

BOOK REVIEW

Can Küçükali. (2015) *Discursive Strategies and Political Hegemony: The Turkish case* [Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture, 64]. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins. vii, 184 pp.

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In her introduction to an edited volume on the pragmatics of political discourse, Fetzer (2013) underlines, among other things, the importance of two parameters for analyzing political discourse and understanding how it works: First, the interdependence between political action and language and, second, the role of culture in shaping the particularities of political discourse within a specific sociocultural community. As to the interdependence between politics and language, she observes that politics cannot actually be done without language. She also contends that current political discourse analysis exhibits an interdisciplinary orientation largely due to “an ongoing shift from a still prevailing examination of macro-politics and of politics as a product, to the more recent focus on the investigation of the dynamics of politics and political processes” (Fetzer 2013, 2). In a similar vein, Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, 1) suggest that we view political discourse as “*practical* argumentation [...] for or against particular ways of acting” (emphasis in the original).

At the same time, culture – defined “as the world view reflected in the classification systems of languages, as systems of beliefs, values and attitudes shared by members of a community, as shared ways of doing things” (Fetzer 2013, 5) – is also pertinent to the discussion of language and politics. The ways political identities and the ensuing alignments or conflicts are negotiated (in the form, e.g., of genres) and the ways political activities are performed (in the form, e.g., of political reforms) draw on shared perceptions and knowledge of what constitutes politics, how political actions are to be implemented, and how political meanings and discourses are produced, circulated, and interpreted (Fetzer 2013, 5–7).

In this context, Can Küçükali sets out to investigate the political discourse of the Turkish ruling party AKP (*Justice and Development Party*). The main presupposition of his study is that political discourse constitutes a strategic resource and practice used to attain specific political goals, that is, to account for and eventually contribute to implementing certain reforms. The author aims at showing that the discursive strategies attested in the political speeches examined do not merely *represent* political reality from a neoliberal and neo-conservative perspective, but constitute “ways of representing reality *as subordinated* to the question about

what to do, to action” (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 20; my emphasis). This is achieved via a critical approach and an account of the data in view of the AKP political decisions and transformative steps away from Kemalism and its state-centered and bureaucratic-elitist tradition, towards economic neoliberalism and global capitalism.

The first, introductory chapter of the book outlines its content and aims. The author concentrates on the discursive strategies employed by AKP to legitimize its “neoliberal policymaking as the only way of making progress” (p. 1). A solid working definition of *discursive strategies* is offered:

discursive strategies [are] linguistic realizations which create an intermediary sphere between plan and goal, and which are systematically practiced in order to assist or contradict a political action in line with the actors’ context-dependent socio-political objectives. (p. 2)

The author also claims that the analysis of discursive strategies entails a “critical stance when it comes to investigating social and political reality” which enables us to “analyze and expose opaque representations of power, domination, discrimination and control as manifestations of language” (p. 2). It is also clearly stated that the book will focus on the discourse produced by the leader and party members of AKP and will not include the discourse produced by rivals or dissidents representing and evaluating AKP ideology and politics. The book aspires to fill a research gap concerning AKP discourse, since already existing research mostly concentrates on power struggles around AKP policies, thus largely ignoring the role discourse plays in such struggles.

The second chapter of the book provides an account of the historical and political context from which AKP emerged and subsequently became the strongest and most popular political actor since 2002. This account is particularly well-written and helpful for the readers of the book as it includes the evolution of the main Turkish political parties since the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate and the Ottoman Sultanate, that is, since the foundation of the Turkish republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s CHP (*Republican People’s Party*). AKP seems to maintain CHP’s pro-Western and pro-European political orientation and its aim of creating a modernized, industrial, and capitalist society, but the differences between the two parties prove to be more significant than their similarities. In fact, AKP seems to build its political identity *in opposition with* that of CHP by criticizing the latter for statism, bureaucratism, and elitism, and by taking steps back from the secularization of society. Hence, AKP policies and ideology favor privatization and the decentralization of authority as well as the reorganization of society according to global market needs.

Religion and in particular the Islamic tradition and its values also come into play to attenuate the negative consequences of such radical changes: Charity as a significant component of Islamic religious morality “helps the most marginalized people in society to achieve a minimum level so that they can continue to live and this makes their poverty sustainable” (p. 33). Thus, charity is discursively constructed as the sole mechanism of wealth distribution and this “prevents any questioning of existing production and exploitation relations, the formation of private property and capitalism itself” (p. 33). It appears that AKP’s agenda merges neo-liberal policymaking and religious morality in order to address and attract diverse social groups ranging from “middle-classes, business circles, international finance and foreign investors” to “rural masses and conservative people with religious sensitivities” (p. 34), and “basically all those segments of society that are not in the center” (p. 36) which have traditionally been represented by CHP. Understanding the construction of such a complex and seemingly contradictory political party identity becomes the main analytic goal of the study.

The theoretical background is presented in detail in Chapter 3. After critically discussing deliberative and aggregative models of democracy as “isolated from social and power relations, culture, [and] language” and as “overlook[ing] the fact that passions and emotions play an important role in securing democratic values” (p. 42), the author places particular emphasis on conflict and conflict-ing discourses as representations of social reality: “A functioning democracy is one where democratic positions should clash in a vibrant way” (p. 44) and where “[d]ispute, disagreement or dissensus [...] are not problems to be got rid of, but healthy political instances to be encouraged” (p. 39). It is in this context that the author explores how political contradictions and clashing political interests are entextualized in the discourse of the Turkish ruling party.

To this end, Küçükali combines two theoretical frameworks, namely, the *critical realist theory of hegemony* (Joseph 2002) and *critical discourse analysis* (CDA; see among others Wodak 2009). The first one distinguishes between *structural hegemony*, which involves a ruling bloc advancing a neoliberal, capitalist economic (re)structuring of (Turkish, in the present case) society, and a *hegemonic project*, which involves the political discourse promoting the above-mentioned structural hegemony by ideologically supporting and eventually legitimizing the neoliberal, capitalist reorganization of society. In critical realist theory, these two aspects of hegemony are perceived as interdependent. Given that CDA focuses predominantly on how social inequality and political domination are perpetuated and become naturalized, it seems highly compatible with the critical reality approach to political hegemony and discourse. In particular, the author suggests that CDA

has the potential to overcome reductionist and relativist conceptualizations of political discourse by concentrating on the impact of extra-linguistic factors on discourse (in our case it is structural hegemony) and the linguistic exercise of power at the discursive level (hegemonic projects). (p. 54)

The description of the data examined and the methods and goals of the analysis are presented in Chapter 4. The author has selected 13 texts (1 election rally speech, 1 party group speech, and 11 ministerial speeches) so that he can trace common topics and discursive strategies among different genres of (Turkish/AKP) political discourse and thus “observe intertextuality and interdiscursivity between different fields of action in politics” (p. 76). In the same chapter, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), its main principles, and its analytical tools and potential are extensively discussed so as to help the readers familiarize themselves with the concepts and methodological steps of this particular analytical framework (see among others Wodak 2009). Hence, the author presents the discursive strategies that will be used in the analysis (e.g. *nomination*, *predication*, *argumentation*, *perspectivation*, *intensification*, *mitigation*), the various *topoi* constituting the premises of political arguments (e.g. *topos of numbers*, *topos of history*, *topos of threat*), the most common fallacies in political argumentation (e.g. *argumentum ad misericordiam*, *hasty generalization*, *ignoratio elenchi*) as well as legitimization, authorization, moral evaluation, and rationalization strategies. The list of discursive strategies is comprehensive and impressive and helps the author build a promising but also rather complex analytical toolbox. The chapter is concluded with a connection of this theoretical framework with the three main questions of the study: (a) Can we see similar and common discursive strategies for different policy issues? (b) What are the main traits of the political discourse employed by the AKP? (c) What is the impact of political history on discourse? (p. 77).

In the analysis of the data (Chapter 5), the author scrutinizes two complete speeches by the leader of AKP Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the election rally speech and the party group one mentioned above) and extracts from ministerial speeches delivered by members of the AKP. The author focuses on those extracts and topics/discourses which appear to be recurrent in these texts and pertain to a variety of political issues such as “economic prosperity, foreign policy, the healthcare system, education, energy policy, policing and finance” (pp. 137–138). The selected texts and extracts clearly indicate the alignment between the members of the AKP and their leader as well as their common ideological orientation. Moreover, they show that these politicians more often than not resort to similar discursive strategies. The analysis offered is not only thorough and includes helpful cross-references revealing intertextual links between different texts, but also provides an interesting

example of how DHA can be applied. The main goals set by the author are served as he clearly illustrates how

social rights are reframed as services, cities are evaluated according to their market value, public spending is seen as a burden and privatization is seen as a major indication of economic success, in line with economic neoliberalism, (p. 138)

while at the same time “potential counter-arguments are restated in a fallacious way” (p. 138).

What could be considered appealing to scholars interested in the analysis of verbal aggression and conflict is how AKP politicians construct their relation with their political opponents such as politicians belonging to opposing parties, political activists and protesters, “gangs, elites, media, writers, businessmen, international networks” (p. 99), all trying to question and/or hinder governmental policies. Via a negative representation of the political “others”, AKP politicians present themselves and their government as victims facing “mistreatment, violence and conspiracy” (p. 90), thus legitimizing the (ab)use of police force or other violent means to “protect” themselves and the citizens and to support the government’s “successful” policies (cf. *argumentum ad baculum*). Most of the attacks and criticism against AKP by political opponents or dissidents are responded to with discursive strategies constituting counter-attacks and counter-criticism and aiming at delegitimizing and belittling these people (e.g. with *argumentum ad hominem*, *trajectio in alium*, *straw man fallacy*, *non-sequitur*, *appeal to hypocrisy/tu quoquo*, *topos of history*, *topos of example*). Eventually, by strategically and repeatedly refraining from addressing the criticisms against AKP, Erdoğan in collaboration with his party members “frames the limits of the criticism/opposition and makes the legitimacy of any kind of political opposition questionable, other than in parliamentary elections” (p. 96). Thus, voting citizens emerge – in a populist manner – as the only “suitable” and “legitimate” judges whose votes are to be secured as a result of their sympathy for the “victims”. In general, a significant part of AKP’s positive self-representation as a “strong” (p. 138) yet victimized government seems to be achieved via the negative representation of the political adversaries (e.g. their criminalization or demonization), as is often the case between political rivals (see among others Tsakona 2012) or between opposing groups (see among others van Dijk 2005).

Finally, Chapter 6 offers a comprehensive discussion and summary of the goals, the theoretical framework and tools, and the findings of the study. What is more, the author compares his findings with previous research on AKP political discourse (Yaşlı 2012) and provides additional information concerning the main reforms imposed by the AKP on various sectors (e.g. the health system, education, urban housing and property, police force, foreign policy). Thus, the concluding

chapter establishes strong links between the neoliberal changes and the restructuring of the Turkish state under AKP rule (see Joseph's 2002 *structural hegemony* above), on the one hand, and the discourse produced to ideologically support and justify them (see Joseph's *hegemonic project*), on the other. In this sense the study aligns with Fetzer's (2013, 4) proposal that "political discourse needs to be examined beyond the level of what has been said".

The book is very well-written and coherent except perhaps for the introductory chapter which is not very well-structured. In my reading, it opens more issues for discussion than the book adequately addresses and at times presupposes that readers are sufficiently familiar with DHA and/or Turkish politics (which, however, may not be the case). A second reading of the introduction after finishing the whole book makes better sense and is much more rewarding.

Minor drawbacks concerning the structure and the presentation of the content can be detected. First, some of the abstracts provided at the beginning of each chapter (e.g. Chapters 2 and 4) do not capture the content of the whole chapter but summarize only a part of it; hence they do not help the reader to get an idea of the content in its entirety. The numbers inserted in the analysis to establish cross-references to the analyzed political speeches are sometimes inaccurate, thus defeating their purpose and confusing the readers (e.g. on pp. 93, 96). Furthermore, additional cross-references or quotations would be helpful at some points in the analysis (e.g. on pp. 90–91, 94–95, 107). The author also seems to presuppose that his readers are particularly familiar with the wide variety of *topoi* and *fallacies of argumentation*, so in their presentation (pp. 60–75) he offers examples that the readers are expected first to contextualize and then to analyze by themselves. In some cases, this is not particularly easy for readers who are not knowledgeable in Turkish politics and/or DHA. All this could perhaps be easily amended in a subsequent edition or reprinting of the volume.

From the beginning of the book, the topic of religion as an important argumentational resource for AKP politicians is highlighted. This is indeed an appealing aspect of the data under scrutiny since Western secularized democracies or countries with a Western and/or neoliberal political orientation do not often use religious topics or values to persuade the public and support the proposed policies. However, it is my impression that religion as emerging in AKP political discourse is not adequately discussed in the book and thus appears to play a less significant role in the analysis than outlined in the introduction (pp. 3–4) or in the conclusions of the study (p. 140). A different selection of texts may have demonstrated more effectively the importance attached to the Islamic religion and its influence on Turkish politics.

The book seems to fulfill its goal as an attempt to shift the analytical focus from "the reproduction and contestation of political *power* through political discourse"

towards “political discourse as attached to political *actors* – individuals (politicians, citizens), political institutions and organizations, engaged in political *processes* and *events*” (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 17; emphasis in the original). In addition, it forms an interesting and welcome case study coming from outside the core of the Western world and allows us to have a glimpse of how economic neoliberalism and globalization are perceived, localized, and implemented in sociocultural contexts that exhibit remarkable differences from the Western world. Hence, the study is strongly recommended to scholars interested in the analysis of political discourse and conflict, especially to those who opt for critical approaches.

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