

**MSC 2020****International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.  
COMMUNICATION»****SOCIAL ASPECT OF URBAN DISCOURSE IN BRITISH MEDIA: A  
CASE STUDY**

Elena Kokkonen (a), Elena Ryzhkova (b)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University, Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation

(b) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University, Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation

Yelena.Ryzhkova@novsu.ru

**Abstract**

The article is devoted to the problem of the social aspect of urban discourse. Based on the coverage in the British media of the problems of accessibility of playgrounds and recreational spaces, the article attempts to analyse the speech behaviour of participants in a socially problematic situation. It considers the manifestation of the actors' positions through lexical means expressing their perception of and their attitude to the problem of a single recreation zone divided by a fence. Within the analysed discourse the “residents’ discourse”, formed by the tenants, the activists, the supporters, and the “power discourse”, formed by the city authorities, the developer and the managing companies are distinguished and their linguistic peculiarities are pointed out. The analysis of diverse linguistic means, employed by the actors of the discourse allowed the authors to identify the key cognitive schemes involved. They are the cognitive image of the problem on the whole, the image of the opponent in dispute, the image of the barrier dividing the recreation zones. The article concludes that the citizens do not perceive the urban environment as a single entity. There are numerous disparate images of the urban environment and various cognitive schemes: they regulate the attitude of residents to the environment, the authorities and to each other.

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## 1. Introduction

Discourse, being a multidimensional concept, is considered from different perspectives: the theory of speech acts, linguistic pragmatics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, linguistic analysis of text, conversation and discourse analysis. The Western research paradigm, that arose within the framework of structural linguistics, has grown into an interdisciplinary field of research, in which discourse is viewed as a broad phenomenon, including psychological, sociocultural, historiographic, pragmatic and other significant aspects of a communicative event. These can be found in the works of van Dijk (2016, 2019), Fairclough (2010), Forchtner and Wodak (2018) and others. Among Russian researchers Bogdanova (2019), Dobrosklonskaya (2014), Duskayeva (2018), Leontovich (2019), Shmeleva (2015) address discourse primarily within the scope of media linguistics. Media texts created in the context of the *actual* (italics of the authors) communicative field represent valuable material for studying directly unfolding discourse. Based on an understanding of discourse in the Western and Russian research paradigm, it can be concluded that discourse is: 1) an actual communicative event, which is reflected in written texts and oral speech in a specific communicative field; 2) a set of texts united by a common topic.

Among the many types and aspects of discourse, the issues of urbanism and urban discourse are being actively investigated (Ovodova et al., 2018). A review of viewpoints on urban cultural space, city's cultural image and urban identities can be found in the work by Shabaev et al. (2018). The modern city, which Wirth (1938), defined as “a distinctive mode of human group life” (p. 4), is naturally discrete and heterogeneous in its structure, despite the existence of developed communication networks. Researches point at “social polarisation” as one of the most important challenges of modern cities (Fernandez-Anez et al., 2018). The interrelated and interwoven discourse fields introduced by such subjects of the city discourse as representatives of municipal authorities, business, media, city activists, ecologists, ordinary citizens of various social strata with communicative habits and practices characteristic of each community, give rise to a multi-aspect urban discourse. Having analysed the main aspects of the study of urban communication, Leontovich (2019), among others, points to the existence of historical, geographical, cultural, recreational, political, public vs personal, political and other types within urban discourse.

## 2. Problem Statement

As Hastings notes, at present the understanding of urban discourse is shifting to the perception of the city as “a space of performance, theatre and spectacle rather than as a site of inequality and struggle” (1999, p. 8). However, the social aspect remains relevant, as urbanites, having ceased to be an object in the system of municipal administration, become not only active participants in urban planning, but also reformers of the urban environment. This process is accompanied by conflicts between citizens and authorities, as well as between the interests of various urban communities.

## 3. Research Questions

The paper aims at answering the following questions:

1) How social discourse as an integral part of urban discourse is structured, how its actors and their positions can be characterized relying on media texts.

2) How the differences in the roles of the actors are manifested in their verbal behaviour.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

In this study, the social aspect of urban discourse will be examined as it is represented in the British media. The emphasis will be on the analysis of manifestation of the actors' positions through lexical means expressing their perception of and their attitude to the problem of social segregation in housing departments. The analysis will be based on the press coverage for the period from March 2019 to January 2020 of a situation that caused social tension.

#### **5. Research Methods**

As research methods, content analysis, discourse analysis and linguistic analysis of the text were chosen. Based on the conceptual provisions outlined above, the following analysis procedure was applied: 1) the social phenomenon as the object of observation of the author of the article was identified. Within the scope of analyzed articles the problems of accessibility of playgrounds and recreational spaces were considered. 2) The facts and arguments given by the authors of the articles were indicated. 3) The participants of the discourse, their social profile and social relations were considered. 4) Linguistic means reflecting the attitude of actors to a social problem were singled out and examined. 5) Cognitive schemes that determine the verbal behaviour of communicants were defined.

#### **6. Findings**

The study was conducted on the texts of British newspapers The Sun, The Daily Mail, and The Guardian. The selection criteria were the substantive focus of articles on urban social problems, primarily the problems of urban planning and design. The discourse under study was initiated after it became known to the press that the developer Henley Homes had blocked social housing residents from using shared play grounds at its Baylis Old School complex, in south London. In order to gain planning permission, the development was required to include a mix of “affordable” and social rental units. Nevertheless after the development project, which initially provided a gate for residents, was approved by Lambeth Council, the recreational area with a playground happened to be divided by a fence into unequal parts: a spacious green zone in the private part of the development, and a much smaller area covered in wood bark, for social-housing residents. Publications were monitored from March 2019 to January 2020. The first publication appeared in the Guardian on 25 March 2019 (Grant, 2019a). The last one came out on 14 January 2020 (Grant, & Michael, 2020). A total of 21 articles were analysed. A feature of online publications is the possibility of reader commentary, which makes the discourse multi-subject. Readers' comments were also taken into account.

The situation with the playground alarmed mothers living in different blocks of the complex whose children are friends and schoolmates, but cannot play in the same yard. Thus, activist mothers, initiating media coverage of this issue, triggered the emergence of the analysed discourse. An analysis of the very first publications (six appeared in The Guardian on March 25-27, 2019 and three each in The Sun and The Daily Mail for the same period) showed that various and numerous actors were involved in the discourse

in one way or another, namely: homeowners and the social housing residents, having a different number (mentioned from one to three) of children. These two categories of actors are directly interested in resolving the situation. The difference in housing conditions as follows from these publications, cannot serve as a sufficient basis for dividing these local groups of residents on a social basis into “poor” and “rich”. The activists from the social housing block vary from university researchers or IT project managers, to mothers of disabled children. The points of view of other residents of the house are also presented, both supporting and non-supporting activists. The comments on the articles made it possible to identify several more actors: activist sympathizers, supporters of the separation of the sites and victims of a similar situation in other residential complexes. All these actors present the “residents’ discourse”, which is communicated “from the bottom-up” (Karsten, 2009).

The “power discourse”, communicated “top-down” (Karsten, 2009) is represented, first of all, by the developer who erected the fence, and two management companies in charge of the two buildings of the residential complex. Publications in the press sparked the involvement of representatives of Lambeth Council, the Mayor of London, the Conservative housing secretary, the shadow housing secretary, architects and experts on child-friendly design. Journalists-authors of articles are also participants in the discourse. On the one hand, they act as “investigators”, collecting facts and presenting points of view, on the other hand, they become their interpreters, shaping the readers' views.

The first obvious cognitive scheme involved in the discourse is that of the situation on the whole. The analysis showed that it is verbalized by diverse means. The most neutral were the expressions used by the authorities. They define the events as the “story” or simply “situation”. Definitions given by journalists range from “controversy”, “some tension on the estate”, and “division” to “row”, “poor doors' scandal”, and “housing segregation”. Activists on both sides of the fence use the terms “disparity”, “segregation”, “social exclusion”, and “discrimination”. Commentators perceive the situation more emotionally: from segregation to apartheid, with “segregation” and “discrimination” being the most frequent terms. The degree of emotional assessment of what is happening also varies. Neutral emotional attitude, rather a dry statement of the “incorrectness of the situation”, is expressed within the power discourse: “unavoidable situation”, “plain wrong”. Although in general both the power discourse and residents’ discourse are assessing the situation as a whole and the developer’s act as “appalling”, “outrageous”, “abuse of the planning process”, “a cynical move”, and “disgraceful, shameful practice”.

London authorities view the situation as intentionally created, morally unacceptable and shameful, however, the use of the words “unavoidable” and “practice” indicates the acceptance of the fact that the situation in question is not unique in the practice of urban development. The positions of urban and public administration and that of business clash. The developer does not see anything reprehensible in this situation. It is viewed as “in no way discriminatory but fair and reasonable.” The position of the developer is to avoid mentioning the moral side of the issue. Formally, the developer is no longer responsible for the fence in question; now it is a matter of the management companies.

Contrary to our preliminary assumptions, the assessment of the residents involved turned out to be rather restrained. There are three typical reactions to the situation that are characteristic of both the owners of private apartments and social-housing tenants. Residents are not inclined to blame specific individuals; they evaluate the state of affairs as “rude”, “morally wrong”, “a shame”. Their statements contain more

expression of bewilderment and regret than anger and accusations. Residents describe the situation as “not pleasant,” “not fair,” “awkward and embarrassing,” “heartbreaking and sad to see”. Nevertheless, a number of statements contain a sharp assessment of what is happening: “It's outrageous and is discrimination”, “It's outrageous, it's horrible and it's unacceptable. Our children are really upset about it” (Duel, & Leatham, 2019) but still avoiding direct accusations.

From this perspective, people view the situation as a reflection of discrimination and segregation inherent in society as a whole. It is noteworthy that this position is shared by childless residents and homeowners who are not directly involved in the conflict. Here are just a few statements by residents: “I felt discriminated against, children shouldn't be discriminated against. It's heartbreaking and sad to see.” (Rogers & Hall, 2019a). “It's discrimination what they're doing”, “... This feels like discrimination. It separates us and make people in our block feel different and it shouldn't be like that – it's the 21st century It drives a wedge between the two blocks” (Tingle & Leatham, 2019). “They make us feel like we're second class”, “... there's a feeling of them and us” (Booth & Mohdin, 2019). People note that they are treated like “lesser beings”.

What do the discourse participants see as the essence of the problem? The Sun in the article from 27 March 2019 most emotionally conveys it, blaming the developer: “Developer Henley Homes had sent letters to social housing families warning them to stay off the posh playground and built a wall to segregate the kids – sparking uproar” (Rogers & Hall, 2019b). The expressions used by the discourse participants emphasize the inability for children from social housing to get to the owners' site due to physical barriers. This is described as: “a wall eventually put up stopping the kids”. The verbs “to block from”, “to keep out”, “to restrict”, “to bar”, “to cut off” are characteristic. Violation of children's rights is reflected in the verbs “to ban”, “to deny the right”, “to exclude”. Finally, expressions like “to separate playgrounds”, “to segregate play areas” directly indicate the social separation of children. However, despite the tenants' apparent restraint, journalists tend to present them as angry and furious, “fuelling complaints of housing segregation”, and use the following expressions: “Parents were left furious”, “The segregation has sparked uproar”, “Parents were left fuming”, “Outcry from locals”. Thus, it is emphasized that dissatisfied parents became the initiators of the discourse.

Another detected cognitive scheme is that of the residents of the complex. Of particular interest is how the “relevant stakeholders” are viewed by other participants in the discourse such as journalists and government officials. Their “housing status” is indicated in both ascertaining and evaluative terms. Neutral, ascertaining definitions only indicate the status of residents. For example: “residents of different tenure”, “private owners / residents”, “social-housing residents / tenants”, “homeowners” and “rent-paying social housing tenants”. These appellatives are characteristic of the discourse of power, designed to level out the conflict of the situation. In the discourse of journalists, by contrast, evaluative definitions are used to draw attention to social separation and inequality: “poorer / richer residents”, “wealthier homebuyers”, “wealthy residents”, “less wealthy residents of developments”, “less well-off tenants”, “haves / have-nots”, “divided”. Similarly, children are evaluated as “rich kids / poor kids”, “the 'privileged' children / the 'poorer' children”.

The barrier dividing the recreation zones can be considered as one more relevant cognitive scheme with different means of verbalization. In the discourse in question, there is no unity of views on it. Judging

by the photographs given in the articles, this is a low barrier, partly a green fence, partly a brick or wooden wall. A number of residents suggest that children simply jump over it, which is easily possible. But for residents (and for journalists) it is not only “the fencing”, “a wall”, but rather “impassable hedges”, “the barriers”, “the divide” as a symbol of separation of people. The authorities also look at the fence as a means of “restriction of access.” One of the commentators allusively says, “It’s also not a hedge it’s a brick wall.” Commentators also propose eliminating inequality by literary destroying the fence: “Impassable Hedge? Aint no such thing. I'm sure it would be passable if someone had an "accident" with a couple of buckets full of weedkiller?” (Rogers & Hall, 2019b).

Another object of disagreement and diverse assessments within the framework of the discourse under consideration and one more cognitive scheme is the divided playground. The effect of photographs depicting a spacious well-kept green lawn and a fountain and children's swings in contrast to a narrow elongated strip covered with dark red chips and a fenced high net is enhanced by the lexical contrast. The homeowners' ground is represented as “the huge grassy play area”, “the well-kept park”, “the nice, green grassy area”, while the tenants' site is described as a “tiny playground”, “a much smaller area covered in wood bark, away from the main area”, “the small gated strip of play equipment near the back of the social housing”, “a fraction of the size”. As can be seen from the descriptions, for residents it is not so much the site’s well-groomedness that matters, but its size, quality and safety of coverage, and ease of access.

Let us now consider the behaviour of the main actors of the discourse: the authorities represented by the developer and higher institutions, residents and outside observers – commentators. As mentioned, the developer initially positioned the residential complex as “inclusive and family friendly”. When buying an apartment or concluding a social rental contract, tenants were promised equal access to recreational areas. It can be assumed that had the tenants known about the existence of the fence in advance, they would have accepted the situation. In fact, the residents were deceived and the developer can only, according to The Sun journalists, “ignore mums at your own peril” (Duel & Leatham, 2019). In their defense against accusations of segregation, both the developer and the City Council indicate that formally, the rights of tenants are respected, as follows from the quotes: “... the duty to provide play space for under-fives has been discharged, because there is a small strip of toddler play equipment specifically for the social housing children” (Grant, 2019a). The developer’s strategy indicates: “There is a network of courtyards and open spaces ... which will provide attractive areas for informal play. This will emphasize the sense of community within the scheme stressing that the common areas are there for the use of all the residents” (Grant, 2019a). The management companies do not mention the status of residents in any way, emphasizing only that residents of the divided complex “do not have the right of access” to the territory of neighbors. The company managing the private housing block explains the current situation solely for economic reasons: “Although, as you state, the block overlooks the swing area, the residents have no access to it. This is for [a] very good reason – being that [they] do not contribute towards the service charges” (Grant, 2019a). A certain position was expressed by political forces, including the mayor of London. According to the authors of publications, they generally express “widespread condemnation”, and “criticism”. “This is wrong, it must end”, since such situations stigmatize the social strata and exacerbate stereotypes.

Considering the behaviour of residents it becomes evident that in general, mothers try not to emphasize the social nature of the problem, as they themselves say, “I told one journalist: 'You aren't

allowed to make this about rich against poor. This is just about a group of women, all friends, fighting together for children to play” (Grant, 2019b). Parents want to protect their children from social discrimination which they still have to face in the future. Their position is simple: “... Children are children – they have to grow together.”

The residents discourse demonstrates disunity and mutual ignorance of the situation of the opposing group. The assessment of social residents is determined by the stereotype: these are marginalized people who do not have means, are not able to pay for social benefits, and therefore do not have the right to use them. But as tenants point out, their monthly rent and maintenance fees may exceed mortgage payments for apartment owners. Therefore, they view their anger at being deprived of their right to use public territories as justified. Residents describe their condition as being “fuming”, “outraged”, “shaking with rage” when they try to counter the prejudices of their neighbors and society as a whole. **Interestingly, while separating some communities, similar problems unite others. After the demolition of the fence, women activists are perceived as “local heroes” and “sisters” by the parents of other children from the local school.**

A special heterogeneous community is formed by article commentators. Several positions of commentators can be estimated by the number of likes and dislikes. The first group is sure that such articles are designed to exacerbate social contradictions, “get people frothing at the mouth”. Another group believe that people get what they pay for, the situation is normal and “fair”: private property must be respected. As it is stated in one commentary “it’s like buying a car and being told freeloaders can drive it whenever they want.” The number of likes under such comments is nine times the number of negative ratings. Judging by the prevalence of this point of view, the urban environment is seen by society as several associated private estates. It means that the city as a whole is not a single public space. Still others think the situation has educational function: it stimulates people to try earning more, change their social status. Such comments as “Gives the little tikes some motivation to better themselves” also get a lot of likes.

A group of comments note that the situation reflects the social stratification of British society. This was most accurately expressed by a commentator from Belgium: “You’d get short shrift if you tried that in Antwerp. ‘Posh’ flats are nothing to write home about – just bog-standard housing. Petty snobbery is alive and well in Britain.” A number of commentators advocate equality of access to benefits, trying to explain that life situations are different, people cannot always change them; people should not be divided by income. Children raised in such an environment will grow up with trauma. The number of dislikes under such statements is three times higher than likes. Some commentators give an unexpected turn, stating that the poor are fenced off from the unhealthy influence of the rich. “It’s good that the poorer kids can’t play with the rich ones. We wouldn’t want them picking up Tarquin’s coke habit now would we?” (Rogers & Hall, 2019a,b). They suggest moving the owners’ playground away from the windows of the social housing block so that children from wealthy families do not make noise under other people’s windows.

## 7. Conclusion

The study shows that the urban environment does not represent a single space either geographically or socially. Despite the existence in an environment unified from a physical point of view, urban communities form various cognitive ideas about this environment. Observing the speech behavior of

discourse actors reveals differences in the perception of urban realities, which can help to bring together disparate communities. The extent to which they are able to come to an agreement determines the level of their social well-being and the well-being of the urban environment as a whole.

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