



ISSN 2187-4972

**Working Papers
in Language Education and Research**

<http://eliworkingpapers.org/>

**CRITICALLY EXAMINING TEXTS:
CONTEXT AWARENESS AND IMPLICATION**

Name: Akiyuki Sakai

Corresponding Author:
sakai-a@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Publication date: February, 2014

To cite this article:

Sakai. A. (2014). Critically examining texts: Context awareness and implication. *Working Papers in Language Education and Research*, 2 (1), 57-64.

Scroll down for article

**CRITICALLY EXAMINING TEXTS:
CONTEXT AWARENESS AND IMPLICATION**

Akiyuki Sakai

Kanda University of International Studies

ABSTRACT

This study examined the way certain cultural norms are communicated through text. A critical discourse analysis was conducted on six randomly selected volumes from two Australian series of readers for school children. Results showed favorable norms for Australia were being presented in three criteria: living (economic) standard, safety standard, and norms associated with power. The results suggest that if these or similar volumes are to be used as second or foreign language (L2) reading material, it may be best to inform readers with facts related to the contents. The results also suggests it may be best to use materials from a variety of countries of origin.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fairclough (2001, p. 1) says “the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change in social power” is underestimated. This notion could be threatening if we view ourselves as the passive receiver of messages through the text; however, we realize the threat may not be as big as it seems once we notice that we all have, at least to a certain extent, freedom of being the sender of messages and indeed, we often play that role. Van Dijk (1996) mentions access to, or control over, public discourse and communication as an important ‘symbolic’ resource, as are knowledge and information. In the case of peer-reviewed academic publications, for example, there is an editorial board that carries and maintains certain standards and decides if one’s manuscript should be accepted and made available to the public under the label it represents. The same could be said of other traditional sources of information such as newspapers where the chief editor has the authority to decide what should and should not be printed. “Members of more powerful social groups

and institutions, and especially their leaders (the elites), have more or less exclusive access to, and control over, one or more types of public discourse” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 356).

Considering a common action receivers may take against a message through a traditional source of information, rejection seems one likely option. It is perhaps the most available action receivers can take: to reject a message as an individual is to be responsible only at the individual-level, it does not involve anyone else. I, as an adult, often reject messages that do not match my cultural norms, or expectations, and I believe the same could be said of many others. But when and how did I acquire the bases of my social norms? Although a norm is an ever-changing entity, it is only natural to think that the very bases of one’s social norms are developed during childhood, and if that is true, the messages we receive during our childhood have a great impact on what we believe later in life.

2. BACKGROUND

It is because of the above mentioned that I became interested in looking into the discourse in six different volumes from two Australian co-series of a reader for young children. The volumes were randomly selected from a national university library in Australia. The series, *BOYZ RULE!* and *GIRLS ROCK!*, are classified as year 7-10 books and they are gender counterparts to each other as the name suggests. Each volume of the series is a short story of two young students engaging in an activity. A sales copy of the series says that the readers of the series would enjoy reading them as they relate to the fun, ordeals, disasters, and friendships in a variety of ‘daily situations’. An analysis using the Sociocognitive Approach (SCA) of the Critical Discourse Analysis was conducted to systematize the phenomena of

given reality in the volumes. Since the study was conducted on year 7-10 short books, the analysis focused on two linguistic markers, coherence and topic choice, out of the 14 markers SCA suggests concentrating on (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 29). Open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, pp. 13-15) were done to the data and it resulted in three selective codes that represents dominant norm categories in the volumes: living (economic) standards, safety standards, and norms associated with social power. Details of the findings are as follows:

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 *Living (Economic) Standard*

Both BOYZ RULE! and GIRLZ ROCK! have skateboarding as a topic. Both versions of the skateboarding stories promote the importance of wearing protective gear while skating (Arena & Kettle, 2003A, p.3; Arena, Kettle, & Arena, 2006, p.13). Such a reminder of safety precautions may look good and seem reasonable to appear in a book for children; however, we should be alert to the fact that it may also lead to promote purchases of protective gear. Purchase of all the gear, a helmet, wrist guards, elbow pads, and knee pads, can easily double the cost associated with skateboarding as an activity. During my trip to Italy seven years ago, I saw local children playing soccer in a semi-open area in more than several different neighborhoods of different cities. What surprised me was that some of them did not even have an ordinary soccer-ball, what they had was a ball they made with some newspaper and packing-tape. In such a context, one cannot deny the possibility of there being parents who are willing to buy their child a skateboard but are having second thoughts because they can afford only the skateboard deck and not the whole package. I have to say that the living standard illustrated in the book is fairly high.

More illustrations of a fairly high standard of living are found in the book *Skater Chicks*. When Rosa arrives Jules' house with her new skateboard, Jules says: "Hey, I didn't hear your mum's car in the driveway" (Arena, Kettle, & Arena, 2006, p.2), which implies that Rosa's mother usually drives Rosa to Jules' house despite the distance of travel being short given the fact that Rosa takes the travel on foot and/or a skateboard. Jules is playing a video game on PlayStation console when Rosa arrives, which means that the console is thought to be a typical possession of a child. Skateboarding requires smooth ground, such as a paved road or a skate park, and both are available to children in the book. Rosa has a different kind of outfit on to look like a typical skater on top of her new skateboard and protective gear. If these are all details of a 'daily situation' as the sales copy says, then the target readers must live in a context where they are far away from striving for necessities. Other example details supporting this notion from other books of the series are as follows:

- A child practices an electric guitar in a garage: you may have a parking space but not a garage in many parts of the world or in levels of a society
- Children being able to eat all and whatever they see in the house
- Children being able to waste food and not feeling bad about it
- A child not really caring about his basketball being stolen
- A child having two basketballs and giving one to a friend for no particular reason
- A child receiving a basketball from a friend for no particular reason and not being surprised

In addition to the examples above, perhaps the most explicit example is in *Cooking Catastrophe*, where the girls fail at baking cookies and say: "Maybe we can't make the best bickies in the world, but we can buy some!" (Arena, Kettle, & Dinbergs, 2006, p.32).

3.2 Safety Standard

I am familiar with Japanese and American norms and they both tell me that for safety reasons a child should not be playing alone in a basketball yard or walking/skateboarding to a friend's house if it is a driving distance. However, in *Basketball Buddies*, Billy finds Sam playing in a basketball yard alone and decides to join him. In *Skater Chicks*, Rosa takes a trips to Jules' house, the trip her mother usually gives her a ride to, alone. Since these settings are part of daily situations, it can be understood that the neighborhoods in the books are safe for children both in terms of people and traffic they have within.

Another but different kind of contribution towards illustrating safety of the context can be seen in *Rock Star*, where Billy gets carried away playing Sam's electric guitar and smashes it on the garage ground like a heavy metal guitarist, braking it into pieces. Although the incident only takes place in Sam's dream, it can be seen as sending a message to readers that heavy metal music (and rock and roll in a greater sense) is disruptive and disorderly. Many adults would find the image of the rock legend being illustrated in the story is after *Jimi Hendrix*. While Jimi destroying his guitar is only one aspect of rock legend to an adult who knows Jimi and other legends, Billy destroying Sam's guitar may be seen as the general characteristic of the whole rock culture to a child, as it is being presented as a typical behavior of a rock star. The presentation may be reflecting a negative attitude the society has towards rock culture that is often criticized for being associated with excess pressure and drug use, in order to keep children away from it. Towards the end of *Rock Star*, after Sam awakes and finds his guitar nice and sound in one piece, he chooses not to show it to Billy and asks Billy to play basketball together instead, as if he is staying away form the whole exciting but dangerous concept of a rock star. The ending may be seen as promoting an idea

not to take a risk to disturb the safe living that is there otherwise.

3.3 Norms Associated with Power

Although the series are gender specific, there is no mention of boys being better than girls or girls being better than boys in the books of either series. Instead, the idea of boys and girls being equal in terms of ability and/or power is being promoted through examples such as Rosa being able to skate as well as boys at a skate park (Arena, Kettle, & Arena, 2006, pp.30-31), both Jules and the boys cheering Rosa on (Arena, Kettle, & Arena, 2006, p.31), and Jess and Sophie being as irresponsible as Sophie's brother for the mess they make in the kitchen (Arena, Kettle, & Dinbergs, 2006, pp.23-25 & 32).

While that is how the series looks at gender differences, the way they treat national identities is very different and comes across as rather shocking. One book that reveals their attitude towards national identities is *Test Cricket*, in which Tom and Joey explicitly and repeatedly glorify Australia and put England down and make a generalization that it is what everyone does (Arena, & Kettle, 2003B, pp.2-5, 15, 19-20, 26, & 28-29). It was after I read this particular book that I realized I was previously not too aware of the messages of national power in the books. The straight presentation associated with power in *Test Cricket* made me re-examine the books and the findings were surprising: great cricketers such as Brett Lee, Steve Waugh, Sir Donald Bradman, Allan Border, and Mark Taylor are being introduced as Australian while Tony Hawk is being introduced as a skateboarding legend but there is no reference to him as being American. The same goes for basketball legend Michael Jordan. From these findings, communication through the books is clear: great people from Australia are from Australia while those from the US are from elsewhere. No information is being falsified, but the degree of presentation on information items is different depending on the

national origin of the items. Such presentation generates a message that, from what their record shows, Australia is strong. An item in the trivia section of the book puts a turn of the screw on this by saying: “The most runs scored in one day of cricket are 721! Of course that record is held by Australia” (Arena, & Kettle, 2003B, p.37).

4. CONCLUSION

The theme of this paper has been how and what cultural norms are communicated through text in some volumes of Australian readers for young children. This paper provides some examples that support Moscovici’s notion of social representations resulting from daily life and being sustained by communication (cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 26). The analysis shows that the discourses in the volumes privilege and marginalize certain voices to represent particular knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies desirable for a particular context. Finally, The results suggest that if these or similar volumes are to be used as L2 reading material, it may be best to inform readers with further facts related to the contents. The results also suggests it may be best to use materials from a variety of contexts.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on a presentation given at 2013 CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching. I thank for a funding support from the Research Institute of Language Studies and Language Education at Kanda University of International Studies to attend the conference.

6. REFERENCES

- Arena, F., & Kettle, P. (2003A). Skateboard dudes. *Boyz rule*. South Yarra: MacMillan.
- Arena, F., & Kettle, P. (2003B). Test cricket. *Boyz rule*. South Yarra: MacMillan.
- Arena, F., & Kettle, P. (2003C). Basketball Buddies. *Boyz rule*. South Yarra: MacMillan.
- Arena, F., & Kettle, P. (2003D). Rock star. *Boyz rule*. South Yarra: MacMillan.
- Arena, F., Kettle, P. & Dinbergs, H., S. (2006). Cooking catastrophe. *Girlz rock*. South Yarra: MacMillan.
- Arena, F., Kettle, P. & Arena, J. (2006). Skater chicks. *Girlz rock*. South Yarra: MacMillan.
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13, 3-21.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power*. New York: Longman.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1996). Discourse, power and access. In R. C. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds), *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 84-104). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen and H. E. Hamilton (eds), *Handbook of Discourse Analysis, the* (pp. 352-371). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). Critical discourse analysis: history, agenda, theory, and methodology. In R. Wodak and M. Meyer (eds), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 1-33). London: Sage Publications Ltd.