

SUBTLE HATE SPEECH, PREJUDICE, AND SEXISM IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

Original Scientific Article

DOI: 10.5937/zurbezkrim2502059S	COBISS.RS-ID 144043265	UDK 004.738.5:305-055.22
---------------------------------	------------------------	--------------------------

Jelena Škrbić Bijelić¹

Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Srpska, Republic of Srpska, BiH

Abstract: Any form of media writing about women is often accompanied by prejudices embedded throughout the text, as well as sexist attitudes that reflect the mindset of the broader environment and, indirectly, that of the author. Subtle hate speech is therefore present in such texts, and at times even explicit. To verify this thesis, ten articles from six online portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina were analyzed, using “woman” as the key word. The portals were accessed on 26 August 2023. The analysis focused on how women are represented, that is, which roles are assigned to them (including insight into the roles to which women in the media are typically restricted). The findings of the analysis indicate that reporting is unethical and stereotypical, that prejudices against women remain prevalent and continue to be reinforced, and that women are still portrayed through the lens of sexism even in the 21st century.

Keywords: media, woman, sexism, hate speech, prejudice

1. Introduction

The status of women in BiH and the wider region is unfavorable in many respects. Equality exists only on paper. For example, the Law on Gender Equality in BiH prescribes equal treatment for all citizens. Nevertheless, this equality is not realized in practice. According to 2019 data, women made up 63.9% of the working-age population, 32.9% of all employed persons, and 26.7% of the inactive population. While it cannot be stated that the media, or the way women are portrayed in the media, are solely responsible for these statistics, they undoubtedly play a role by perpetuating prejudices and stereotypical representations of women. Article 21, Paragraph 2 (Media) of the Law on Gender Equality in BiH stipulates that “public display or representation of any person in an offensive, demeaning, or humiliating manner on the basis of gender is prohibited.” How-

¹ Corresponding author: Jelena Škrbić Bijelić., Ministry of Interior of Republika Srpska. E-mail: lenaskrbic@gmail.com

ever, in practice, this provision is largely ignored. Gender-based discrimination remains visible, and indirect discrimination is particularly prevalent in media reporting.

In order to conduct the analysis of the selected texts and achieve the goal of presenting the media portrayal of women in 2023, it is first necessary to define the key terms that are used in this paper.

Hate speech is essentially any form of expression that conveys messages of hatred or intolerance toward a particular group. "(...) It represents an act that simultaneously discriminates against and condemns the victim, while encouraging others to join in the condemnation and persecution by presenting such behavior as socially justified and acceptable, which will not encounter social disapproval" (Ivanović et al., 2019: 19). At the root of hate speech, as with violence, lies a power imbalance, that is, an attempt to position oneself as superior to the victim. It is typically based on a specific characteristic, such as race, national or ethnic origin, religion, language, sex, sexual orientation, political beliefs, social origin and so on. Hate speech appears through all channels where spoken or written language is used—from radio and television programs, print media, online news portals, periodicals, and books, to pamphlets and social media.

According to (Ivanović et al., 2019: 22), there are seven types of hate speech: incitement to violence (calls for violence circulated via social media or other mass media); the dissemination of stereotypes and prejudices; the dehumanization of the victim (where the victim is portrayed as an inferior person who does not deserve equal treatment); associating a particular group with criminality (when the commission of an act is attributed to an entire group rather than to individuals, for example, fan groups); spreading false information, creating panic, and alarming the public; direct or indirect threats; and the use of offensive expressions targeting a specific group.

In the broader context, hate speech constitutes a form of violence. In this paper, sexism and prejudice are treated as subcategories of hate speech. Discourse analysis, as an appropriate method, is used to determine the extent to which prejudice and hate speech targeting women are present in the 60 examined texts from six different online news portals retrieved using the keyword "woman."

In this paper, the representation of women in media texts is classified into categories. More precisely, the analysis will show the extent to which stereotypical reporting classifies women into specific categories, assigning them a limited range of roles. As Valić Nedeljković notes, drawing on Byerly and Ross, research on the representation of women in news has shown that "women most frequently appear as victims, predominantly of sexual violence, which is presented in the media in a sensationalist manner. Additionally, they are visible primarily as mothers and wives. Women rarely serve as sources of information, be it in local, regional, or national media. They are quoted less often, and when they are, it tends to be only a superficial mention in shorter texts. They are also

considered less credible as sources of information than men” (Valić Nedeljković, 2011: 450).

Regarding the roles women assume in the media (when they receive media space), Valić Nedeljković identifies four categories: “female media content creators; women as actors in socio-political practice who are given space to present their ideas and views in the media; women portrayed exclusively as objects; and finally, women who in certain media content alternate between the role of actor and author—such as female journalists who, in some situations, are presented as actors within the socio-political and cultural sphere” (Valić Nedeljković, 2011: 455). The roles of women in the media, more precisely, in the informative (non-magazine) press, are also defined by Milivojević, who identifies three categories: the entertainment role (entertainers, models, singers, etc.); the domestic role (housewives, mothers, companions, or women who balance career and family); and the expert role (psychologists, social workers, beauticians, teachers, doctors, etc.), whose expertise is typically framed in relation to the family sphere and women in family-care roles.

The role of the media in shaping personality is extremely important, and this role has not changed throughout history. However, a contemporary problem is the low level of media literacy, particularly in the realm of online media, which benefits portals whose primary goal is profit, often at the expense of quality and ethical reporting. For this reason, hate speech and prejudice often remain unaddressed, as clicks and views are prioritized over the journalist’s (or editor’s) ethical code. It is crucial to address the issue of disseminating prejudice in written media discourse, both because of the rapid dissemination of ideas among large groups and across the population (in the case of the Internet) and because of the shifting of responsibility onto others when sharing such content, which is noted by Ivanović et al.: “Due to the difficulty of identifying oneself within the crowd, the sense of responsibility for one’s actions is lost, which leads to much more extreme behavior. Certain behaviors (or ideas, note by the author) spread massively like a virus, as individuals in a crowd tend to accept and follow the ideas, opinions, and emotions of the majority without question” (Ivanović et al., 2019: 86).

2. Methodology

Media construct images precisely through language. Language does not only serve as a tool to convey information—it also serves to shape attitudes, affirm (or form) identity, and disseminate ideology. This is why it is important to include other disciplines in the study of language, in order to move away from pure formalism, because language is not only a system of signs but also a system of meaning.

This paper employs quantitative–qualitative discourse analysis, with the unit of analysis being the written text, that is, a single post on an online portal.

Using a comparative method, the results are summarized to distinguish the categories into which women in the media are placed.

Discourse analysis as a method originates in linguistics and later narratology, and today it is used across many disciplines as a systematic and suitable tool for studying textual, cultural, and sociological phenomena from the perspective of meaning. Viewed from a narratological standpoint, the text represents the template, while discourse represents the meaning-making potential of that text. On the structuralist level, text would correspond to *fabula*, and discourse to *syuzhet*. Thus, discourse and narrative may be seen as synonyms, with the difference that discourse analysis is now a method used across numerous disciplines, whereas narratology has remained tied to the arts (initially literature, and today also virtual arts such as video games). In this sense, discourse would represent the linguistic analysis of texts, specifically “the highest level of linguistic analysis” (Perović, 2014: 33). In other words, discourse analysis is “a study of the relationship between language and contexts in which it is used” (Lakić, 2014: 57).

“Critical discourse analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality” (Van Dijk, 2001).

Because critical discourse analysis enables us to identify how language shapes and reinforces the power of ideology, this method is suitable for examining the inequality produced through texts that objectify women.

This paper analyses written discourse. As Savić points out, “written material can, in essence, be categorized into three basic groups according to the criterion of the degree of publicity: (1) printed, (2) non-printed (that is, written but not intended for print), and (3) written but intended for oral delivery (public speeches, radio and/or television news, etc.)” (Savić, 1993: 48). This classification was developed in relation to the media landscape at the time; however, today online news portals may also be considered a form of printed media, but virtually printed. With the development of digital technologies, discourse changes in technical terms, but not in its essence.

2.1. Corpus

Sixty texts from six of the most frequently visited online news portals were analyzed—three from Republika Srpska (*Mondo.ba*, *Nezavisne.com*, *Atvbl.com*) and three from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Hayat.ba*, *Avaz.ba*, *Klix.ba*)—as identified in Top 20 Bosnia and Herzegovina News Websites and Top Websites in Bosnia and Herzegovina (All Industries) (<https://www.sem-rush.com/trending-websites/ba/all>). The texts were published between July and

August 2023 and were located by entering the keyword “woman” (*žena*) into each portal’s search tool to ensure the most possible objectivity of the sample. We did not search within *lifestyle* or *leisure* sections, where lighter content implicitly aimed at women is typically published, in order to avoid predetermining the outcome of the analysis. All texts were collected on 26 August 2023 at 9:00 a.m. For clarity, articles from the portals were coded (Appendix 1). The analysis includes linguistic interpretation, given that “language is a means of expression but also of producing social inequality. (...) These are numerous, typically subtle forms of the abuse of social power, where language is the primary instrument of domination over others. This is precisely the subject of critical discourse analysis” (Perović, 2014: 97).

The paper presents the findings of the analysis of media reporting and the extent to which hate speech, prejudice, and sexism are present in the examined texts. The concluding section reiterates several findings outlined in previous sections. The analysis was conducted using the coding sheet from the study *Која је изабрала шћамја у Србију?* (Pralica, 2012: 64), which was adapted for the purposes of this study.

3. Analysis of the portals

In general, women are portrayed in the media either infrequently or as inferior to men. As noted by Markov, referring to Валић Недељковић, “in the media, they are represented as incompetent, inferior, and always at the service of men. The media either ignore women or stereotype them” (Valić Nedeljković, 2011: 448). Валић Недељковић identifies three categories of print media according to their target audience: feminist media, women’s media, and gender-unmarked media (Valić Nedeljković, 2011). The analysis primarily pertains to the latter, gender-unmarked category.

It is important to address how dominance (in this case, male) permeates everyday narratives and, by extension, the media. Theories of media manipulation, as discussed by Chomsky and Teun van Dijk, address this phenomenon. Van Dijk, discussing the connection between the cognitive and the affective, highlights the misuse of power not only through actions but also through the mind:

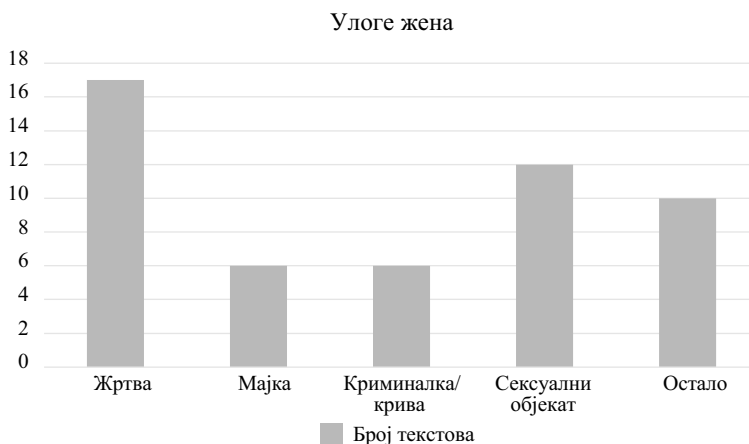
“That is, through special access to and control over the means of public discourse and communication, dominant groups or institutions may influence the structures of text and talk in such a way that, as a result, the knowledge, attitudes, norms, values, and ideologies of recipients are – more or less indirectly affected – in the interests of the dominant group” (Van Dijk, 2007).

Critical discourse analysis therefore encompasses the study of linguistic structures and analyzes how such structures (headlines, syntax, semantics, style, and stylistic devices) contribute to manipulation.

With regard to the gender composition of editorial staff, which may influence the text being published, the *Dnevni avaz* impressum states that the outlet is a full member of the Press Council in BiH. The editor-in-chief is a woman, while the company director is a man. The editor of *Klix* is male. *Mondo* is headed by a female director, and each section (e.g. news, magazine) has its own male or female editor. In *Nezavisne novine*, both the executive director and the editor-in-chief (as listed in the impressum) are women. Regarding *ATV* and *Hajat* portals, the editor is not specified; only the ownership structure of the television channels, rather than the online portals, is provided. It is evident that women are predominant in editorial positions.

3.1. Categories of women

The analysis shows that the categorization does not deviate from those proposed by Valić Nedeljković. The woman often appears as a victim (Graph 1), which corresponds to the dominant media narrative and the ongoing gender-based violence as a consequence of patriarchy. A new category also emerges, reflecting a new form of discrimination—in text X2¹ we encounter a new media role assigned to women: that of a spoiler, someone who “ruins” something (and is once again “at fault”). The text describes a TikTok video of a marriage proposal and a woman who supposedly “ruined” the public beach proposal simply by being present. Here we can identify subtle hate speech both in the text and in the comments that are cited, particularly through the her-us opposition, or more precisely the young versus the old. This also points to the presence of so-called ageism, that is, discrimination against older people.



Graph 1

3.2. Genre and textual elements

In the observed news portals, news items overwhelmingly dominate (Graph 2). The most frequent genre across all analyzed online portals is the news report, while not a single reportage was identified. Texts retrieved from Reddit and slightly adapted were analyzed as articles, which explains a somewhat higher number of articles. Regarding layout features, the only recurring element was photographs serving as meaningful visual accompaniments to the texts (e.g., a photograph of a hornet in article H10²). However, the photographs meaningfully accompanying texts that contain prejudices are suitable for such texts, but not for challenging such patterns. For instance, in text M7³ we find a sentence that reflects not only prejudice but also subtle hate speech followed by the accompanying photos: *Take a look at Larisa, who claims she is ‘not just a piece of meat.’*



Graph 2

3.3. Headlines

In general, a headline should provide information about the content of the text. Naturally, it also serves to reinforce ideological messages, which is why ethical codes and guidelines condemn sensationalist headlines that disseminate prejudice. Nevertheless, such headlines fulfill their purpose—they attract clicks and views, thereby influencing the financial aspect of the portal. Metaphorical and sensationalist headlines were grouped into a single category (Graph 3). It was observed that journalists often simply rename news items (for example, from the police or prosecutor’s office) by adding phrases such as “New Details of the Accident” (M1⁴) or “Drama in Istria” (A39⁵), in order to create more “explosive” headlines and attract readers.

Sensationalist headlines dominate compared to others, which again highlights the importance of education aimed at influencing changes in editorial policy.



Graph 3

3.4. Style and language

The very form in which something is written already contains information about style and language. Given that the analyzed corpus mainly consisted of news, that is, statements issued by police departments or prosecutors' offices, it is clear that the administrative style typical of these institutions prevails. The sentences are short, clear, and simple. Such texts contain no epithets, verbs are used in the passive voice, and nouns and pronouns dominate. This is expected for this type of text, as their primary function is referential, that is, to convey information. However, a characteristic feature is the conative function that appears in the headlines of such news. This is precisely why they are often categorized as sensationalist, and the message they convey can even be offensive. In articles, by contrast, the sentences are not as short and the language is more colloquial, aiming to be closer to the reader and facilitate the delivery of the message. Text A6 contains many such examples: "Due to the lack of this hormone, women can become very difficult, and will often have outbursts of anger at people who merely looked sideways at them." This pseudoscientific perspective on women reveals a deeply rooted misogyny and sexist attitudes suggesting that a woman is suitable only for sexual intercourse.

3.5. Stereotypes about women

Stereotypes appear both in headlines and in the body of texts across all analyzed portals. From the categories into which women are placed (which has already been discussed) to calls for violence, all these elements contribute to the dissemination of deeply rooted prejudices. For example, in text A2⁶ we identify

subtle hate speech and the act of assigning blame to the woman, as the headline emphasizes that she was the one who “left the child sleeping” (rather than stating that the child died in its sleep). Text A6⁷ already conveys prejudice in its headline: Experts claim: This is what a woman who has no sexual intercourse looks like. Why? Because such stereotypes rest on the belief that a woman who does not engage in sexual intercourse is incapable of anything, that her reactions are inappropriate precisely due to the absence of sexual activity, and so forth. The text represents a pure reproduction of stereotypes, as it does not specify who these “experts” are, where such research was allegedly conducted, or any other information that would indicate the existence of a scientific study. The concluding part of the article is not only saturated with sexism and misogyny but may also be interpreted as encouraging violence, including rape: “In other words, when you see that a woman looks tired, is irritable, frustrated, angry, and lacks self-confidence—do not argue with her; instead, try to resolve the situation in the way the experts advise—through sexual intercourse.”

The *Klix* portal publishes an equal number of texts that adopt a somewhat more serious approach—portraying women as a vital part of the community—and texts that reduce women to objects of male attention. Five of the portal’s texts address social problems, while the remaining five reinforce them. The texts in *Nezavisne novine* containing the keyword “woman” also include jokes, which represent a specific form of reinforcing prejudice and stereotypes, as well as sexist ideas. It is disheartening that such content appears on a portal intended for a broad audience, yet it is also indicative of the readership’s mentality, given that media literacy remains insufficiently addressed within educational structures. These kinds of jokes also constitute a form of subtle hate speech.

All these stereotypes disseminated through texts confine women to a limited set of roles that are “assigned” to them in a patriarchal society. For example, when discussing the public discrediting of Serbia’s former acting president Nataša Mičić solely on the basis of her gender, Milivojević notes the following: “This type of instant discreditation works because it has been carefully prepared through years of media practice that fixed stereotypes of female inferiority in the popular consciousness” (Milivojević, 2005: 12). We are inclined to agree with this observation. Twenty years later, women are still portrayed as secondary, defined only in relation to men, and reduced to objects. The dominant politics that Milivojević described at the time has become even more pervasive today, which is facilitated by the rapid dissemination of information, easier access to online portals, and the expansion of audiences.

4. Conclusion

The findings indicate that Bosnian-Herzegovinian journalism does not follow contemporary recommendations on gender-sensitive reporting. Reporting

on women is stereotypical; women are represented through the lens of prejudice, and the primary role assigned to them (as demonstrated in previous studies as well) is that of the victim. The roles of mother/wife are also prominent, while a new category is introduced—that of the lawbreaker or the woman who is (in some way) to blame. Headlines are either sensationalist or informative, with the former clearly aimed at generating clicks and likes, far more frequently than should be the case, and often in contradiction with reporting guidelines and ethical codes (e.g., *a horrifying fate*), yet effective in attracting readership. Metaphors serve to reinforce prejudices, and at the lexical level women remain confined to predefined categories, with only one exception (K6⁸— *woman artist*). Epithets are used to amplify sensationalism (and, consequently, prejudice). Within the analyzed corpus, 30 texts were unsigned, 29 were signed with initials (both initials), and only one text was signed with the author's full name and surname.

Of the 60 analyzed texts, nearly one third consist of Reddit posts and descriptions of TikTok videos. Another third comprises statements issued by police departments, published with the addition of sensationalist headlines aimed at attracting visitors to the portal, while the final third consists of articles copied from one outlet to another without any genuine sources. Two texts are jokes. In 17 texts, the woman is presented as a victim. In six texts she appears as a mother or a wife, and in another six she is portrayed as being in conflict with the law. In 12 texts, the woman is depicted as a sexual object, although objectification occurs continuously. Ten texts fall into the category “other,” either because they are unrelated to women (e.g., Putin, Dodik), or because the woman is portrayed as a pest in one text, two texts are reports from conferences concerning women, one discusses a women's association, one is an interview with a woman artist, and three include a misattributed keyword. The text about a dentist who falsely presented himself was counted only once, but with two roles (victim and perpetrator). The categories into which women are placed, as well as the stereotypes assigned to them, indicate a significant presence of hate speech targeting women in the analyzed texts.

“Traditional media have merged with the internet in order to respond to the needs of their audiences. And the needs of the new, digital audience revolve around ensuring the fastest possible flow of information in the shortest possible time, which is presented in the form of sensationalist headlines. Reading content on digital media is superficial, without deeper engagement with substance, which leads to a distorted perception of facts. Every fact becomes a shout” (Ivanović et al., 2019: 86). Following this logic, each time hate speech is used and an average consumer of such content encounters misogynistic views (which they do not recognize as misogynistic but rather as factual), women in society maintain their unequal status, as they are perceived by the crowd absorbing these shouts as less competent. This is why it is crucial to address these issues from every perspective and to continuously draw attention to the harmful effects of such patterns.”

Media outlets and media professionals must adhere to ethical codes and the law, and base their reporting on principles of education rather than the dissemination of backwardness for the sake of clicks, especially given the extremely low level of media literacy, which makes the average consumer more susceptible to manipulation conveyed both through the text itself and through comments on the text. The analyzed media (the broadest and most widely read ones), therefore, do not deconstruct patriarchy and the norms it imposes. Instead, they reconstruct stereotypes as elements of social reality that have been dogmatized and are thus perceived as normal and unchangeable. In order for change to occur, editorial policies must be reformed. It may be useful to draw on the guidelines for media reporting on gender-based violence developed by Women Journalists Against Violence, as these can also be beneficial for gender-related reporting in general or, quite simply, the ethical standards of the journalistic profession.

Linguistic structures, such as word order in headlines or the use of rhetorical questions, whether in the headline or the body of the text, shape the reader's perception and the formation of attitudes toward a given issue. According to Van Dijk, when readers (i.e., recipients) lack access to alternative information sources or the cognitive ability to resist suggestive messaging, preferred models of specific situations emerge as a result. These models then evolve into generalizations, attitudes, and ideologies (Van Dijk, 2007). This clearly illustrates the extent to which media influence audiences and contribute to the creation or reinforcement of views on particular issues—in this case, the status of women. For this reason, it is essential to change reporting practices on women, reshape media representations, and develop new, affirmative categories in which women will be placed within the media landscape.

Notes

- 1 X2 – НЕПОЗНАТА ЖЕНА НА ПЛАЖИ УНИШТИЛА МЛАДОМ ПАРУ ПРОСИДБУ ИЗ СНОВА
- 2 H10 – Жена преминула од убода стршљена
- 3 M7 – ОНА ЈЕ МИС БУМ БУМ 2023: У финалу послала поруку о којој брује друштвене мреже
- 4 A1 – Нови детаљи несреће на путу Бањалука - Лакташи: Погинула тридесетогодишња Прњаворчанка, повријеђене три особе
- 5 A39 – Драма у Истри: Мушкарац оteo жену и побјегао
- 6 A2 – Стравична судбина човјека који улази у „Задругу“: „Жена ставила дијете да спава, послије пет минута је умрло“
- 7 A6 –Стручњаци тврде: Овако изгледа жена којој фале интимни односи
- 8 K6 – Ханна Дујмовић: Умјетност је медиј који држи нит међу ствараоцима, прилика да се наше име чује у Европи

References

- Ivanović, A., Randjelović, D., & Totić, M. (2019). Govor mrznje u elektronskim medijima i na društvenim mrežama. *Monitor*, 7(2), 45–60. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331959215_GOVOR_MRZNJE_U_ELEKTRONSKIM_MEDIJIMA_I_NA_DRUSTVENIM_MREZAMA
- Lakić, I. (2014). Analiza pisanog diskursa. U S. Perović (Ur.), *Analiza diskursa: teorije i metode* (str. 57–76). Institut za strane jezike, Univerzitet Crne Gore.
- Milivojević, S. (2004). *Žene i mediji*. Ženske studije i komunikacije, Centar za ženske studije.
- Perović, S. (2014). Diskurs i statistika ili diskurs kao odgovor na Jakobsonovo „sramno zaostajanje“. U S. Perović (Ur.), *Analiza diskursa: teorija i metode* (str. 13–67). Institut za strane jezike.
- Pralica, D. (2012). Koga je izabrala štampa u Srbiji. U D. Valić Nedeljković & D. Pralica, (Urs.), *Koga su mediji izabrali... A šta su partije nudile?* Novosadska novinska škola.
- Puljić, G. (2015). Jezik novina o jezičkim novinama. U A. Ryznar (Ur.), *Svijet stila, stanja stilistike: zbornik radova*. Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.
- Savić S. (1993). *Diskusija analize*. Univerzitet u Novom Sadu, Filozofski fakultet.
- Valić Nedeljković, D. (2011). Rod i mediji. U S. Milivojević & S. Markov (Urs.), *Uvod u rodne teorije* (str. 455–470). Centar za rodne studije.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, & H. Hamilton (Eds.), *Handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352–371). Blackwell. <https://discourses.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Teun-A.-van-Dijk-2001-Critical-discourse-analysis.pdf>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2007). Discourse, power and access. <https://shorturl.at/apKR8>

Paper received on: 9/7/2024

Paper accepted for publishing on: 18/11/2025