

## REPORTING RAPE IN ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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### INTRODUCTION

To say that language is used to represent a particular reality is stating the obvious. However, what is often overlooked is its power and potential to create reality and position subjects in particular ways due to its discursive quality. Against the backdrop of increased literacy, including computer literacy, and the place given to English at present, this paper attempts to analyze the manner in which crimes against women are represented in English newspapers, using a contemporary theoretical framework and methodology which combined, would provide both a quantitative and qualitative perspective of how this important issue is discursively reported, and its implications. The aims of this study are two-fold. One is to investigate linguistic patterns and thereby the discursive construction of reality related to sexual violence against women in the English press, in order to raise awareness of the fact that language is not an innocent means of communication. The other is to create a framework which combines discourse analysis with corpus linguistics in order to contribute to the field of linguistic analysis of the media in Sri Lanka.

The theoretical perspective used is Critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach, while defining discourse not only as language as it is used in context, but also as a social construction of reality, a form of knowledge (Fairclough, 1995), attempts to draw connections between the use of language and the exercise of social power. Within the paradigm of CDA, reality is understood as constructed, shaped by various social forces. These realities however are naturalized in everyday discourse. Reality is frequently presented simply as 'the way things are' and not as the outcome of social practices that might be questioned or challenged. CDA can help to unpack the meanings of specific linguistic items in the texts, and to relate these meanings to broader socio-cultural processes. Early studies using the CDA framework were done by the Glasgow Media Group (1980) who pointed out that news reports had a consistent pattern of language use which portrayed workers and labour unions as being demanding, unreasonable and violent but managers and employers as being peaceful and reconciliatory. In the late nineties, researchers such as Ehrlich (1998) examined judicial proceedings in date – rape trials and investigated the grammatical resources that were used to construct certain sequences of events as consensual sex rather than as assault. Van Dijk (1987, 1991, 1996) has repeatedly examined the representation of race in mainstream sources including press reports, speeches made in European legislative assemblies school textbooks and scientific and corporate discourse. In a more relevant study, Clark (1998) investigated reporting of violence by the British "Sun" newspaper using naming analysis and transitivity analysis. She concludes that the *Sun* manipulates blame and achieves this linguistically, and in its reporting of crime, victims were cast according to their sexual availability or not, and their attackers were named as fiends or not. She attributes this to the *Sun*'s general interest in sex as a selling property. Since no study of this nature of this nature has been conducted in Sri Lanka, this paper attempts to fill this void.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study is primarily Corpus Linguistics, (CL). CL is a currently popular computer-based method of analysis which analyses recurring patterns in large samples of linguistic data. It is the study of linguistic phenomena through large collections of machine-readable texts: **corpora**. An important part of CDA is to demonstrate the existence of consistent patterns in a text or set of related texts. Analysis has to be systematic and not just a matter of

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picking out isolated examples for comment. Hence, the CL approach is appropriate for the theoretical perspective selected. For this quantitative analysis, the sample taken is the corpus compiled by the JLU, Giessen Germany; of English news reports appearing in two (*Daily News* and *Daily Mirror*) over the five year period of 2002-2007 were used.

In addition, a qualitative analysis using the method of close textual analysis was also carried out. The sample for this was a corpus of reports pertaining to crimes against women, particularly rape and domestic abuse, appearing in the months of January – March 2011 in three English daily papers. The source from which they were obtained was the Women and Media Collective (WMC), Colombo.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that the way news about sexual crimes against women is reported is heavily value-laden, often follows a narrative organization which creates a story line which implicate or blame the victim, the high frequency of the word “love affair” in many of the reports, as well as the reporting of the age of the victim and her other affiliations such as “school girl” or “mother” and adjectives to provide a more elaborate description of the victim, portraying her in terms of other social relationships. Inclusion of other irrelevant facts that contribute to the notion that somehow the victim was “abnormal” is also significant. The research contributes to the very miniscule body of research which exists in this country related to media and gender particularly that which uses computer-based tools and the findings indicates the increased necessity for critical awareness when reading supposedly factual news reports. This study would be useful for teaching English language learners the manner in which English can be used to create bias, and to enrich critical reading skills in ESL.

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