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## Latinos in the Media: The Value of Critical Media Literacy

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### Abstract

“We cannot, especially in this day and age, exaggerate the power of what we take in with our eyes. Our culture is based on this: television news, television shows, and films (Landsman, 2001, p. 25).” Media is becoming increasingly central to our collective culture as a society; therefore, it is vital that media consumers possess the skills to critically examine it as a source of potential stereotypes and misconceptions. According to Kellner and Share (2007), “Critical media literacy involves cultivating skills in analysing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts (p. 372).” Critical media literacy skills allow media consumers to see how they have been, often unknowingly, influenced by covert messages found in various forms of media. Media, as with any form of discourse, represents social actors in a variety of ways (van Leeuwen, 2008). This paper reviews examples of genericization, appraisal, metaphors, activation and passivation of actors, nomination, categorization, and others, as well as ways to engage students to develop critical media literacy. It is vital that media consumers be made aware of these rhetorical techniques, as “it is through discourse that many ideologies are formulated, reinforced and reproduced (van Dijk, 1998, as cited in Paltridge, 2012, p. 194).”

*Keywords:* media representation, media literacy, genericization, media rhetoric

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## Introduction

“We cannot, especially in this day and age, exaggerate the power of what we take in with our eyes. Our culture is based on this: television news, television shows, and films” (Landsman, 2001, p. 25). Media is becoming increasingly central to our collective culture as a society; therefore, it is vital that media consumers possess the skills to critically examine it as a source of potential stereotypes and misconceptions. According to Kellner and Share (2007), “Critical media literacy involves cultivating skills in analysing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts” (p. 372). Critical media literacy skills allow media consumers to see how they have been, often unknowingly, influenced by covert messages found in various forms of media.

The field of critical discourse analysis offers tools that allow for the cultivation of critical media literacy. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on how such tools can be used to critically examine how Latinos/as are portrayed in mainstream media. Paltridge (2012) states, “The aim of a critical approach to discourse analysis is to help reveal some of these hidden and ‘often out of sight’ values, positions, and perspectives” (p. 186). Therefore, “the theories, methods, analyses, applications and other practices of critical discourse analysts” (Carta & Wodak, 2015, p. 4) can be used to critically analyze media for implicit biases and prejudices, allowing media consumers to question and challenge stereotypes of Latinos perpetuated by media discourse.

Media, as with any form of discourse, represents social actors in a variety of ways. Van Leeuwen (2008) presents fifty different ways social actors can be represented in English language discourse. Applying these to mainstream media discourse about Latinos, one can see that the oft-used phrase “illegal aliens” utilizes both genericization (through the use of a mass noun to reference a group of individuals) and appraisal (due to the negative evaluation associated with the term illegal). Gener-

icization, as opposed to specification, induces media consumers to see the immigrants referenced by the phrase “illegal aliens” (most often Latino immigrants from Mexico and Central America) as indistinct, rather than individual persons with unique hopes, dreams, and motivations for risking life and liberty by immigrating to the United States. Appraisal, paired with genericization, acts to persuade media consumers that this nebulous group is inherently bad due to their involvement in “illegal” activity. By using the term “illegal,” the discourse draws on media consumers’ conceptualizations of crime, legitimizing stereotypes of Latino immigrants as rapists, murderers, and drug dealers espoused by various individuals in positions of power (most notably in recent events, Donald Trump).

Social actors can also be either activated or passivated. Latinos are passivated when they are “represented as ‘undergoing’ the activity, or as being ‘at the receiving end of it’” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). For example, in the Omaha World-Herald headline, “Program trains Latinos in LGBT issues” (Conley, 2014), the program (A La Familia, a project of the Human Rights Campaign) is activated, while Latinos (specifically, those who speak Spanish) are represented as undergoing the training or being at the receiving end of it. As such, they are passive, rather than active, participants in the activity being portrayed. This passivation functions to strip Latinos of their agency, something that society does all too often. Imagine, however, if the headline was rewritten (while still reflecting the main point of the article) so that Latinos were activated. It might read, “Latinos engage in conversation about LGBT issues.” Here, Latinos are given agency as they are portrayed as “active, dynamic forces” in the activity described (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33).

Nomination and categorization, two forms of determination, also influence how social actors are represented. Social actors are nominated when they are represented “in terms of their unique identity,” while they are categorized when they are represented “in terms of identities and functions they share with others” (p. 40). An example can be seen in the St. Paul Pioneer Press article (Berardino, 2015) titled

“Twins’ work with Latinos praised,” where Tony Clark is nominated in two ways. First, his full name is given. Second, his unique role as executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association, a position he alone holds, is highlighted. Whereas, “the Twins’ young Latino players” are categorized through the use of both functionalization and classification. They are functionalized by their shared role as baseball players (something they do) being foregrounded. Simultaneously, they are classified by their shared role as Latinos (a major societal category used to differentiate between classes of people) also being emphasized. However, these “young Latino players” are left unidentified. The juxtaposition of Tony Clark’s nomination and the categorization of the “young Latino players” implicitly conveys a hierarchical relationship to media consumers, with Tony Clark above the “young Latino players.”

Media discourse, like other types of discourse, also makes use of rhetorical devices like metaphor – “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). According to Cameron (2008), “Metaphors carry not only ideational content but also something of speakers’ attitudes and values in respect of that content” (p. 203). Therefore, it is important for media consumers to be taught to look for and critically analyze metaphors used in media discourse.

Santa Ana (1999) discusses metaphors about immigrants, categorizing them into four main source domains (e.g., ANIMALS, WEEDS, WATER, and WAR). In the late 1990s, IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS was the dominant metaphor. Santa Ana gives the following example: “The truth is, employers hungering for really cheap labor hunt out the foreign workers” (p. 201, emphasis in original). Unaware of the metaphor, media consumers may unconsciously view immigrants as subhuman or animalistic, something to be hunted in order to control the population. However, what happens if we remove the metaphor? The statement above could be rewritten as, “The truth is, employers who desire really cheap labor seek to hire the foreign workers.” While this reworded statement still negatively stigmatizes foreign workers as “really cheap labor,” it no longer draws a compar-

ison between immigrants and animals, effectively ridding the statement of the dehumanizing effect of the IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS metaphor.

Metonymy – profiling or highlighting certain aspects of an event, action, or person while backgrounding other elements (Hart, 2011) – also influences media consumers’ opinions of Latinos. The example of “illegal aliens” mentioned earlier is often shortened to the adjectival noun “illegals.” This represents an example of grammatical metonymy, which can be seen in the following example from The Fulton Sun:

Both parties want the votes of the Hispanic population, the most rapidly growing demographic in the country. And this is the same population most sensitive to the immigration issue because most of the illegals within our borders are from Latin American countries.

Besides being an example of grammatical metonymy, the use of “illegals” is also an example of the metonym DEFINING PROPERTY FOR PERSON, which functions to highlight the defining property of the immigrant’s “illegality” or undocumented status, while backgrounding their personhood.

As illustrated by these various examples, “it is through discourse that many ideologies are formulated, reinforced, and reproduced” (van Dijk, 1998, as cited in Paltridge, 2012, p. 194). Similarly, Santa Ana (2013) asserts that mass media is a socializing discourse, “reinforced by other institutions (such as church, school, and the courts) to become crucial elements of the identities of members of their imagined communities” (p. 179). In order to counteract the negative portrayals of Latinos perpetuated by the media through the use of genericization, appraisal, passivation, categorization, metaphor, metonymy, and other rhetorical devices, we must also socialize media consumers to be aware of these rhetorical techniques and their effects. Therefore, critical media literacy skills that challenge media consumers to criticize stereotypes, norms, and dominant values represent one way to resist oppressive media tropes.

As Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell

(2005) contend, “In the same way that the media has been historically employed in creating normalizing practices, it can also be employed in the deconstruction of those practices” (p. 165). The media and its associated discourse are social constructs through which we create our social reality. Aware of the media’s influence, we can change the narrative!

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