

# TOPICS WITHIN ACADEMIC STUDIES IN DISCOURSE ON HUMAN RIGHTS: IS THERE FOCUS ON LANGUAGE USE?

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## ABSTRACT

*The article focuses on key topics and concepts within the academic discussion on human rights and strives to map their verbal representation tools. The paper aims to get preliminary information if the academic research on human rights discourse includes the investigation of language use within the mentioned domain. The study required the formation of the research theoretical background that rested on critical discourse studies, and the development of research methodology that integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches, used computational tools for text content analysis for further considerations of the data obtained. The research material covered academic papers on discourse on human rights that passed through a series of selection procedures and finally amounted to 4,765 items. The findings revealed 13 major thematic codes within the Academia's discussion on human rights during 2000-2010, 6 additional codes that got their visibility during 2011-2019, and also identified language units that verbalized the above codes. The paper suggests the above thematic codes could be associated with those microstructures that form the macrostructure of human rights phenomenon both within cognitive semantics and social construct of human existence reality. The findings led to the conclusion that currently there is no systemic focus on language patterns within discourse on human rights and provided arguments for the respective research prospects.*

**Keywords:** Academic Discourse, Content Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Human Rights, Institutional Discourse, Language, Social Semiotics.

## INTRODUCTION

Human rights represent a fundamental concept and driving force for the of civilization development. Scholars agree that today discourse on human rights discourse is viewed as part of global lingua franca (Freeman, 2017). This explains researchers' ongoing attention and interest to various aspects of this concept scope and interpretation, the development and implementation within multidimensional practices of the contemporary multicultural world community (Avineri et al., 2018; Conley et al., 2019).

Scholars view the topic through historical lenses and try to trace the development of discourse on human rights as a conceptual movement from landmark editions as the American Declaration of Independence (1776), the French Revolution (1789) towards the contemporary cornerstone Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1989), and other Covenants and Conventions.

However, a confusing fact can be discovered in the course of electronic databases search for publications on the language use within the discussion on human rights issues. On the one hand, such a search would result in a huge list of items for key words “*language/discourse on human rights*” (i.e. Google Scholar produces over 2,500,000 results in 0.07 sec). On the other hand, just a glance at even first top 1,000 abstracts under the “*any time*” engine setting would reveal that the use of such words as “*language*” or “*discourse*” do not mean that a paper considers specifics of particular language units use in contexts related to the human rights phenomenon. Such research items either focus on language rights or refer to the status of human rights topics within national or international discourse as communication activity.

This study is to get preliminary information if the academic research on human rights discourse includes the investigation of language use within the specified context. The research subject is the content of the academic research works that study the above discourse. The research object is the verbal representation of the key topics and concepts that are discussed in the above works. The research goal is exploring the current state of affairs in discourse studies regarding the use of language in the contemporary discourse on human rights.

The research follows the concept of Van Dijk (2009) who views discourse as multidimensional social phenomenon. Discourse is a linguistic phenomenon (formed by language units into a sequence of words or sentences) that reflects an action, a form of social interaction, mental representation, communicative event, cultural product, etc.

Further, it is critical for the present research to follow CDA understanding that language is embedded in society and its institutions, the text bears meaning only within a particular social context at a specific time and place, and as result of this contextually dependent synergy of specific thoughts, knowledge, words, deeds, bodies, tools, objects (Giddens, 1986; Pütz & Van Dijk, 2004).

The above view confirms the current importance of functional linguistics within CDA, that aims “*to relate language form to context*” (Flowerdew, 2017) Moreover, the present study follows the stance of those researchers who consider that language use should be analyzed empirically within its social context, the analysis should serve the public good (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) within humanitarian contexts (Atabekova et al., 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

*The theoretical stage* included analysis of literature to build up the research theoretical background and methodology. In the course of studies various methods within discourse studies were applied, including content-based, textual and critical discourse analysis. This combination made it possible to consider realist, constructionist and critical ontologies of the language use product, combine statistics and semiotics (semantic and syntactic features, pragmatic contexts of concepts actualization in academic discourse), integrate deductive and inductive methods, lay grounds for discourse consideration within micro- and macro-contexts.

The selection of works on the discourse on human rights for the study implemented the content-based approach in terms of identifying themes of articles that introduce considerations and data on human rights issues. Discourse historical approach laid grounds to period limitations in the course of material selection for the empirical analysis of language use, items published only in the Third Millennium were subject to study. Dispositive approach justified the authors’ attention to heterogeneous phenomena and toolkit use in terms of materials, approaches, topics

for identification. Dialectical relational approach made it possible to explore academic publications as products of Academia social activities within the mutual connection, specifics, and development in terms of knowledge representation on the topic under study. Authors have shaped the grounds of the above methodology earlier (Atabecova et al., 2019) and checked its application to a particular area in the present research.

## RESEARCH MATERIALS

Materials for empirical study focused on academic discourse on the topic under study and included publications produced within 2000-2019; the research team decided to focus on the trends within the current century landscape. The initial step included search through the Google Scholar database. In January 2019, the respective search showed about 565,000 results within 0.12 sec for the key words “*human rights discourse*” during 2000-2019 period of publication. Next, additional key word combination “*language use*” was added. This restricted the list of potential sources to about 17,100 results within 0.09 sec. The respective papers abstracts were analyzed by the research team who also engaged MA course students to select papers whose abstracts mentioned the language use or language issues within the issues of discourse on human rights. Finally, 4,765 articles were subject to analysis of discourse on human rights.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The empirical stage consisted in the content analysis of academic papers that explored discourse on human rights through coding and computational automated analysis. The studies lasted from January to June 2019.

The *coding* was performed by the authors who applied both predetermined and emergent codes (Stuckey, 2015). The starting number of topics that emerged from the textual data was reduced from over 40+ to 13 major code categories that act as constant within 2000-2019 period of academic discussion on human rights and 6 codes that acquired Academia’s attention and therefore, led to the increase in the number of publications on the respective topics during the last decade. The authors strived to reach the intercoder reliability, so they checked all the texts codes for consistency and between three coders. As computer-assisted investigation proved its efficiency (Pandey et al., 2017), a set of tools were applied, including automated search for key words double ranking (Wang et al., 2016). The above configuration of integrated analysis proved its validity in the course of studies oriented toward societal needs (Atabekova & Shoustikova, 2018).

## RESULTS

### Thematic Codes in Academic Discourse on Human Rights

Study made it possible to identify the major thematic codes within discussion on human rights and language units used for verbal representation. The differences in the list and major codes distributions were found with regard to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> decades of the Third Millennium.

The list below provides references to examples of the most consistent texts where the mentioned thematic codes appear (2000-2010):

1. 12.24% discourse on human rights and globalization (Asante, 2008; Blythe et al., 2018);
2. 11.19% discourse on sustainability, security and development (Casper, 2007; Melkote & Steeves, 2015);
3. 10.13% on human rights and education (Gray et al., 2018; Lohrenscheit, 2002);
4. 9.1% on language of social justice, advocacy for balanced language policy in education, service provision, etc. (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Reagan, 2019);
5. 8.74% on language of politics (O'Connell, 2017; Reus-Smit, 2001);
6. 8.39% on human rights and counter extremism/terrorism (Gearty, 2007; Mattsson & Säljö, 2017);
7. 8.04% on human rights and vulnerable audiences, peoples with disabilities, focus on the role of sign language promotion and use (Corker, 2000; Shakespeare et al., 2017; Murray, 2015);
8. 7.34% on human dignity, rights, and duties (Chaskalson, 2002; Mezzaroba & da Silveira, 2018);
9. 6.64% on particular language endangerment as threat to human rights (Hornberger, 2002; Roch et al., 2018);
10. 5.24% on children rights (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Jans, 2004);
11. 4.9% on women's rights (Joachim, 2003; DeLaet, 2018);
12. 4.2% on rights and national identities within globalization (Bokser-Liwerant, 2002; Klevan et al., 2016);
13. 3.85% on regional and national specifics in discourse on human rights (Achugar, 2007; Makoni, 2011).

The list below specifies new subcodes and provides references to examples of the most consistent texts where the mentioned thematic codes appear (2011-2019):

1. 3.64% on human rights and religion, papal discourse (Giordan & Zrinščak, 2018; Troy, 2019);
2. 3.36% on human rights within sports (Horne, 2017; Talbot & Carter, 2017);
3. 3.36% on LGBT rights (Davidson & McDonald, 2018; Lee, 2016);
4. 3.36% discourse on human rights within migration crisis (McDermott & Gibbons, 2016; Sicurella, 2017);
5. 3.08% on health and bioethics rights (Brisbois & Plamondon, 2018; Williams & Blaiklock, 2016);
6. 3.08% on international business and human rights (Posner, 2016; Wettstein et al., 2019).

The research confirms that new themes might come to light within critical discourse analysis (Ndhlovu, 2018) and new verbal units appear in the arsenal of discussion on human rights. We found papers on ways that politicians use the rhetoric devices and text structure to prove the state's national compliance with the international provisions (Kiersey & Hayes, 2010).

### **Language Representation of the Thematic Codes under Study**

The thematic codes characterize the semantic varieties of the textual dimensions within discourse under study. The content-based analysis reveals the correlation between the thematic codes and respective semantic concepts that academic discourse uses in the course of cognitive processing and presentation of knowledge on the human rights issues. These concepts can be considered as signified parts to the macro sign of human rights within academic discourse on this topic. Language means that verbalize the above codes and respective concepts act as signifiers to verbalize context-dependent varieties of human rights macro sign in the communication field under investigation.

The respective analysis explored the above specified thematic codes with regard to the number of language units that served the purpose of specifying the thematic codes in the academic text corpus on human rights.

The statistics revealed the following:

1. Structures that are formed by one notional word amount to 6.8%;
2. Structures that are formed by two notional words amount 17.2%;
3. Structures that are formed by three units amount to 10.3%;
4. Structures that are formed by four units including one functional word amount to 44.8%;
5. Structures that are formed by five units including one functional word amount to 14.1%;
6. Structures that are formed by six units including one functional word amount to 6.8%.

The analysis reveals that the most frequent syntactic length of the thematic codes is four units including one functional word, or the structures with two notional words. This data seems to be relevant for further studies due to a number of reasons, bearing in mind previous studies of general character/related to topics that do not focus of discourse on human rights. Scholars argue for the link between the length of language structures and complexity of the respective concepts. Also, there is academic trend to understand syntactic constructions as prototype categories.

The academic discourse on human rights uses a system of specified concepts that differ by their syntactical complexity. Their language syntactic form correlates with the concept level of abstraction/concreteness with regard to particular topics. The dominance of concepts, which are verbalized through four units including one functional word (44.8%) reveal the high level of context-dependent topics in terms of the academic research area on human right, on the one hand. On the other hand, bearing in mind the semantic features of the verbalized concepts identified in the course of present study, it is possible to conclude that there are no prototype categories either generalized or tailored to a particular discourse, which would relate to language use issues within academic discourse on human rights.

### **Data Interpretation within Social Semiotics and Discourse Theory**

The research has neither found a trend in discourse studies that would consistently focus on the language means for the system of legal signs on the human right issues, nor discovered any items on the language use specifics related to discourse on human rights. The findings have mapped major concepts that form the phenomenon of human rights within the academic studies, major semantic, syntactic, and morphological features of language means, which are used to verbalize the system of human rights concepts with no regard to the language means for their verbal representation.

The data obtained can be considered from the angle of theory on discourse macrostructures (Van Dijk, 2019). The concept of human rights holds the status of a conceptual macrostructure within contemporary multidimensional activities across the world. The subtopics that have been verbalized in the papers under study represent culturally and socially accepted topics that reflect the international and national communities' actions with regard human rights implementation.

The human rights can be considered as a micro sign within the interdisciplinary discourse on the respective theme. First, the signified part of this sign is verbalized through legal regulations and respective written texts within the legislation on human rights. Then the language structure "human rights" can be viewed as a signifier whose semantics is perceived and verbally interpreted in varied syntactical and morphological forms by different audiences, including law makers, legal practitioners and legal scientists, other representatives of interdisciplinary academic community, civil society actors, and other populations. Thus, possible content-and context dependent pragmatic features of the human rights macro sign are also specified. In this

way discourse on human rights represents a multidimensional social construction of legislative meaning as infinite semiosis that different audiences are part to.

The study reveals the this construct largely depends on pragmatics, namely on societal/institutional settings, and particular school of thought/individual perceptions within which ones the essence of the human rights macro sign is considered and interpreted. With regard to the components of the signifier as part to the human rights macro sign, there is no room in current academic discourse for the language units that would be considered as components of the respective signifier. Some brief outline of the methodology that the present research applied, seem to be timely, as well. As for the designed methodology it has proved the need of various tools application for the data validity assurance in case of discourse analysis.

The conducted study moved the knowledge form language patterns in national legislations on human rights to a new realm of academic discourse on the above topic. The methodologies used in the research correlates with the general trends in information processing and drive to enhance its quality (Atabekova & Gorbatenko, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The research focused on academic papers that considered discourse on human rights within 2000-2019 periods. The investigation has confirmed a wide array of diverse topics and themes within the realm under study. The above topics and themes were specified into a list of text codes that identify major trends within the academic discussion on human rights. These codes could be considered as tools for naming and shaping those substructures that materials through discourse form the structure of human rights micro sign as part to social semiosis and activities in the contemporary society.

The study identified those language units that had been used to verbalize key concepts and research topics in the above works. The empirical investigation of the verbal representation of the key topics and concepts in the academic research on human rights discourse revealed language features that refer to constitutive conceptual items of the macrostructure of human rights within their multidimensional existence and developments in diverse contexts. However, the study has revealed that academic research on human rights discourse does not include the consideration of language use within the relevant contexts.

This research data lays grounds for further study of language unites patterns use, language units' functional roles within the identified global schematic subcategories of the discourse macrostructure of human rights. The proposed angle of the study helps to identify human rights vision of international and national government institutions, representatives of various social and political communities, since their positions are verbalized in the relevant discourses.

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