity?
- How do students define the concept of "homeland"?
- Do they wish to return?
- Does the group of foreign students with only a few years of residence in Greece present more consistent characteristics of national identity or not, when compared to the rest of the students?

Intercultural education distances itself from what have been considered objective criteria for the student's national identity, her ethnic origin and characteristics, and gives precedence –at

least at the legal framework level– to the student’s participation in the social reality, her equal access to education, and the responsibility that comes with her integration in a multicultural collectivity.

Intercultural Schools were established in 1996. The Law 2413/96, Government Gazette 124 i.A/17.6.1996 indicates that intercultural schools can use a different curriculum, providing the students with extra classes, and the educators with fewer teaching hours, while distributing a smaller number of students to each class. The schedule is in accordance with that of the school system, and is based on the same principles and legislation. According to article 34 of Law 2413/96:

“The aim of intercultural education is the organization and operation of primary and secondary education for the provision of education to young people with academic, social, cultural or educational particularities”.

The same programs that delineate the operation of public schools are employed in intercultural schools, which adjust to the special academic, social, cultural or educational needs of their students. Two kinds of Reception Classes exist in intercultural schools, with Reception Class 1 being in session for one academic year and focusing on the instruction of Greek as a second language, and Reception Class 2 providing additional classes and lasting for two academic years, or even three in “exceptional cases”. According to relevant ministerial decisions, educators in these schools are allowed to adjust the curriculum according to the foreign students’ needs, and to select “the format that works effectively and efficiently” (Law/20/Γ1/708/7-9-1999). Along the regular school handbooks that the Ministry of Education publishes, educators in language classes use the books published by the Centre for Intercultural Education. According to the legislation, the foreign students’ languages and cultures can be taught in relevant classes, on condition that a minimum of seven to ten students is met. In September 1999 new amendments were ratified, so that a legal framework has been established, one that allows for educators in each school unit to choose the most effective format in accordance with the students’ academic needs (Paleologou *ibid*: 118). It is worth noting that the students’ age is not taken into consideration for their participation in reception and remedial classes. This also happens in “regular” classrooms –especially where there are no reception or remedial classes in the school –which can ultimately lead to the students’ not being integrated in the class or to their dropping out of school altogether (Mousourou 2006: 237).

In 2010 the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki promoted the program “Integration for foreign and repatriated students” which concluded in 2013. The general aim of the project was to prevent foreign and repatriated students in the Greek school system from academic failure, by creating advantageous conditions that would allow the principles of intercultural education to be put into practice (Paleologou & Evaggelou 2011: 133-134).

This case study was conducted in an Intercultural Junior High School that abided by most of the principles formulated by the relevant legislation. The selection of the ethnographic approach, interview and case study The research approach and the methodological tools of analysis, that were adopted for the study of the field and the interpretation of the data, were not chosen in advance, nor did they remain static. On the contrary, the field research and

observation, along with the evaluation of the conditions of the study were, among others, the factors that contributed to the selection of the particular research and analysis methods. Keeping in mind that there is no one "correct" method or a method better than others in order to identify and introduce a research question, those qualitative methods that would better meet the requirements of the research aims were finally chosen. (Brown & Dowling 1998: 9, Silverman 1993: 29).

Ethnographic approaches aim at analyzing social practices, and studying certain social and minority groups. In the current age of globalization, ethnography moves about the sphere of diasporic culture, concerning cultures that are dispersed in different lands. Ethnographers no longer study individuals' conceptions in a static present, but rather the representations that the latter construct with regard to their identity, their expectations and the future. Furthermore, in this way it is possible to delineate the power of authority mechanisms and the subjects' practices of resistance against them, which constitutes the ultimate aim of every critical ethnographic approach (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995: 391-393· Willis & Trondman, 2002: 398).

For this reason, an ethnographic-interpretative study and a study case were chosen, or, according to Avgitidou (1997: 68), "the ethnographic case study", during which observation in the first phase and interviews in the second phase were used to gather data, since the application of qualitative methodologies aims at the revelation of the restrictions that cultural norms impose on members of vulnerable social groups, while at the same time giving voice to these marginalized groups. Case study method reflects moments of real life and can incorporate various research tools for the data collection process in the field (Brown & Dowling *ibid*: 43, 66, Dooley 2002: 337-338). Case study does not constitute sampling research, and so focuses on the study group's singularity. Thus, the subjects' multiple realities, and their diverse or conflicting conceptions are put forth (Lecompte 2002: 292, Stake 1995: 4-12).

The study on the concept of the nation through discourse does not mean that emphasis is only given to language or the relevant rhetoric. It also aims at changing the concept of nation as object of study, a concept that is constructed through many differentiated aspects such as youth, nostalgia, new ethnicities (Hall 1996a), new social movements, the politics of difference. All these parameters form new interpretations and different directions in the process of historic change. Bhabha (1994) suggests in his theory a range of different readings that do not take homogeneity and the past history of the nation for granted. Such a reading can come from minorities and immigrants, which was done in the present study.

Research group consists of foreign students of the Intercultural Junior High School of Evosmos, in Thessaloniki. They were chosen so that the discourse of both students with a long residence in Greece and students with only up to one year in the country would be analyzed, since in this way it was possible to focus on discrepancies among the different cases (Meyer 2001: 334). Observation was used as the first research approach and it was used in the school's Reception and Remedial Classes. However, observation continued for the duration of the study while gathering data at interviews, during recess, and in gym class in the schoolyard. Observation included as thematic axes the students' level of Greek, the use of mother tongue or Greek during classes and recess, the students' relations in the classroom

and their production, or lack, of ethnocentric or minority discourse. It needs to be noted that observation as method was used by keeping field notes, without following any relevant protocol (Brown & Dowling *ibid*: 54-56). In particular, notes were taken on the sessions, their dynamic, the time frame of instruction, and the communicative competence of students who would participate in the interviews – which led to the appropriate formulation of the interview questions, and consequently to the evasion of comprehension problems during the interview. Ideas on further questions for the interviews were also formulated. Observation without participation in the classroom was chosen as ideal, so that the processes of the classroom would not be interrupted and the researcher's smooth integration in the students' environment would be achieved. In any case, the attitude and behavior of the students, along their verbal communication, were observed during recess and sometimes during gym class in the schoolyard, observation with participation was chosen, which helped on the one hand to discern a constant behavior as it took place and to take notes regarding the thematic axes of observation, and on the other to determine whether the students produced different, conflicting or coherent discourses in and out of the classroom, and during interviews.

The role of the researcher was transfigured in reference to her relation with the study's subjects. The notes taken helped to focus on the object and the aims of study, and so to avoid observing various field parameters that are often unrelated to the study. The notes helped analyze the students' practices in the classroom and during recess, and so were added to what the students said. What is more, the researcher's participation in the school activities created trust between her and the students, thus limiting the latter's nervousness and discomfort during interviews (Rubin 2005: 80, 87). Over the course of the researcher's visit to the school, the contact with educators during class hours was very important in that it allowed the comprehension of the school and classroom processes. What was also constructive was the continuous collaboration with the instructor responsible for the program's curriculum, as his perspective on the school's processes was helpful to understand the operation of classes, as well as the instructors' practices in both teaching the Reception and Remedial classes and approaching their students.

The individual interviews were, finally, the most effective in retrieving and collecting data on complicated and sensitive issues such as that of identity construction, one that requires the ability to instigate the subject to express her conceptions and explicate her theses, so that her representations of the world and its experience are understood. Besides, it is what the subjects say during an interview, and the way in which they say it, that matters to the researcher (Brown & Dowling *ibid*.: 72-73, Bryman 2004). Interviews were loosely structured, as a question protocol was followed for information relevant to the basic assumptions of the study to be gleaned, and no deviation from the topic to occur, while at the same time there was an opportunity for posing further questions over the course of the interview if necessary.

However, a lot of restrictions exist in a school environment, time limitation being the most important one. Nonetheless, there was no limitation when students chose to expand on a certain subject, particularly when their narration would help the promotion of familiarity and trust between them and the researcher. When describing the social situation – semiotic process in which the students' discourse was produced, it is worth noting that the loosely structured interviews were conducted during class hours. Each interview took place in a small

classroom that was selected after some search in the school premises. Therefore, the space that the interviews took place in was familiar to the students who had also already become familiar with the researcher's presence in their classrooms. The students' participation was influenced by their teacher's admonition –it, somehow, constituted an obligation– without this meaning that students were denied its refusal. However, the subject position in the classroom did not leave much room for students to refuse the interview – since much as in the context of the school environment, so in the context of the interview, the respective limitations of the logonomic system exist.

2.0 FROM DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO CULTURAL SEMIOTICS

Having made the decision to use Discourse Analysis as the preferred methodological tool, it was believed that the most appropriate method had been chosen in order to analyze oral texts. However, some difficulties appeared that were related to the application of the method to the students' oral production during the interviews, and so the question was raised whether Discourse Analysis can help with the data analysis, or whether there are limits to the method's effectiveness. At what point does this method stop leading to reliable results, so that some other method needs to be employed? The fundamental difficulty was the low language competency level of foreign students with only a few years in Greece, since this made the comprehension of the questions difficult, and did not allow the students – who were bound to a limited linguistic code, much freedom to a varied linguistic repertoire. Students had not developed their language skills to the point that certain characteristics could be identified in their discourse, characteristics that would be later categorized in order to be employed during the analysis of their oral texts. Thus, it was not possible to use Discourse Analysis alone on the students' limited linguistic code.

After relevant discussions and with the help of Gunther Kress² Social Semiotics was chosen as the methodological tool for the analysis of the students' texts complementing Discourse Analysis, whenever deemed necessary. Discourse Analysis is used on texts in which speakers produce extended linguistic codes through an extensive discourse. Social Semiotics, as propounded by Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge (1988), is more as it can be applied on less extensive texts, on any form of discourse –limited or edited code, and also multimodal texts – since the analysis of the message is based on the relationship between signifier and signified, and is oriented toward the study of a category of behavioral semiosis. This does not mean, nonetheless, that Social Semiotics is not a socially defined process, as is Discourse Analysis. Text and linguistic analysis, macro-sociological analysis of social practice and of its relation to social institutions, along an interpretative or micro-sociological tradition that sees social practice as something people produce through action, all complement each other in Discourse Analysis. The practices of subjects are defined by social practices, by power relations, and by the nature of the social situation in which they are implicated. Thus, description, the process that is related to text analysis, and the analysis of the linguistic and social practice, was employed, along interpretation and exegesis, by which we search for the relationship between

² Gunther Kress participated in the study as “colleague from an institute abroad”. The Thesis was submitted under the program for the enhancement of new research staff (PENED 2003). Under this program collaboration with Gunther Kress, and his scientific guidance, proved invaluable especially for the selection of the method for data analysis.

interaction and the social situation on the one hand and the social definition of the production and interpretation of discourse on the other (Fairclough *ibid*: 62-73). Wherever necessary, basic elements of analysis were used, such as intertextuality, discourse representation, interactional control, modality, metaphor, cohesion, nominalization, members' resources, naturalization (Fairclough 1989). In Social Semiotics, the principles and the planes of analysis were used through specific terminology, such as logonomic system, semiotic plane, mimetic plane, sign, signifier, signified, semiotic act. In the particular case of foreign students' discourse analysis, employing Social Semiotics was considered the most relevant approach. Students' discourse was produced in the context of an interview, a genre in which power relations are defined by the logonomic system that delineates the boundaries of communication. What is more, these interviews were conducted within the school premises, where the context plays an important role in the students' production of speech, and with foreign students producing their discourse in a semiotic act that is characterized by lack of solidarity and by power relations.

Preserving the importance of discourse and the text, and utilizing the basic elements of text analysis, as is defined by Discourse Analysis, the application of Social Semiotics on the foreign students' discourse can be employed effectively, as the smallest semiotic unit for analysis is the message, and not the text, where Discourse Analysis begins.

3.0 DISCUSSION

The research aimed at the study of the discourse produced by a group of male and female foreign students, in order to understand the ways in which the students create a national identity. The study focused on the form and the content of the discourse, and complements existing studies on identity, since the latter lack a focus on the analysis of the discourse of foreign students. What is more, the students' narratives, which they produced willingly, and so their life stories, became known, and parts of them were understood. At the same time, the interpretation of the ways in which the students construct their multidimensional identity was aimed at. That is, the linguistic repertoire, which students mobilize when talking about their identity, along the content of their discourse, through which they construct their subjectivity, were studied. This paper presented the research parameters that made the use of qualitative methods for analysis and the combination of Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotics effective and efficient tools for data interpretation, tools that were used to accommodate the special conditions of the study, since interpreting every-day situations is problematic for foreign students who do not have access to certain forms of oral and written speech, and who oftentimes experience the conflict of identities.

The decision to synthesize the two methods of analysis, Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotics, was a result of the particularities of the students' discourse, as mentioned above, and of the concern as to how to handle the linguistic texts of students at a low level in the use of the Greek language. This situation led the researcher to further study the two methods, and to realize that both of them, besides being used in the research fields of deconstructionism and social constructionism, share many of the basic units of analysis, such as discourse, genre, text and context. Similarities also occur in the semiotic acts of grammar, negation, modality, transformation, syntax, but also in the identification of subject positions. Authors use similar techniques to identify and interpret the units of analysis, so much in the linguistic

analysis of texts, as in the interpretation of ideological complexes and the rules of logonomic systems. The dialogue between the two methods contributed to a unique and interesting interpretation of research data.

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