Power is not something confined to armies and parliament: it is, rather, a pervasive, intangible network of force which weaves itself into our slightest gestures and most intimate utterances. (Foucault, 1977; in Eagleton, 1991, p. 7).

ABSTRACT. This paper is an investigation of the influence of ideology on the construction of the discourses of letters to the editor of three magazines (Time, Manchete and Newsweek). Letters to the Editor is a site in the magazines where readers can voice their claims, supporting or denying facts which occur in the social sphere. The corpus is analyzed according to Halliday's (1985) theory of transitivity for the repercussion of ideologies in the lexicogrammatical choices. The results indicate that in the process of expressing personal and subjective thought, writers also seem to encode, in their discourses, social inequalities, power and interests which support the social relations, and which seem to be shared by social groups as naturalized beliefs.

Key words: ideology, discourse, lexicogrammatical choices.

RESUMO. Aspectos ideológicos em cartas ao editor. Esse artigo é uma investigação da influência da ideologia na construção dos discursos das cartas ao Editor de três revistas (Time, Manchete e Newsweek). Cartas ao Editor é um espaço reservado pelas revistas no qual os leitores podem manifestar suas ideias, favoráveis ou contrárias, em relação aos fatos que ocorrem na esfera social. A análise das cartas foi feita de acordo com a teoria da transitividade de Halliday (1985), com o intuito de verificar a influência das ideologias nas escolhas léxico-gramaticais das construções das frases e consequentemente dos discursos. O resultado indica que no processo de expressão pessoal e subjetiva do pensamento os escritores parecem ocultar, em seus discursos, manifestações de desigualdades sociais, poder e interesses que quais aliçerçam as relações sociais e podem ser compartilhados por certos grupos como crenças sociais.

Palavras-chave: ideologia, discurso, escolhas léxico-gramaticais.

Although ideas are considered “apparently abstract” (Eagleton, 1991), a critical discourse analysis enables us to lay bare and investigate ideological processes encoded in language. In this paper, the investigation of the influence of ideology on aspects related to discourses carried out in “Letters to the Editor” of three well-known magazines: Manchete, Times and Newsweek (a Brazilian magazine was required to be part of the corpus investigated).

Letters to the Editor are the manifestation of the readers’ claims favoring or objecting articles that have already been published in the written press. They are the expression of private concerns within a public sphere, selected and edited through the mediation of the “editor.” Letters to the Editor are recognized as a genre, a “relatively formalized genre” (Morrison and Love 1996, p.45) where “writers wish to shape, policy, influence opinion, swing the course of events, defend interests, advance causes” (Haul et al., 1978; cited in Sotillo and Starace, 1999, p.251). Genres, according to Kress’ (1989) definition, are texts which “have specific forms and meaning, deriving from and encoding the functions, purposes and meaning of the social occasions” (p.19).

Consequently, letters to the editor are also considered a “highly structured discourse exchange [that is] a central link in shaping of public opinion” (Hall et al., 1978; cited in Sotillo and Starace, 1999, p.251) which provide a connection between the private and the public spheres.

The characteristic of being a channel for expressing thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and the fact that the letters permeate both private and public domains
might help, voluntarily or not, and consciously or not, to oppose or support ideological standpoints which may belong to individuals, their community or the society as a whole. But how can ideology influence discourse?

Ideology, language and identities

People from different milieus may construe reality in different ways, because the environment is, in part, responsible for shaping their thoughts, which, in turn, shape their language. However, in the same way that the context influences the individuals' language, the individual's language is also responsible for influencing the way the context "thinks."

Hence, we could say that studying language might first enable us to scrutinize individual ideas, thoughts, and behavior, among others. That is, through the analysis of the linguistic elements of an individual's discourse and its context, we can visualize one's private "sphere," the way he/she feels, sees and constructs his/her "world."

Second, studying language might open us horizons to interpret the social theories, the ideologies, which may dictate and control people's behavior, because language reflects not only what goes on within a person's "private domain," but it also reflects current ideological principles, which are responsible for governing and shaping social identities and social acts. Therefore, we could say that language, thought and social environment are bound together forming a "circle," and constantly influencing and shaping each other.

Studies relating networks of relationship between language, thought and the social system are dated from more than a century. According to Stubbs (1996), "questions about the relation between language, thought and the world are often traced back to 1757, when the Berlin Academy of Sciences asked: What is the influence of people's opinions on the language, and of the language on the opinions of people? (Stubbs, 1996, p.234). Hence, as we can notice, theories trying to explain and understand "abstract" aspects hidden behind the observable patterns of language usage have long been the concern of many inquiries and researches.

The reasons for such an extensive investigation is not difficult to understand, because the deeper we explain language, the more we understand and interpret people's behavior, their way of thinking, their identities and, ultimately, we could say, human history, because language is the instrument human beings use for thinking, feeling, and for "negotiating their identities" (Gee, 1990, p.03). But why are ideology and language considered to be bound together?

Defining Ideology

Ideology is seen as the "entity" responsible for shaping our thoughts, and for establishing our private and social identities, and language may stand as the vehicle for encoding and for "deciphering" such processes. Thus, language is bound to ideology, and ideology is directly related to the individual's conduct, and these relations can be explicit, as "society, language and mind are indissoluble: society creates mind, mind creates society, and language stands as mediator and metaphor for both these processes" (Halliday, 1985, p. 31).

Emphasizing the importance and relations between language and ideology, Gee (1992) explains that "language is inextricably bound with ideology, and cannot be analyzed or understood apart from it" (p. 06). Therefore, understanding language presupposes understanding ideology. What is ideology then?

Defining ideology is not an easy task due to the fact that it is interpreted in many different ways, according to different perspectives. Among the innumerable definitions of ideology some rounded in concepts of "world knowledge" and current forms of thought, important for the purpose of this work, are presented below.

a) The process of production of meaning, signs and values in society.

b) A body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class.

c) Systematically distorted communication.

d) Forms of thought motivated by social interest.

e) Socially necessary illusion.

f) The conjunction of discourse and power.

g) The medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world.

h) The confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality.

i) That which offers a position to the subject.

j) The indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure.

k) The process where social life is converted to a natural reality.

l) Action-oriented sets of beliefs.

m) Ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power.

n) Identity thinking (Eagleton, 1991, p. 02).

Considering the given concepts it is important to notice that ideology nowadays is more concerned
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with “the function of ideas within social life than
with their reality or unreality.” In other words, ideology is more concerned with the social structures than with “true or false cognition” as it used to be (Eagleton, 1991, p. 03).

Thus, if ideology is seen as “ideas within social life,” then language can be focused as “one of the best ways to signal and visualize such characteristics, as well as to uncover social conventions, which are not open to introspection” (Giddens, 1984, in Stubbs 1996, p. 08).

Among the definitions of ideology given above some are more intrinsically related to my research. “Identity thinking,” “The process of production of meaning, signs and values in society,” “A body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class,” “forms of thought motivated by social interest,” “the conjunction of discourse and power,” “that which offers a position to the subject,” “the interest,” “the conjunction of discourse and power,” “class,” “forms of thought motivated by social interests,” “a body of ideas characteristic of a particular group” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 03), which are inherent to the ideological process. The definitions presented seem to represent the scaffold for the structuring of the discourse of the letters to the Editor. Such hypothesis is based on the fact that the argumentation of the letters is based mainly on personal world views, on current ideologies. Therefore, the way the writers think and encode their thoughts is the result of their inner and outer world which may embed “forms of thought motivated by social interests,” “a body of ideas characteristics of a particular group” (Eagleton, 1991 p. 03), which are inherent to the ideological process.

Taking into consideration the previous concepts, mainly that language is one of the best ways to signal and visualize the “ideas within social life” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 03), I have tried to use the letters to the Editor as mechanisms to identify and analyze aspects related to the writers’ ideas, and the influence of the social spheres on the construction of their discourse. For example,

You glorified people who have become grotesquely wealthy and downplayed their negative impact on society. In many cases the detrimental effects have far outweighed any benefits incurred. Sam Walton created a company that has destroyed thousands of small businesses. Ray Kroc and MacDonald’s have given us unhealthy, tasteless food and lot of low-paying jobs. Worst of all was your choice of builder William Levitt and Leavittown’s clone houses. Similar suburban developments have resulted in the paving of thousand of acres farmland and forest. These people were not visionaries; they were opportunists who diminished the American quality of life while enhancing their own personal wealth (Time, Jan 4 1999).

A first reading of this letter to the Editor sent to Time magazine shows the fact that the discourse contains more than simple words; it embeds “concepts of thinking,” ideas, values and beliefs which were transformed, as suggested by Eagleton (1991) in “semantic” phenomenon. And it is from this capacity of transforming “thought” into “words” that we may ask, among other things, what social aspects are encoded in letters to the Editor? What ideologies are implied? What are the elements in the text which might signal the embedded aspects? Discourse analysis is the tool language researchers use to lay bare the ideological elements of a discourse because in such type of analysis language is seen as an instrument of “power” and “control.”

In addition to the concepts already seen, another important aspect related to ideologies is presented by Fairclough (1989), when he proposes that, “Ideology is closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behavior, and the form of social behavior where we rely most on “common-sense assumptions” (p. 02). Common-sense assumptions are considered to be part of ideologies.

**Ideology, common sense and power**

What is common sense? In simple terms, it can be seen as “a practical good sense gained by experience of life, not by special duty (Hornby et al., 1963, p. 190). Fairclough (1989) links the term common sense to an “implicit philosophy,” which in varying degrees, contributes to sustain unequal power relations, or may also establish and consolidate relations among members of a group.

Ideologically speaking then, common sense assumptions would be the assumptions “which are implicit in the conventions according to which people interact linguistically, and of which people are generally not consciously aware” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 02). Common sense assumptions are also closely related to “authority and power.” The examples below show such aspect.

Todo mundo sabe que o Paraguai especializou-se em falsificar tudo. No Brasil a televisão está mostrando a toda hora farmácias vendendo remédios falsificados aqui mesmo. Esta facilidade em se encontrar o Viagra não significa que tem muita gente tomando pitulha de farinha made in Paraguai, achando que vai provocar ereção (Manchete, Dec. 12, 1998).

* Semiotic is defined by Halliday and Hassan (1985) as the “study of sign system – in other words, as the study of meaning in its most general sense” (p. 04).
The discourse, as Fairclough (1989) explain, structure of the discourse, as Fairclough (1989) be presented in a tangential way, implicit in the “authority” and “power” in a specific discourse may relate to the audience. They are also showing “power” in expressing their authority in relation to their standpoints, they are also showing “power” in constructing, at the same time the writers are expressing their authority in relation to their standpoints, they are also showing “power” in relation to the audience.

Nevertheless, common sense assumptions are not always evident in discourse. The claims for “authority” and “power” in a specific discourse may be presented in a tangential way, implicit in the structure of the discourse, as Fairclough (1989) explains,

Ideologies are brought to discourse not as explicit elements of the texts, but as the background assumptions which on the one hand lead the text producer to “textualize” the world in a particular way, and on the other hand lead the interpreter to interpret the text in a particular way (p. 85).

But how do writers “textualize” their ideologies, their world views? Particular ways of “textualizing” discourses may derive from the choices the writer makes when selecting his/her lexical and grammatical elements. And these choices are considered to be ideologically induced. Thus, if “linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena” (Fairclough, 1984, p. 23), in analyzing the lexicogrammatical choices used in the construction of the letters, patterns of behavior, values and beliefs of a private or a social sphere of our society might be observed For example,

In fact, your list might lead people to believe that blacks have made virtually no contribution to shaping our business world. We all know better (Time, Jan. 28, 1999).

In these examples, the writers’ common sense assumptions are embedded, for example, in the expressions “todo mundo sabe,” and “we all know.” Here, the writers might have taken for granted their “authority” in relation to the truth of their propositions, speaking, consequently, in the name of their “ideal” group (we all). Therefore, using such construction, at the same time the writers are expressing their authority in relation to their standpoints, they are also showing “power” in relation to the audience.

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I read with interest your amazing issue on successful entrepreneurs and business executives [Dec. 7]. It was certainly one of the best and most informative reports I’ve ever read. Yet I was frustrated at not seeing an adequate representation of the black achievers. In fact,

In the letter above the writer expresses his/her own thoughts. Nevertheless, with the use of common sense assumption “we all” the writer is assuming that his/her values and beliefs might be shared by a certain community. Words such as “amazing, successful, best, most” stress the writer’s personal world view and standpoint making his/her argumentation more effective.

I have been arguing that language influences and is influenced by ideology, and it is through the individual’s discourse that we establish parameters to visualize and interpret the social system he/she belongs to. Therefore, in the analysis of the letters, I try to lay bare the elements of the discourses that could signal possible encoded forms of ideologies, and reflect social phenomena.

In order to achieve such aim, I have also concentrated the analysis of the letters, having as a framework three points, theorized by Stubbs (1996), which are related to ideology and language. First, “language is itself a social practice, and language actively reproduces and transforms society (p. 90). Second, “language is never neutral” (p. 235) and finally, “all texts use grammar to persuade” (p. 94) (stress added). I considered these aspects relevant to my work, because I believe that discourses of letters to the Editor may be characterized by them.

Another point to be explained is that ideology in my work was studied as a matter of “discourse,” rather than “language” used in a general sense. I make this distinction between the two according to Eagleton (1991) for whom “Ideology is less a matter of the inherent linguistic properties of a pronouncement than a question of who is saying what to whom for what purposes” (my stress) (p. 09). Thus, in the sentence “Clinton couldn’t resist the temptation to exploit Lewinsky, and neither could Time” (Time, April 5, 1999), the important aspect when we read this sentence is to perceive that it seems to have a specific purpose, and the words may cause specific effects in the readers.

Letters to the Editor are written texts, which are generally the expression of individual voices, carried out in a public domain, referring to an ideal audience, and dealing with issues of importance to them. Acting in such way, writers may implicitly or explicitly claim for their ideologies. The examples below show some ways in which the writers of the magazines present and evaluate a situation through their own standpoints,
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Monica Lewinsky is someone we all love to hate (Time, April 5, 1999).
I am soooooo fed up with the umpteenth Time 100 issue (Time, Jan 4, 1998).
Monica was aptly portrayed on Time’s cover: a pretty face with a beguiling smile (Time, April 5, 1999).
If Lewinsky has any relevance at all, it is the death knell of the public’s belief in the journalist as a person to be listened to (Time, April 5, 1999).
Few societies are fully prepared for such unexpected shock (Newsweek, March 15, 1999).

In expressing their opinions (we all love to hate, a pretty face with a beguiling smile, bonita e talentosa, few societies are prepared, for example), the writers of these letters, among other things, may inform, influence, “establish and maintain appropriate social links with the audience” (Thompson, 1996, p. 38). Consequently, taking the examples above, we may hypothesize that at the same time that the writers are evaluating a situation they might also imply persuasion in relation to their standpoints. Simultaneously writers would be contributing, with the power embedded in their discourses, to the reproduction of social patterns, either reinforcing them or “attempting” to a (slow) social change.

In recent research in the genre of letters to the Editor focusing on the aspect of the role of discourses in the letters, Morrison and Love (1996) concluded that letters to the Editor are “discourses of disillusionment,” because at the same time that the writers use the news to claim their standpoints, their “disillusionment,” they do not have the expected response. Sotillo and Starace (1999) corroborate Morrison and Love’s investigation in a recent work called, “Political discourse of a working-class town.” Such type of discourse, they explain, is mainly characterized by a “problem 1 non-solution” (Morrison and Love, 1996; in Sotillo and Starace, 1999, p. 271). Therefore, according to these studies, writers of the letters to the Editor express their opinions, beliefs, and thoughts in the evaluation of a subject, but their claims seem to have no “visible” impact or “immediate” answer.

Nevertheless, claims which may appear to be neglected may also, gradually, destabilize social concepts contributing to social changes because, as I mentioned previously, language “actively reproduces and transforms society” (Stubbbs, 1996, p. 90) (my stress). Thus, even in discourses considered “opaque” or “naïve,” people may be slowly “legitimizing” or “obscuring” social values. And this is another important aspect related to ideology which could possibly be applied to the letters to the Editor.

Ideology and the legitimization and naturalization of power

How do beliefs and values become “legitimized” to be considered ideologies? Ideology, as we have seen, is related to questions of “power,” and power may be “established” in six different ways to become “legitimized.” The process is explained below,

A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenital to it, naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself (Eagleton, 1991, p. 05).

Therefore, “promoting,” “naturalizing,” “universalizing,” “denigrating,” “excluding” and “obscuring” are the stages which would interact in the formation of ideologies. But two concepts are assumed by Eagleton to be central to the idea of ideology: “obscuring,” and “naturalizing” social reality. And I believe that letters to the Editor, eventually, might contribute to legitimate and naturalize social realities. For example

A expressão “mulher objeto” saiu de moda. Mas as mulheres-objetos estão cada vez mais em alta (Manchete, Dec 12, 1998).
Sobre a lista das cem mulheres mais desejadas deste século na Manchete, acho que não há como questionar o resultado (Manchete, Dec 12, 1998).
Pinochet fez muito pelo Chile. Foi, para o seu país, o que Médici foi para o Brasil. Acho que todo mundo tem direito de errar (Manchete, Dec 12, 1998).
Todo mundo sabe que o Paraguai especializou-se em falsificar tudo (Manchete, Mar 10, 1998).
Populist politicians must understand that the world is now a different place. We must take actions and measures required to compete in the new world order. We do not need 60-year-old men leading our destiny into the 21st century. What we need is a young, aggressive leader with a fresh vision (Newsweek, Jan 18, 1999).

Geralmente os jogadores de futebol são alvos fáceis (Manchete, Dec 12, 1998).

The segments of the letters above, as we can notice, express the writers’ personal beliefs and evaluations. Nevertheless, the lexicogrammatical choices made by the writers in the construction of these sentences seem to embed a struggle to promote, naturalize, denigrate, and obscure “social realities in a way convenient” to the writers’ argumentation, to support their ideologies.
Consequently, “jogadores são alvos fáceis,” “what we need is a young aggressive leader,” “o Paraguai especializou-se em falsificar tudo,” “tudo mundo tem direito a errar,” “as mulheres-objeto estão cada vez mais em alta,” etc, are subjective “sets of beliefs.” However, at the same time that the power masked in each discourse promotes the writers’ personal thoughts, it could also slowly contribute to the legitimization and naturalization of “ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class,” as explained before.

Among the ideological discourses found in the letters to the Editor analyzed, “political standpoints,” “sexual power” as well as “gender roles” are relevant in the texts analyzed. In the examples below we may notice how the writers, through language, seem to articulate their ideologies.

Just as society may not exist in isolation without medicine, medicine may not exist apart from society. They are forever interdependent. Achievement in the medical sciences must run parallel with the will of society. There must be more emphasis in the medical research on the effective delivery of health care, rather than on the raw sciences that stress longevity and seek to serve only to the privileged few (Time, Feb 01, 1999).

It is disgraceful that individuals on both sides of the impeachment debate ruined the life of Monica Lewinsky, a decent if politically unsophisticated young woman. She is not one of the people who hurt the country. Her only real “crime” was to insist on controlling her own Sex life. Ordinarily, I would be critical of a news magazine’s neglecting major news issues to spotlight a minor celebrity. But I am happy you gave Monica a chance to defend herself. Perhaps her book profits will partly compensate for all the harm the government has unjustly caused her (Time, April 5 1999).

The two letters above express “sets of beliefs.” But, as Eagleton (1991) explains, “not every rigid set of ideas is ideological” (p. 05). For instance, quarrel between couples over who burned the toast cannot be considered ideological. However, when it “begins to engage questions of sexual power, beliefs about gender roles,” then it can be seen as ideological. The difference relies in those facts “which are central to the whole of social life and those which are not” (p. 08). Taking the examples above we can notice that they talk about social facts (the relation of science and humans in the first letter and people’s social attitude in the second).

Observing the lexicogrammatical choices made in these two letters we notice that the writers stress values and world views, emphasizing aspects they believe to be important for supporting and making effective their argumentation (“may not exist, disgraceful, decent, forever interdependent, unsophisticated young woman, may not exist,” etc.). Consequently, we can give support to the concept that “language always provides different ways of describing a common world” (Stubbs, 1996, p. 17). And it is the individual’s ideological position he/she may assume in life which might be responsible for the way he/she “perceives” and “codifies” the world.

In addition, such words as, privileged few, may embed, for example, a political discourse, signaling to the fact that in our society only “few” people have the power; the “privilege” to access important things. In the same way, the sentence, her only crime was controlling her own Sex life may encode a “feminist” form of discourse; a claim against gender inequalities existing in our society. In both sentences it seems to be the “promotion” of beliefs in order to defend world views and power relations. Deriving from these two last aspects (world views and power relations), another important characteristic noticed in the discourses of the letters analyzed was related to “gender” discourses.

**Ideology and gender discourse**

On investigating ideology, we are brought to a variety of perspectives which are the result of the “identities” individuals assume in the social world. Among these social identities, gender differences have become an important subject of research, mainly in aspects concerning the relationship between ideology, language and gender (See for example Lee, 1992; Heberle, 1997).

Giving an overview on language and gender, Lee (1992) explains that,

> Early work on the topic was strongly influenced by two prevailing strands of thoughts in linguistics. The first had to do with the traditional concerns in the discipline with questions of structures rather than usage, based on a view of language as a homogeneous object. The second strand is the deterministic view of the relationship between language and cognition deriving from Whorf.” (Lee, 1992, p. 132).

Nowadays new perspectives on these issues have been raised. Therefore, instead of considering language a “homogeneous entity” as seen above, Lee (1992) explains that language has the notion of “linguistic behavior” (my stress). And, considering that “gender relations are antagonistic” (Ballaster et al.,

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1 “The idea that language is intimately involved in the way that we perceive the world was taken up in a rather different context by the American linguist Benjamin Whorf” (Lee, 1992, p. 27).
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1991, p. 20), this reality should be expected to be shaped in the male and female “linguistic behavior,” in their forms of discourse.

Following this line of thought, Poynton (1989) argues that “biological sex (identification as female or male) needs to be distinguished from social gender (identification as feminine or masculine), since the latter is not an automatic consequence of the former” (p. 04) (original emphasis). According to Poynton, there are appropriate behaviors for males and females dictated by society, which are not related to those biological differences (such as pregnancy, and lactation in women). And these “norms” she explains, vary from society to society. Therefore, she suggests that “gender is a social creation” (p. 04), and evidence of such aspect might be found in the linguistic forms used in the construction of a discourse. Difference in gender discourses, then, would be important in the understanding and the establishment of ideologies, social identities and social realities.

Gender differences based on ideological principles, among the variety of factors which may influence language, were mostly noticed in sexist discourses, originating the hypothesis that there would be a “pervasive ideology tending to downgrade, marginalise and exclude women” (Lakoff, 1987; cited in Lee, 1992, p. 110). A great variety of material on sexist discourses was plentifully found in newspaper reporting. The examples below demonstrate the principles which have governed the journalistic practice in relation to this issue.

1. All people are male unless proven female.
2. A woman’s relationship to a man (or men) is her defining identity.
3. A woman’s appearance always requires comment, whether she defies or exemplifies a popular stereotype.
4. A woman can safely be identified as “his wife,” it is unnecessary to identify her by a name.
5. After marriage, a man remains a man and a woman becomes a wife.

Nowadays, perhaps, the social identities assigned to men and women are not so arbitrary and explicitly noticed in gender discourses as seen above, but I believe they have not fallen into total disuse. Ideology may still be responsible for shaping attitudes, behavior, and thought, among other characteristics, in gender discourses, and language enables us to identify such differences. Thus, as investigated and discussed by Halliday, (1978), Kress (1989), and Gee (1992) “language is not just to communicate information. Language is, in addition, also a device to think and feel with, as well as a device with which to signal and negotiate social identity” (Gee, 1992, p. 78). And, discourses in letters to the Editor are important instruments for investigating social identities and social realities.

Among the ideological aspects studied in my research, differences in the “social identities” writers assume seem to be the generator of most of the antagonistic discourses. And such differences are more perceptible in the way women/men encode their thoughts and express their world views. Thus, in the corpus studied, letters written by women seem to present social “realities,” mainly people and sentiments, through a subjective and personal focus, evidencing traces of “emotionality.” Analysis on attitudinal epithets, qualifiers and numeratives, seem to corroborate such hypothesis. However, it is important to have in mind that in the process of selecting the letters, the Editor may also contribute to reinforce, sustain and perpetuate the ideological presupposition that there is a stereotype for women’s language and women’s behavior.

In order to exemplify my argumentation, I will now give two examples of letters, one written by a man and the other written by a woman, evaluating the same problem but in a divergent way, with a different focus.

Guess where most of the genetically perfect kids, developed as a result of gene insertion, will go?
Straight to full-time day care, so their parents can pay off the $50,000 spent to have them. If kids are perfect, we can turn to the pharmaceutical companies to help us cope with this horrific life through various drugs. Having kids is about unconditional love, and life is about struggle. But in the future, it could be that happiness will lie in kids- only the perfect ones- and in prescription drugs that cost a lot of money (Helleren, Time Feb 1 1999).

After reading your articles on biotechnology and the future of medicine [Jan.11], I realize that for better or for worse, genetic engineering is now a permanent fixture in our daily life. Its potential to benefit society is great. However, many have decided that genetic engineering is unethical and immoral. We should remember that any knowledge can be used for evil and unethical purposes. It’s not the field of genetic engineering that’s unethical but how we make use of the new development (Andrew, Time Feb 1, 1999).

We do not need a careful reading to realize that these two letters have contrasting standpoints which seem to be articulating specific interests. Each writer...
has his/her world view which influences the way he/she encodes thoughts. Thus, in both letters there are adjectives and numeratives stressing the writers’ world views. In the same way abstract words are found in both letters. Nevertheless, comparing the selection of words such as unconditioned love, happiness, struggle, horrific, perfect written in the first letter and permanent fixture, unethical purposes, immoral written in the second, it seems that the first discourse relies more on “emotional” appeal than the second one. Why do we have such different perspectives?

Ideology, as discussed, “offers a position to the subject,” and “action-oriented sets of beliefs” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 02) which seem to be responsible for the way the discourses of the two letters are structured. Thus, the first letter could be written either by a man or a woman. However, the fact that it was written by a woman might signal to the fact that ideology can shape “gender identities” and could also justify concepts such as, “being a woman (or a man) is a matter, among other things, of talking like one” (Wodak, 1997, p. 28).

Decoding discourses

Up to now I have been arguing about the written expressions of the writers’ thought. But, as important as “encoding” (made by the writers) we have the process of “decoding” the discourses (made by the audience).

“Decoding” discourses implies that the audience has to make a connection between what is within the discourse and the “world.” As Fairclough (1989) puts it:

*The producer of the text constructs the texts as an interpretation of the world, or the facets of the world which are then in focus; formal features of the text are traces of that interpretation. The traces constitute cues for the text interpreter, who draws upon her assumptions and expectations (incorporated in frames) to construct her interpretation of the text* (p. 80).

For instance, if readers of the two previous letters are asked to make an early guess in the process of interpretation (through the traces given), whether the writer of the first letter is a man or a woman, I believe the answer would probably be: a woman. The reason for such choice may rely on the “traces” found in the letters, which lead to the system of ideas surrounding the roles of women in the social sphere. In other words, it is the “common sense assumption” that is implicit in the social conventions establishing that women are expected to be mothers, and to worry about the destiny of their children (*having kids is about unconditional love*), plus the fact that “being a woman is talking like one” that may induce the readers to guess and interpret, correctly, that the first letter was written by a woman. Therefore, in addition to the writers’ beliefs, thoughts, and values used in the construction of an ideological discourse, we also have the audiences’ (which may function as a community) ideologies contributing to the interpretation of that specific discourse.

I have briefly demonstrated in this article that ideology seems to be responsible for the lexicographical choices writers make when organizing their discourse. Thus, as it could be noticed, the argumentation, in the discourses of the letters analyzed, seems to be structured through a careful selection of grammar and lexis showing, explicitly or not, that the “real” world was seen through the writers’ ideological standpoints.

From these variables (ideological standpoints and lexicographical choices), a perceptible gender difference was observed. However, due to the limitation of my study the conclusions obtained only represent a small contribution in the vast and complex field of ideology and discourse.

Concluding this article I could say that letters to the Editor are important sets for the investigation of ideology because as analysis signals, in the process of expressing personal and subjective thoughts, readers may also show the inequalities, power and interests which scaffold the social relations, and which seem to be shared by social groups and classes as naturalized beliefs. Letters to the Editor, as most of the news publications, might also contribute to influence opinions, change the course of events, obscure, denigrate and legitimate “sets of beliefs” which are embedded in the “sociocultural knowledge and social attitude” of current ideologies.

References


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