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Pussy Riot vs. Civil Obedience: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Two Texts



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Abstract

In February 2012, less than two weeks before that year's presidential elections in Russia, a two-minute video of young women in brightly colored masks and short dresses was uploaded to YouTube. The video featured four members of the Pussy Riot punk feminist band performing a wild dance in front of the altar of Russia's main Orthodox temple, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. Lip-syncing to a song, which they called a punk prayer, they beseeched the Virgin Mary to "drive" Vladimir Putin, then the prime minister and a presidential candidate, "away." After generating scads of international publicity, the case ended with the three band members being sentenced to prison for two years on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.

The clearly provocative nature of the performance – with costume changes mid-scene and anti-government, anti-Church protest slogans set to the music of a sacred Orthodox song – made the Pussy Riot case a springboard to discussion of the acceptability of religiously contextualized political speech in contemporary Russia. Through a critical discourse analysis of the original lyrics of the punk prayer and the report from the psychological and linguistic experts that formed the basis of the prosecutor's case, this article explores the discursive devices and rhetorical strategies employed in these texts to challenge or sustain the existing power relations in Russia. As the analysis makes clear, while the punk prayer criticizes State and the Russian Orthodox Church as oppressive and corrupt by disrupting and denaturalizing the images typically associated with their rituals and spaces, the report normalizes conformity, depoliticizes Pussy Riot critique, and delegitimizes public political protests by pushing them beyond the boundaries of socially acceptable forms of citizens' civic participation.

Keywords

Pussy Riot, Russia, critical discourse analysis, blasphemy, political speech.

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Key words: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology, Euphemization, Derogation Discursive structures, Presupposition, Polarization (In- group vs. Out-group), Negative other-representation vs. Positive self- representation. 1. Introduction Critical discourse analysis shares a lot of common grounds with critical approaches in their endeavours for people's awareness and ultimate emancipation. According to Widdowson (2000), CDA is the uncovering of implicit ideologies in texts. It unveils the underlying ideological prejudices and therefore the exercise of power in texts. Apparently, two different ways of analysing texts were applied relative to my expertise of the background: I used a deductive, "top-down" (i.e. hypothesis-data-thesis) approach for those with a clearly defined and familiar context (geopolitical, social, etc.) and an inductive, "bottom-up" (i.e. data-thesis) approach for those texts which I found less "analytic-friendly." Suppose we have been analyzing the cold-war discourse of the US administration under President Truman or President Eisenhower. Suppose we have found, upon the analysis of textual data, enough evidence to claim that the investigated discourse, while containing little implied information, is manifestly rich in cohesion links.