

***The Language of Inequality in the News:  
A Discourse Analytic Approach***  
By M. Toolan (2018)  
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*Reviewed by Ilse Astrid Ras*

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Toolan's book is, in particular, a collection of studies into the changing use of words and concepts relating to wealth inequality in, primarily, *The Times*, as well as *The Daily Mail*. Most of Toolan's corpora contain reporting from the 1970s and 2010s. What Toolan shows is that the changes in how these words and concepts have been used have contributed to, or at least occurred alongside, a normalisation of the wealth inequality prevalent in Britain at the time of writing (i.e. the late 2010s). A key strength of Toolan's approach is the fact that focusing on individual texts and very small corpora enables him to analyse in depth these selected words and concepts, thus offering a very nuanced interpretation of how changes in language have accompanied the change in wealth (in)equality.

In an accessible, conversational tone, Toolan begins his book by patiently showing that wealth inequality has increased in the United Kingdom over the last five decades, and explaining thoroughly why it is so important that we look at how wealth inequality has come to be seen as normal, even, in some circles, desirable, in particular given the rather far-reaching (by many considered negative) effects of this inequality. Similarly, Toolan's overview

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of developments in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a useful one, both for those relatively new to CDA and also for those who have been doing CDA for a while, but who could do with expanding their own knowledge of the approach. One recurring issue in CDA is the question as to what extent the approach enables cherry-picking informed by political sympathies; and indeed, at the end of the chapter, Toolan assures us that he focuses on the issue of wealth inequality out of humanistic sympathies, rather than precise political affiliations.

In the second chapter, Toolan shows that between 1971 and 2011, the narrative of what is *fair* and *unfair* changed dramatically in *The Times*. Whereas in the 1970s, fairness was considered to be something good worth striving for, by 2011 it had become unaffordable. Indeed, fairness on the whole has become a far less important consideration in the evaluation of government proposals. Furthermore, the notion of what fairness actually looks like has also shifted; by 2011, greater wealth inequality and more precarity were regarded as fair compared with 1971. In general, the use of *fair* and *unfair* changed from basic questions of what is fair, with the understanding that it is the job of the government to provide the basics that allow a person to live and work in 1971, to one in which fairness is an individual responsibility, with the government's only role to enable individuals to make those choices that allow them to live in 2011.

In Chapter 3, Toolan presents the budget speeches of two Chancellors, namely, Anthony Barber (1971) and George Osborne (2011). Both speeches were heavily covered by the press, to the point of being reproduced almost verbatim by *The Times*, and commented on by both newspapers. It is clear that both newspapers are largely supportive of these Conservative budgets and speeches. However, whereas Anthony Barber's speech still suggests that tax is a *burden* to be shared, George Osborne's contains little mention of *burden*, suggesting that the idea of 'the strong help[ing] the weak' has become '*passé*' (p. 95). Interestingly, Osborne tells a story that focuses on the health and strength of the economy itself, rather than viewing it as a tool and yardstick for enabling and measuring the prosperity of British society. In contrast, Barber's speech appears to lack a strong narrative. Toolan diagnoses in Barber's speech the start of something that was even more explicit in Osborne's: an equating of private wealth with dynamism and opportunity, and welfare economics with responsibility, with private wealth then positioned as the opposite of welfare economics. Other options are apparently unavailable. *The Times* still had to defend Barber's budget to some of its readers; Osborne's speech was simply approved of.

In the next chapter, the reviews of two television critics for *The Daily Mail* – Peter Black (1971) and Christopher Stevens (2012–13) – are

analysed. Whereas Peter Black appears fairly progressive, being concerned with issues relating to class, as well as other inequalities, and sympathetic to television programmes aiming to respond to them, Christopher Stevens is not. Instead, Stevens appears to consider inequality as a matter that has been sorted, and seems to find that paying attention to these issues in television programmes is ‘taking things too far’.

In the fifth chapter, Toolan tries to piece together the narrative of ‘Luddites’ and ‘Luddism’, as expressed by *The Times* between 1971 and the present time of writing. It is a term that is often used to denounce the actions of unions, and takes the side of the capitalists. Those labelled ‘Luddites’ are described as destructive, unco-operative, unreasonable, anti-modern and anti-change. What these newspapers thus imply is that the preferred mode of behaviour is one of compliance with changing circumstances – with growing inequality.

Toolan uses a similar method in his sixth chapter, and first shows that use of the name ‘Robin Hood’ tends to be less in periods of Conservative government, and that its usage has on the whole declined in the last decade, presumably because the idea of redistribution of wealth has been pushed to the very edge of political debate (presumably due to the shifting of the Overton window). In the 1970s, the name suggested risky, naïve behaviour that was gently disapproved of. Post-Thatcher, however, the allusion has taken on connotations of counter-productivity, theft, danger, of rewarding the spendthrift and robbing from the prudent. Robin Hood has become a villain.

The key conclusion to the book that Toolan draws is as follows.

Collectively [centre-right newspapers] have naturalised ways of talking about work, unemployment, pay, housing, pensions, health care and taxes that prioritise private retention of wealth and income, a balanced budget and a reducing budget, low inflation and a strong currency, near-full employment and competitive interest rates. These are represented as the ‘vital signs’ of life in Britain; they are routinely and invariably cited as having to ‘come first’, as the objectives to which the entire machinery of politics should be oriented. (p. 219).

In other words, what Toolan has found is that in the discourses of *The Times* and *The Daily Mail*, there is less of a sense of collective responsibility for the wellbeing of everyone in Britain, and more entitlement, more emphasis on personal choice. Wealth inequality has become naturalised.

One question that remains unsatisfactorily answered is why only the reporting of *The Times* and *The Daily Mail* were considered. Toolan makes a good case for why these papers were examined, but one is mostly left to imagine why Britain’s other mainstream daily newspapers, with readerships

on other points of the political spectrum and with varying socio-economic backgrounds, were not also included in this study. This is not necessarily a drawback; a large corpus can become unwieldy, and would not have allowed Toolan the depth of analysis he has managed to achieve in this book. However, it does mean that other UK newspapers could, and perhaps should, be examined in a similar manner.

Doing so might be complicated. Unfortunately, it is not always clear which precise methods Toolan used to collect his corpus/corpora, and whether the words and concepts he examined were keywords in a corpus linguistic sense, or whether they were chosen intuitively. It is only in the third chapter that Toolan explicitly notes how the examined keywords were selected. That said, the ample evidence from the corpora that he presents in each chapter convincingly shows the development of the narrative(s) of wealth inequality, and provides plenty of support for Toolan's conclusions.

Overall, this is an interesting collection of studies into wealth inequality-related reporting by *The Times*, with also some studies of this reporting by *The Daily Mail*. A beginner discourse analyst will find the first chapter in particular a very useful one as a starting point for further reading on (corpus-assisted) critical discourse analysis. However, those hoping to find a manual for carrying out discourse analysis should first consider other works. Nonetheless, Toolan's findings are important ones, and this book is a must-read for everyone interested in the discourse(s) of wealth inequality.