Critical Discourse Analysis of Protest Signs at the Women's March on Washington

Brezovec, Branimira

University of Zagreb

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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Branimira Brezovec

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Assoc. Prof. dr. sc. Mateusz-Milan Stanojević

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1 Introduction

For some time now people have been conscious of the fact that fewer and fewer politicians care about their needs and only go into politics as wielding that sort of power has proven to be very conductive to making themselves even richer than they were before. Or giving them enough clout to open the doors they did not have access to before. The democracy and the party system are supposed to give everyone the chance to choose the candidate they feel is best suited for the position, and whose policies best represent the wishes of the voters. So what does it mean when a day after a presidential inauguration people flood the streets in record numbers to protest the appointment? Evidently the institutional communication channel of the voting process has also come under the influence of those with an existing power capital.

Political protests have become an increasingly popular alternative channel of communication with the authorities, mostly because they are based on being big enough of a nuisance to force the authorities to give in into at least some of their demands in an effort to prevent further complications and possible monetary loss.

In what ways do social movements go about to make their dissent known? How do they present their demands in hopes they will be heard? This paper will focus on the discourse generated by the participants of the 2017 *Women's March on Washington* in the forms of protest signs as seen through the lens of the Critical Discourse Analysis to see how and which language and multimodal forms of expression are used in those instances and for what purposes. More specifically, since protest signs need to be seen from a distance, but have limited space for a message, the expectations are that short and simple sentences often in imperative will be used while a lot of additional information will be expressed by visual elements such as drawings and color choice.

To do that in the next section this paper will give some insight into what Critical Discourse Analysis is and why it is a good choice for the analysis of an event such as this. Section 3 focuses on social movements and protest as well as the 2017 *Women's March on Washington*. Section 4 presents the analysis of the protest signs. The paper ends with a conclusion.

2 Critical Discourse Analysis

The first step to explaining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is defining discourse. A concise definition given by Machin and Mayr describes it as “language in real context of use” (2012, 20). From this we can derive several things – the focal point is communication (exchange of information) as that is what language is used for, there is no restriction to just one mode of language usage (ex. writing, speech), and context is an integral part of it. As such, who is using language and how and in what situation it is used has the same importance in discourse analysis as word choice and grammatical structure. Therefore, Jaworski and Coupland define discourse analysis as “reaching out beyond the visible or audible forms of language into social context, and as exploring the interplay between language and social processes” (2006, 41).

CDA is an approach to discourse analysis that emerged in the late twentieth century. Wodak and Meyer mention van Dijk, Fairclough, Kress, van Leeuwen, and Wodak as the group that spearheaded this interdisciplinary and problem-oriented theoretical framework for discourse analysis (2009, 2). Van Dijk explained that CDA is a “type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (2008, 85) and Fairclough and Wodak emphasized that its “principle aim” is to “uncover opaqueness and power relationships” (1997, 279). These two quotes show that CDA is problem-oriented whereas interdisciplinarity can be clearly seen from the fact that Wodak and Meyer needed a whole book – *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* – to enumerate and explain different approaches employed by it and fields of study they originate from. Therefore, in CDA, methodologies proposed by structuralism, sociology, corpus linguistics, the historical, sociocognitive, and dialectical approaches are all considered valid and none of them is singled out as being better than the others.

The ‘critical’ in CDA does not stand for criticism in the sense of purposefully looking for and pointing out failings of a narrative, but instead refers to the characteristics it shares with other Critical Studies that it emerged concurrently with. In his paper *Critical Discourse Analysis and the Rhetoric of Critique,* Billig (2006) identifies the following characteristics: 1) they are critical of the present social order 2) they are critical of other academic approaches

that ignore the connections between language and power 3) they claim that academic work exists in the sphere of social assertion of power, that the fact that the uncritical approaches are mainstream is in itself an ideologically motivated show of power, and that any gaps in these orthodox approaches are “neither neutral, nor haphazard” (Billig 2006, 38-9).

Having defined CDA, we can move on onto the two things it deals with – ideology and power. Faircolough’s and Wodak’s definition of ideology as “particular ways of representing and constructing society which reproduce unequal relations of power, relations of domination end exploitation” (1997, 275) shows that these two notions are linked. Blommaert and Verschueren argue that ideology and discourse have a near ontological bond because an idea cannot have any influence on society if it is not communicated. They also stress that not all discourses do the same amount of ideological work and that the difference in that can be seen not just in lexical analysis of the language that is used, but in actively taking into account the socio-political context of the space and time the discourse was produced as well the social actor that is responsible for its production (Blommaert and Verschueren 2002, 26). The amount of ideological work done by a discourse is not equal to the impact it might have – this is where power comes into play.

The term power can be defined in many ways. Wodak and Meyer go as far as to say that there as many definitions of power as there are social theories; however, they also single out three that are most important to discourse research: 1) power as the result of a social actor’s resources 2) power as an interactional attribute of social exchange 3) power as an integral element of society and systems they are built on. (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 9). Basically power is what determines the likelihood of an ideology being successful in shaping the society, with those having more power having a better chance of achieving that. Of course, that is not to say that people and institutions with less power have fewer ideas, or that their ideologies are ‘inferior’ to others; it just means that those with more power have a much wider sphere of influence and much easier time spreading and enforcing their ideological views. As van Dijk emphasizes, these ideologies and power structures are not inherently bad, they can just as easily have very positive impacts. The problems start when there is an abuse of power and those are the instances in which Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) are interested (van Dijk 2008, 17-20).

To finish off this section we will mention that CDA is a qualitative type of analysis, which means that it is interpretative and descriptive. Jaworski and Coupland (2006) warn that this means it inherits all the strengths and weaknesses of such a type of research. Mainly, this refers to the fact that data derived from discourse analysis is all good and true on a case-by-case basis, but using it to extrapolate a generalized conclusion is not advised as one discourse is not a type representative of all other uses of language in similar situations by similar participants. The trade-off is that this approach is great for becoming "more aware of the ethics of using language, and of linguistic market and its practices" which results in being "better prepared to use language for the purposes we deem valuable" (Jaworski and Coupland 2006, 30-2).

3 Social Movement and Protest

Now that we have a framework within which we will do an analysis, we have to look at just what we will be analyzing. *As Women's March on Washington* is a protest, and protests are a form of social movement, we will give those two terms some attention.

A social movement, as James M. Jasper points out, is a term that has a variety of definitions, but there are several things that all of them have in common. For this reason, the definition he settles on for *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* it that social movements are "sustained and intentional efforts to foster or retard social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels encouraged by authorities" (Jasper 2009, 4451). From this we can see that it is a form of power struggle. A group with less power tries to exercise or obtain power – which they would then use to further their own ideologies – through an act that deliberately inconveniences the system in place and the people the system awards more power, the authorities. Revolution would be the most extreme example of a social protest, one that endeavors to completely overthrow the existing system and not just enact social change within it.

In his attempts to better understand the 2009 student protests in Croatia, Mesić (2009) goes through several existing theories of why social movements happen – what mobilizes them. The conclusion is that there can be several reasons or factors why a certain group has decided to mobilize in the form of social movements and the most common of

those include: big societal changes (ex. economic crisis), the dissatisfaction with the current state of the system, and feelings of being unjustly treated (Mesić 2009).

In order for a social movement to be successful, it needs to be visible. That way it can not only ensure that its demands will not end up ignored, but it also has a higher chance of convincing others to join the cause. Protests have become such a prominent tactic of social movements that there is a trend of the two terms – social movement and protest – being used pretty much interchangeably in literature (Tratschin 2016, 37). Tratschin differentiates between the two by saying that protest is the main form of communication of social movements with their intended audience (Tratschin 2016, 38). Others, such as Keren (2006) see protests as specific political actions, which include but are not limited to: strikes, petitions, sit-ins and demonstrations. Going by these two definitions, a protest march would be both: it is a physical action – the organized movement of a group of people from one place to another – and it is a form of communication realized mainly by protest signs. The characteristics of protest marches can be clearly seen even from just a dictionary definition of the word *march*: "an occasion when people show that they disagree with something by walking somewhere, often shouting and carrying signs" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). They are not a static political action like a sit-in or a rally, but they do depend on protest signs to communicate the messages of all individual voices that make up that social movement. Those signs are the point of interest of this paper.

3.1 Women's March on Washington

Women's March on Washington was a protest march held on 21 January 2017, a day after the inauguration of Donald Trump. It was a part of the Women's March movement, which had organized marches all over the United States of America (USA). The one in Washington was central for the movement because of its location. Women from other countries who agreed with the ideology of the Women's March movement organized protests in their own countries.

The whole event is considered to be one of the biggest days of protest in the US history, with the turnout being more than half a million just in Washington and somewhere between 3.3 and 4.6 million in the whole of US. This means that one percent (one in a hundred) Americans was out on the streets that day (Broomfield 2017).

The Women's March on Washington was originally set to begin at Lincoln Memorial like other great historical rallies – civil rights and anti-Vietnam protest in 1960, and the Million Man March in 1995 – but had to reschedule due to Presidential Inauguration Committee having obtained a blocking permit for a period of time that included the day that the March was set to happen (Lang 2016). The starting point was moved to the intersection of the Independence Avenue and Southwest Third Street. The route as described by Lauren Weigle (2017) for the Heavy news and information platform is shown in the Figure 1.

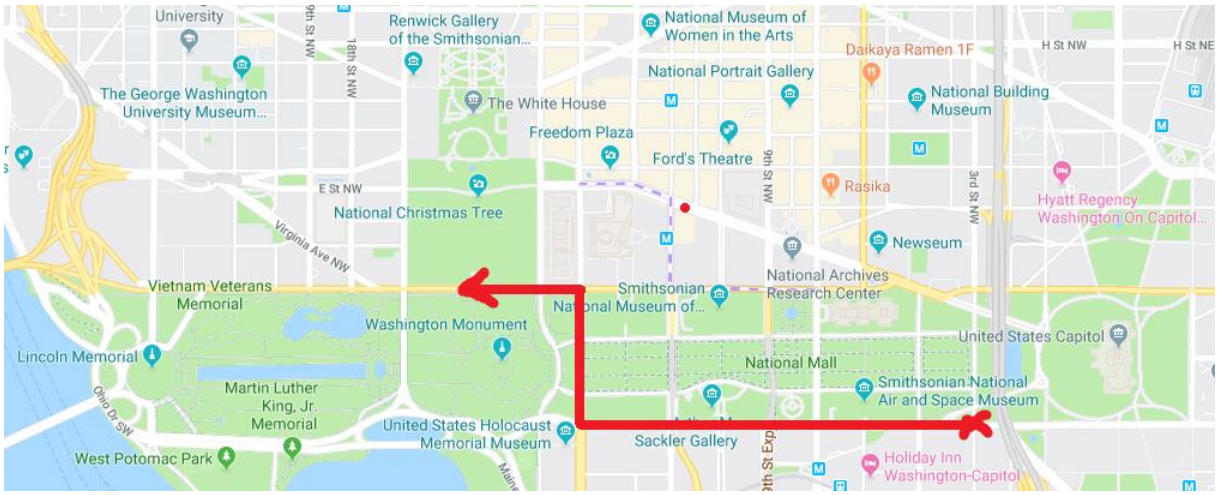

Figure 1

From Figure 1 we can see that since Lincoln Memorial was unavailable as the starting point, the alternative was to get as close to the United States Capitol which houses the United States Congress and then move to end as close to the White House as possible. Earlier it was mentioned that social movements represent a power struggle, and a great example of it between power and dissent is given by van Dijk in his *Society and Discourse:* a person with power can easily obtain a clear space to present their ideology and make sure to have as little opportunities for the dissenters to be heard – the concrete example was of a politician giving a speech where the only chance for another voice to be heard would be an interruption (van Dijk 2009, 139-40). This march showcases that relationship in reverse: the dissent is still an interruption, this time in the daily life and functioning of the state, but they are making sure that they cannot be ignored by having the march start and end pretty much in the front yards of the institutions of power in the US. This is a clear attempt at taking some power back, and getting their voices heard since it is clear that they do not think they were heard during the presidential election period. It is also a show of power because it says

'just because you don't want to listen doesn't mean we will make it easy for you and shut up'.

The reasons for this march are evident through the agenda and unity principles posted on the Women's March website – the website of the central organization of this movement. There are eight main points that call for women of all walks of life to unite (Women's March, 2017):

- **Ending violence** – accountability in cases of police brutality, the end of racial profiling and targeting communities of color
- **Reproductive rights** – open access to safe, legal, affordable abortion and birth control, HIV/AIDS care and prevention, medically accurate sexual education
- **LGBTQIA rights** – these rights fall under human rights and therefore people who identify as such should be free from gender norms, expectations and stereotypes
- **Worker's rights** – all workers having the right to organize and fight for the living wage, and women being paid equitably with access to affordable childcare, healthcare, sick days and paid leave
- **Civil rights** – voting rights, freedom to worship, freedom of speech, and protection for all citizens regardless of age, gender, disability or race
- **Disability rights** – issues of disabled and deaf women with being denied access, inclusion, independence, and the full enjoyment of citizenship
- **Immigrant rights** – migration is a human right regardless of status and country of origin
- **Environmental justice** – right to clean water, clean air, access to public lands, as well as protection of natural resources and climate

3.1.1 Previous Research into the Topic

There has already been some research done on this topic. Weber et al. (2018) analyzed protest signs at this particular march thought they did not employ the CDA approach. They approached it through the process of Frame Analysis which is one of the two types of analyses Hank Johnston (2002) proposed for researching social movements with textual content, the other being Discourse Analysis.

Frame Analysis is a qualitative type of analysis just like CDA, however it analyzes an action as a frozen moment in time just on the level of what is going on, and what is considered important within that action and what is not by the way frames focus attention (Johnston 2002, 62). In shorter terms, in social movement research Frame Analysis is mostly used for discovering what individual and collective frames mean for the development of the movement – they are the 'why' to CDA's 'how' (Johnston 2002, 72).

Results from Weber et al. (2018) identified five more commonly represented topics aside from the aforementioned unity principles at the Women's March on Washington:

- **Unity** – representation of all unity principles put forward by the Women's March organization, with one sign often referencing more than one principle
- **Women as powerful agents of the resistance** – women as bringers of change and subverting the typical gender stereotypes about them
- **Reappropriating the word *pussy*** – deliberate usage of words with pejorative connotations in empowering contexts, mostly centered around the words for female genitals
- **Criticizing Trump** – his appearance, behavior, and politics
- **Defining and critiquing feminism** – accounting for different problems different women face, and inequality that exist in the movement mostly centered around the notion of white privilege

They also pointed out that a lot of protest signs either referenced or directly quoted phrases used in past feminist movements and Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign, or were pop cultural references (2304-5).

4 Research

The aim of the analysis conducted in this paper is to see how those that were part of the Women's March movement communicated their dissent with the help of protest signs. Considering that protest signs serve no purpose if they are not read, and for that to happen they have to be noticed, the main hypothesis concerning them is that they will be very multimodal and that a lot of information will be implicitly stated by color choices.

The other is that language will be very assertive and forceful, often using imperative mood and short simple sentences to get the point across.

4.1 Methodology

There are forty-six (46) protest signs gathered for the purposes of this paper, and they were gathered from four different sources: *twitter* (10), *The Art of Protest* a website archive of protest signs from the Boston sister march (16), and from the *Business Insider* (10) and *Huffington Post* (10) articles about the protest signs at the March.

It would have been ideal if any video coverage was useful for singling out protest signs, but all were either from too far away, or from angles that were not conductive for isolating individual signs. *Twitter* would have been the second best choice, but as some time has passed, it was difficult to find signs from that first historic march in 2017, both because the movement had two more marches since then, and because twitter is not a platform that is user friendly in finding posts older than a year.

The Boston protest sign archive found at *artofthemarch.boston*, which is the website from which the most signs were taken, had the largest and most easily viewable collection. However, as this is an archive of physical protest signs collected after the 2017 March (and specifically that one), the signs from there stand in isolation from the people who made and held them. This means that some context and important information regarding the social actors is missing so the analysis will also be missing information coded by those factors. Even though these protest signs were not from the Washington iteration of the movement, they are considered valid for this research for the same reasons the signs from the marchers around the rest of the world are not – this was a protest directly tied to US politics and it would not do to exclude some voices because they were not physically present at the central location of the movement.

Business Insider and *Huffington Post* were sources that were easiest to find, but were initially going to be discarded to avoid any bias resulting from the fact that someone made an active choice of which pictures to include in the collection, but as all other sources are not

perfect either, they were added. The headlines themselves – *53 of the most eye-catching protest signs we saw at the Women's March on Washington* and *89 Badass Feminist Signs From the Women's March on Washington* – belie their bias by using words such as 'eye-catching' and 'badass' both of which are sensationalist and used to garner interest in the articles.

The final number of the signs taken for analysis was the result of trying to lessen the skewering done by clearly biased sources, but without making one source overly dominant.

The choice of which protest signs to single out for this research was done as randomly as possible to remove any personal bias resulting from the political views or aesthetic enjoyment of the author. In the case of the *Business Insider* and *Huffington Post* this was done by employing a random number generator. *The Art of the March* archive offered the visual interface option of seeing all the protest signs at once in the form of very small squares which were unreadable at first, but could be zoomed in on. They were chosen by randomly choosing places to zoom in on. *Twitter* was the only place where protest sign images were taken as they were found as finding the time-appropriate ones was already a challenge. They were searched for under the hashtags *#womensmarchonwashington* and *#wmow*.

The signs were first qualitatively analyzed in order to obtain the prevalent themes. Next, three signs were selected for detailed critical analysis. The number of signs was limited to three due to time constraints. The criteria for the choice were a) that one out of each types of sources was represented to account for the failings of the others b) that it presented the most often encountered unity principles of the march and c) that the most common techniques used in this discourse were represented. The CDA was done according to the guidelines given in Machin and Meyr's book *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: a Multimodal Introduction* because it gives an overview of how to approach linguistic, visual, contextual and other elements from a critical point of view.

4.2 General Findings

As far as previous research goes, this paper definitely confirms the existence of additional topic categories, and not just that, in the sample pool used for this research the

categories noticed by Weber et al. (2018) are actually prevalent. Explicit anti-Trump sentiments can be found in thirty percent of protest signs – in fourteen of them; while empowerment messages are not as common, they are still included in one fourth of the protest signs. It is also interesting that some of the unity principles, such as disabilities and worker's rights, are rarely explicitly expressed outside of signs whose main topic is unity and support for all of the causes of the march. On that topic, it should be taken into consideration that as this pool of protest signs is significantly smaller than the one from Weber et al.'s (2018) research and randomly selected, it might not reflect the actual state of things.

Multimodality, as expected, was very present. It was most commonly used to denote salience within protest signs. In cases of iconography, it served one of three functions: it was an illustration, it was an exact match for a word and was used instead of it, or it added implicit meaning to the sign. As far as language was used in general, it did contain a lot of usage of imperative mood, and many verbs came in their negative form. There was a tendency of making semiotic choices to use a word related either to Trump's or Clinton's presidential campaign, and thus adding another layer to the text. Pop culture references as well as references to past feminist movements that Weber et al. (2018) said were present were also observed, but in a smaller number. Though not prevalent, there were also signs which depended specifically on the context of the march for the intended meaning to get across correctly. For example, the message 'support your mom' as seen in the Figure 2 could outside the context be interpreted as 'help her financially' or 'give her emotional support' while in the context of the march means to either 'fight for the women's rights alongside her' or 'be supportive of your mom marching for women's rights'.

Figure 2

4.3 Individual Analyses and Discussion

The first sign used in the individual analysis comes from *The Art of the March* archive, and is as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3

As mentioned earlier, it is physically distant from the context of the march, but visual elements used within it help to give contextual clues by imbedding it with implicit meaning. The sign contains only one piece of text – the word 'resist'. On its own this is a statement that does not give a lot of information. It calls for people to 'resist' but does not explicitly say what it is that should be resisted or specify in any way how this act of resistance should be realized.

When we take the visual elements into account, we see that what we have is a cat drawn on bright neon paper with pink accents, one of them being a hat that has the word 'resist' on it, the others being its nose and claws. Now, we can maybe take it to mean that it is a message from some kind of animal rights movement because the message is presented alongside the drawing of an animal. Since the claws are one of the things made salient by the color choice, it could be compelling enough to interpret the message as 'resist doing something or there will be consequences' since that is what happens when you do something a cat doesn't like – you get scratched.

Finally, when put in the context of Women's March on Washington its intended meaning comes together. It was mentioned earlier that the march was held a day after the inauguration of Donald Trump, and he was unfortunate enough to have a tape leaked where he referred to the fact that people with power can do anything they want by saying he could 'grab women by the pussy' if he wanted to and nothing would happen (Wilkinson 2016). *Pussy* is a polysemic word: it is a colloquial way of referring to a cat, but it is also a crude word for a vagina that carries pejorative connotations since it can be used as an insult, for instance 'you're such a pussy' meaning 'you're such a coward/so whiny', which promotes being a coward or whiny as stereotypical behavior of a woman. Therefore, what this protest sign communicates is protest against sexual harassment because it calls for people to resist and the cat is a contextual clue as to what should be resisted, while at the same time being a message to President Trump of 'you can't do what you want without consequences no matter how much power you have' because of its pink claws. The pink of the hat, nose and the claws is also there to associate it specifically with women. The last thing that should be mentioned regarding this protest sign is the hat and the fact that it also carries contextual meaning. Pussyhats – knitted pink hats with triangle protrusions that resemble cat ears – have become an identifying symbol of the 2017 Women's March on Washington. They were the brainchild of a woman in need of a hat and a woman unable to attend the march, which turned into a bigger project intended to be a way for those unable to attend to show their support (Pussyhat Project 2019). As such, this protest sign also carries a message of solidarity. It is amazing how many messages can be contained by a seemingly simple drawing.

The next protest sign coming under scrutiny is the one taken from Twitter and visible in Figure 4.

Figure 4

This example was chosen in order to represent the prominent category of signs whose message was intended to be empowering for women by subverting the common gender stereotypes of women being seen as weak.

The first thing to be noticed is that this protest sign is not made out of paper, it is made out of cloth and shaped in a way that is reminiscent of superhero capes. Weber et al. considered this to be a subversion of gender stereotypes of women being weak because superheroes in media have typically been connected to the notion of hypermasculinity (2018, 2299). The text on it is one of the famous feminist quotes by Coco Chanel – a girl should be two things: who and what she wants – with the words 'a girl' being slightly bigger than the rest of the text. The sign also contains a picture of a flower, inside of which is the raised-fist symbol of feminism.

Although this is a quote that has been used in feminist circles pretty much since it saw the light of day, it doesn't mean it doesn't deserve analysis. Considering it in the light of two other elements – the superhero cape and picture of a flower – makes it seem like a very deliberate choice. The flower is drawn in a style typical for children, and the superheroes are common motives in cartoons which are also associated with childhood so it would not be a stretch to say that this quote was chosen specifically because it contains the word 'girl' which is usually used for women under the age of majority. The fact that the word is singled

out by being of a bigger font supports this. In the light of all this, we can say that this message was designed with a younger target audience in mind.

The modal verb ‘should’ also appears in this quote and suggests that there is a way things ought to be – a girl being who and what she wants only – but that it is not the way things currently are. Coupled with the fact that it is on a cape with the raised-fist symbol of feminism, this protest sign can also be interpreted as sending the message that feminists are superheroes fighting for the right of girls to be who and what they want to be, which is a clever way of making the feminist rhetoric more easily palatable to the younger audiences.

The last protest sign we will be analyzing can be seen in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5

This protest sign comes from the *Business Insider* article. It was chosen because, while it has visual elements, they are not of iconographic nature like the ones in the past two examples.

This protest sign is done on a bold red paper and carries the text ‘this is what patriotism looks like’ with the words ‘this’ and ‘patriotism’ being emphasized. However, they are made more salient in different ways: the word ‘this’ is in the same typeset as the rest of the sign but it is underlined, while ‘patriotism’ is done in a different style of lettering.

The ‘patriotism’ is a call out for Trump’s presidential campaign as its slogan ‘make America great again’ was marketed as patriotic in nature, because ‘making America great again’ would be done out of love towards the country. From this we can see that this sign is also very contextually dependent on the setting and timeframe it is appearing in, just like the first example, but unlike the second, whose message can be understood even without knowing for what occasion it was prepared.

The word ‘this’ is the most interesting part of this sign as there is total absence of additional information that would explicitly tell us what ‘this’ refers to. At least within the sign itself. At the beginning we mentioned that the protest signs from *The Art of March* archive had the problem of being isolated from the social actors involved in its presentation. In this example, most of the information is gathered from what is happening around the sign. As such the word ‘this’ could conceivably refer to two different things.

The first is the March itself and the people within it, and that interpretation is wholly dependent on the setting of its execution. If it were done anywhere else it would no longer be referring to the March. If that interpretation is taken into account then the word ‘patriotism’ also gets better defined because if ‘this’ is what ‘patriotism’ looks like then patriotism, loving your country, is not about the concept of the land within its borders, but about loving the people that make up that country, and treating them with dignity which a March centered around human rights implies is not how Trump, who claims to be a patriot, is treating them.

The second thing ‘this’ could refer to is the person holding the sign. And the immediately visible thing in this picture of the protest sign and its author is that the author is a woman, but more importantly than that, that that woman is using a crutch. This ‘this’ would then define ‘patriotism’ as being willing to suffer for or alongside the people that make up your country. In this case, the red of the sign could possibly be a reference to blood as in the phrase ‘to spill blood for something’, meaning to labor really hard for the sake of something. The verb used in this sign is ‘look like’ and it is generally used for describing appearance, which may be an indicator that the preferred understanding of the word ‘this’ is the second one presented.

These three examples were also used to highlight some of the most prominent features of the protest signs that were part of this march. They are often vibrantly colored, and nearly every one has some form of salience within it. The text they contain often makes use of imperative, general but assertive sentences, and quotes. Also, many of them refer to more than one of unity principles of other common topics – the first sign is after the analysis clearly anti-Trump and references unity along with speaking against sexual harassment.

5 Conclusion

What can be concluded from the results of this research is that protest marches, which involve movement, depend highly on visual aspects of their protest signs to grab and retain the attention of the audiences in an effort to further spread their ideology and gain some power to help along with trying to implement it. They also depend on visual aspects to single out the most important parts of the message they are trying to send.

Probably not completely surprising, but for a movement organized as a protest, Women's March on Washington includes a pretty significant amount of protest signs that contain positive messages such as solidarity and empowerment. Within the messages themselves, sometimes the cultural identities do not come through the text, but that is alright because CDA takes the person holding the sign as an integral part of the discourse so that information is not disregarded.

Since protest sign can take up a lot of space in order to be readable even from a distance, they often aren't crammed full of information, and a lot of information that can be inferred from the event at which they are being used is often omitted. Basically, a lot of them are very context dependent for achieving the intended interpretation or to being understood at all.

Abstract

This paper presents a Critical Discourse Analysis of a group of randomly selected protest signs from the *Women's March on Washington*. A total of 46 signs selected from three different sources were analyzed qualitatively, and three protest signs were singled out for a detailed analysis. The aim of this was to show which linguistic and visual techniques were used to convey the messages to the audience, along with emphasizing the role context – situational and social – often has in those situations. The study showed that there is a heavy reliance on visual techniques, that the topics covered differed somewhat from the ones outlined by the movement, and that in a group with many individual causes messages centered around unity and solidarity show up regularly.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse analysis, protest signs, social movement

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