

Lessons from Nauru: A Securitizing Move on Climate Change

Lições de Nauru: Um movimento para a Securitização das Mudanças Climáticas

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1 Introduction

It could be easy to find people who do not know where Nauru is, or even what Nauru is. Marcus Stephen, Republic of Nauru's president, prefers to do not blame someone for this. Instead, he prefers to invite people to know Nauru with a quick research on Internet, because it is a "fascinating" place "easily overlooked" – and especially because, according to him, Nauru's history is a lesson about how dangerous is to neglect environment preservation, and a warning about how climate change has become a security matter.

Stephen describes Nauru as a small island that was devastated by the overexploitation of phosphate, its only natural resource. Because of this, Nauru shows somehow what can happen if the world does nothing about aggressive use of its natural resources, especially oil and coal. According to the president, the intense burning of these fuels is causing notable climate changes. As a result, polar caps are melting, and oceans levels are rising, threatening people of places like Nauru, where phosphate overexploitation left the coastal line as the only habitable place (STEPHEN, 2011).

With these arguments, Stephen appeals to the United Nations' Security Council to "securitize" the matter: Nauru and islands like Kiribati are places where floods derived from climate changes are putting human lives in risk (STEPHEN, 2011). Stephen's discourse is a representational piece of the international efforts to turn climate change into a security matter. It could be an important source of how arguments are being developed and discourses are involving in this matter. It could be also a way of testing different methodological strategies to approach discourses.

Based on this, this article analyses the process of securitization of global warming and climate changing in the discourse of Marcus Stephen. The object to be studied is the article "On Nauru, a Sinking Feeling", written by Stephen and published by The New York Times. The task is going to be done through a Sociolinguistic Discourse Analysis. The objective is to study the way Stephen's discourse tries to do what Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jap de Wilde would call a "securitizing move", or a discursive strategy whose aim is to make a matter of security from a specific object or theme, like environment (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 25).

The analysis is performed with a somewhat experimental strategy called "triphasic analysis". Inspired by Norman Fairclough "tridimensional analysis" (FAIRCLOUGH, 2004; 2006), the triphasic analysis starts by checking the socially available discourses to which the studied discourse makes references; proceeds by evaluating the way the author combines and "manipulates" these values, as well as the expected contradictions derived from this; and

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ends by evaluating why the author makes these combinations, and judging if these combinations are coherent with the socially available discourses.

2 Method and Methodology

Based on Nelson Phillips and Chyntia Hardy (2002), the article’s methodology is divided between an explanation about how reality is understood (method); and which tools are going to be used in order to analyze this reality (methodology). The division is justified by the fact that Discourse Analysis isn’t made only by techniques to conduct qualitative and structured investigations, but also by a complete understanding of how reality is constructed and changed through *langue* (HARDY; PHILLIPS, 2002, p. 5).

The study is going to consider that the social reality is formed by discourses; and the discourses are present in *texts*, considered as “material manifestations” of discourses. The analysis thus must connect the studied texts to socially available discourses, and contextualize them in a wider social context (HARDY; PHILLIPS, 2002, p. 5).

2.1 Method

The analysis is rooted on *sociolinguistic* grounds, defined here as scientific presuppositions that join together sociological and linguistic evaluation tools. More specifically, the analysis is grounded on the conceptions of Samuel Berger and Peter Luckmann (2008), for whom reality is basically an *intersubjective* product of social interactions. Thus, the analysis considers that decisions about what is real or not are made by consensus, since *Homo sapiens* are in fact *Homo socius* (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 2008).

Along the process of social construction, reality do not emerges as something objective or subjective, but as an *objectivized* object. This is done through the *institutionalization* process, whose main results are *traditions*, *sedimentations* and specific social *roles* (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 2008, pp. 78-88). The institutionalization is considered here as a two-way dynamics: discourses produce people, whereas people produce discourses. In order to be understood, people need to refer to existent meanings and established conventions. This is done so that people can get what they want from the society he wants to change in their favor: a process whose results are changes in the features of the evoked discourses.

Langue has an undeniable important role in the building of this consensual reality. It allows communication between members of society (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 2008, pp. 92); and structures the way men think, classify and understand reality. For both functions, the analysis assumes the concepts of *linguistics*, as explained in the following session.

2.1.1 Linguistics

According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1995), *langue* has a structure whose study allows the understanding the common grounds of all linguistic constructions, independently of grammar or vocabulary particularities. Saussure believes that the application of this structure is wide and long, since *langue* perpetrates all human knowledge, from medicine to mathematics.

The main structure of the *langue* is what Saussure calls “sign” – a kind of “linguistic atom” composed by two “linguistic molecules”: an object or concept referred by the sign – the *signified*; and an iconic, phonetic or even gestural resource used to make reference to some object – the *signifier*. Signs have particular properties: *arbitrary*, *mutability*, *immutability*, and *valor*. All of them work together in order to make language possible.

Arbitrary is about the “artificiality” of the connections between signifier and signified. Signs do not exist naturally, depending on the social conventions that gave them existence. One could even go farther and states that both signified and signifier is a matter of convention. It means there is absolutely no “natural” world: even material aspects of reality rely on conventions to “exist”. In other words, reality isn’t objective or subjective, but *intersubjective*.

Immutability tells how sign is perpetuated by the collectiveness that created it; and *mutability* is paradoxically one of the mechanisms that allows immutability: in order to keep itself socially relevant and understandable, the sign must suffers adaptations on its meanings and usage, because of the historical contingency it is subject to – *if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change*, as told in “The Leopard” novel.

Value is about the process of *differentiation* that builds the signs. It means that signs are always relative: one sign exists when contrasted with another sign, so that every sign is composed by comparative *dyads* like weak-strong, friend-foe, or mimicry-mockery. In international relations, it is easy to recognize some dyads: national-international; sovereignty-intervention; legal-illegal; war-peace.

These dyads are socially created in a process of *negation* between them. It means that signs (and discourses, since it is a kind of sign) exist in *comparison* and *relativity*: that’s why, as put by Saussure, in langue there is nothing but *differences* (SAUSSURE, 1995, pp. 165-166). This process is done with *value judgment*, where one sign is considered better than other. For instance, one could find peace superior to war, and vice versa.

2.1.2 Discourse

Discourses are understood here as actual practices of talking and writing. More specifically, discourses are an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that bring an object into being (HARD; PHILLIPS, 2005, p. 3).

As put by Chyntia Hard and Nelson Phillips, discourses cannot be understood in a vacuum: Discourse Analysis must worry not only about discourses’ contents, but also about the way they gain meaning through social interactions. It means it is necessary to always consider how discourses are connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently (HARD; PHILLIPS, 2005, p. 3).

An important corollary of this social interaction is that discourses have *political content*. The main goal of discursive interactions is to obtain *power*. Based on Michel Foucault (1962), the analysis assumes that discourses aren’t a way to obtain power, but they *are* power. So, those who manage to construct discourses are somehow empowered in the society – more specifically, in the international relations.

Like Chyntia Hard and Nelson Phillips, Foucault believes that discourses are made by a set of precedent discourses. This is what Foucault called the *heterogeneity* of the discourse. As a result, discourses are essentially *contradictory*, because so many claims end up clashing with each other; but contradiction must be understood not as an accident, but as an indispensable feature of the discourse (FOUCAULT, 1962, p. 197).

Even so, discourses strive to give coherence to its meanings. This is done through what Claudio Lomnitz called *deepness* and *silence*: while the discourse tries to be coherent and deeply institutionalized, it also censures every aspect that could “denounce” its flaws (LOMNITZ, 2008). Most of these flaws are demonstrated by the expected contradictions derived from the discursive heterogeneity.

2.2 Methodology

Based on the above explained method, the adopted methodology is divided into three specific phases – a *triphasic analysis*. The concepts are sometimes largely, sometimes loosely inspired on Norman Fairclough’s concepts (FAIRCLOUGH, 2004; 2006), with some adaptations and variations that serve the adopted method.

The first phase is called “social repertory”. It is done through an evaluation about what socially available discourses are referred in the studied discourse – the *interdiscursivity* –, and what texts the studied discourse quotes explicitly – the *intertextuality*. Together they compose the heterogeneity of the discourse. It worth to note that there is no intertextuality without interdiscursivity, but there could be interdiscursivity without explicit intertextuality.

The second phase is named “discursive practice”. During this phase, the analysis investigates the way the studied discourse “manipulate” the arguments extracted from other texts and discourses. It can be done through *textual tools*, like allegories, metaphors, analogies, vocabulary and so forth. It can also be done with *linguistic tools*, or an evaluation about the arbitrarily, mutability, immutability, value, negation and difference of the studied discourse. The objective could also be reached through *discursive tools*, or an investigation about how the studied discourse works its deepness and silence. The analysis may prefer a synergetic approach too.

The third and last phase is called “evaluative interpretation”. It involves the efforts to *explain* the discursive practice; to *evaluate* the aims and objectives of the discursive practice; and to *judge* the discursive practice based on the social repertory and the specific objectives of the institutionalization process. As said, the present analysis is also a practical test on this strategy.

2.3 Securitization, discourse and environment

Based on Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jap de Wilde (1998), security is defined here as the result of a social process. This is done through the concept of “securitization”, whose exact definition and criteria is constituted by the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 25).

The way to study securitization is discourse and political analysis. According to Barry Buzan, the analysis is not a matter of know objective threats that “really” endanger something that must be defended or secured. Rather, it is about the processes of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded as a threat (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 26).

The object that must be preserved is usually the organizational stability of the state – the idea of the state, its national identity and organizing discourse, and the institutions which express it (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 142). But there are also institutions in the international relations that can be considered as a threatened object. These institutions – or better, these discourses – can assume the form of international law, ethics, and world politics, for instance (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 147).

According to Barry Buzan, institutions (again, the present analysis prefers the term “discourse”) carry legitimacy not only as a political utility, but also as a manifestation of obligations beyond the nation-state. This commitment power depends if the discourse has stability and salience enough to make them possible referent objects for security action (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 142). The existence of a discourse is not granted by mere pronunciation: it needs social reception in the international relations. Otherwise, it is not securitization, but a security move.

2.3.1 Securitizing environment

Why, the realm of environment is plenty of security moves. Attempts to securitize environmental values have a very short history compared to other securitization sectors like policy and military. On these matters, discourses, power struggles, and securitizing moves have been reflected by and have sedimented over time in concrete types of organizations, like states and the UN. The same cannot be observed in respect to the environment issues (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 71).

Barry Buzan says the environmental discourse was proposed only in 1972, during the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. It has called political attentions since then, with some actors struggling to securitize the matter, although it does not mean this move is fully developed nowadays.

Nowadays, the main difficulty for the political agenda isn't to know if environment threats are real or speculative. There is consensus enough that these threats are facts. However, one still cannot say if their *presumed urgency* is a political issue. So, the main strategy to translate environment and its threats in political terms is to link it to other issues – specially the political and military ones, that are easily interchangeable.

3 Discourse Analysis

As said, the text to be studied is Marcus Stephen's "Nauru – A Sinking Feeling". According to Stephen in this article, Nauru is a small, sovereignty island located in the Pacific Sea; and also "an indispensable cautionary tale about life in a place with hard ecological limits".

Stephen tells that miners have found once ago that Nauru's grounds were rich in phosphate, which was aggressively exploited by companies and then by the Nauru's nation. As a result, the rainforest that once covered the isle's interior has gone, leaving nauruians unemployment, lack of resources, and "only a thin strip of coastline for us to live on" (STEPHEN, 2011).

Nauru's president explains he tells this history "not looking for sympathy, but rather warning you what can happen when a country runs out of options". Nauru is showed as a tale about what can happen to the world if it did nothing about the way it has been burning coal and oil, practices that are altering the planet's climate and melting ice caps, among other undesirable effects.

Because of such practices, regrets Stephen, Nauru is nowadays threatened by floods. Nauru's coast, "the only habitable area", is steadily eroding. The same is happening to communities in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, forcing people to flee their homes to escape from the tides. Similar things are happening also in Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands, according to the text.

3.1 First phase: social repertory

Based on the above exposed, President Stephen urges the world – more precisely, the Security Council of the United Nations – for a securitization of the climate change. The discourse makes easily reckonable interdiscursive references to *environment*, a value that has been gaining even more attention in international relations. A quick browse on statements delivered everyday in United Nations could give an idea about this.

Stephen offers suggestions about how it should be done. First, appeals him, Security Council should join the General Assembly in "recognizing climate change as a threat to international peace and security", because climate change is a threat as great as nuclear proliferation or global terrorism. Second, continues Stephen, a special representative on climate and security should be appointed. And third, concludes the author, "we must assess whether the United Nations system is itself capable of responding to a crisis of this magnitude" (STEPHEN, 2011).

This paragraph holds the core of the discourse. It carries some of the most important values used by the discourse. "International peace" and "international security" are evoked as objects threatened by "climate change". Again, daily discursive practice of United Nations could show how these values are sedimented in the international relations (for instance, a quick search for "international peace" in the United Nation's document search site returned 4604 results, while "international security" returned 2160 results).

3.2 Second phase: discursive practice

The above mentioned paragraph is also crucial to the discursive practice's analysis. With textual tools, it is possible to notice how the author makes an *analogy* between "climate change" and "nuclear proliferation" and "global terrorism". In order to do this, Stephen *deepens* the similarities between the objects. These similarities could be "socially possible": all of them mean threat to the human life; all of them may come out suddenly; and all of them have potential devastating effects.

Stephen alerts that "the changes [on climate] have already heightened competition over scarce resources, and could foreshadow life in a world where conflicts are increasingly driven by environmental catastrophes". Despite of it, the international community regrettably has not yet begun to prepare for the difficulties the climate changes will put on humanitarian organizations or the political stability (STEPHEN, 2011). Here the deepness is worked through linkages between climate change, human rights and political matters. Probably the most important of these linkages is the political one, because it easily reports to the aimed Security Council, considering how political and military objects are easily interchangeable (BUZAN; WÆVER; WILDE, 1998, p. 141-142). In the other hand, it is imperative to notice that probably there is not successful linkage between military and humanitarian objects (yet).

The deepening of this discourse relies on mechanisms of silent that the author does not seem to work properly. It is known that nuclear and terrorist threats demand a military approach, according to the socially established conventions. That's not the case with climate change, as Stephen is obliged to admit: "We are not asking for blue helmets to intervene" (STEPHEN, 2011). Rather, according to Nauru's president, "Negotiations to reduce emissions should remain the primary forum for reaching an international agreement", while a "special representative on climate and security" should be appointed (STEPHEN, 2011).

Thus there is an evident contradiction here: while the matter of climate change is comparable to military threats to human life, securitization must be done not in military terms. Of course the author would prefer to keep this in silent. That's not the case.

3.3 Third phase: explanatory evaluation

The analogy between climate change and threats like nuclear proliferation and global terrorism may sound awkward as a security move – especially because, as said above, Stephen's discursive comparison between military and climate threats is thwarted by the non-military solutions proposed by him. Stephen's discourse faces the fact that linkages between human rights, military and politics are still not socially available in the international relations, although well succeeded moves certainly have been done in this sense, as the Japanese concept of "human security" may hint somehow.

Despite this, Stephen's discourse makes an honest – and competent – use of the socially available discourses. The "apocalyptic" appeal is valid: Stephen refers to terror and nuclear menaces in order to call attention to the urgency of the matter, possibly because there is no other way to make this urgency socially understandable. As said Barry Buzan, environmental securitization still has not its own political expressions. Analogies are expected and even welcome, because it allows making the situation comprehensible through socially available terms.

The way Stephen appeals to the Security Council is understandable: it is the most "executive" branch of the United Nations; it holds the most influent countries' interests; and it could be easily considered the most relevant branch. Stephen's discourse does not seek for military aid, but to draw attention and to obtain fast responses. It makes sense to imagine the main – if not the only – chance for this is to "securitize" climate change as a military-like global threat, even if responses are not going to be a "blue helmet" intervention.

4. Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to perform a sociolinguist discourse analysis on the securitization move Marcus Stephen, Nauru's president, does on climate change. The task was done with what is called here a *triphasic analysis*, involving social, linguistic and discursive aspects – all of them synergetic and complementary. The studied object was Stephan's "Nauru: a Sinking Feeling" article.

It was concluded that the expected contradictions of Marcus Stephen are "honest", in the sense that it works adequately the socially available discourses and its sources. However, the analysis foresees difficulties to this security move to fully securitize the climate change matter, considering the way it could be complicate to link military responses to a (still) non-military matter.

Securitization theory suited the analysis. Its "constructivist" grounds were compatible with the "constructionist" schema proposed by Samuel Berger and Peter Luckmann; and securitization's discursive approach was convenient to the sociolinguist perspective here adopted. However, the excessive tribute "secularization" pays to the classic themes of international relations – security, military, power, and politics – could prevent the theory from observing discursive changes in the international relations. It means Barry Buzan's theory could turn difficult to observe if security moves are being well succeeded in becoming securitized.

The triphasic analysis answered well to the test. Expected performance results were obtained, even if some features still needs definitions. However, further research is necessary to avail if the securitization of the climate change is still a securitization move or has been turned in a full securitization matter. It could be done with qualitative researches on the United Nations' core documents, what is beyond the present analysis' limits and objectives.

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Abstract

This article studies the international relations' securitization of the climate change. It performs a Sociolinguist Discourse Analysis on "On Nauru, a Sinking Feeling", article written by Marcus Stephen, Republic of Nauru's

president. For this, it adopts the constructivist concept of “securitization” and a methodology here named “triphasic analysis”.

Resumo

O artigo investiga a securitização das mudanças climáticas nas relações internacionais. Realiza para isso uma Análise Sociolinguística de Discurso sobre o texto “On Nauru, a Sinking Feeling” de Marcus Stephen, presidente da República de Nauru. Adota para isso o conceito construtivista de “securitização”, com a metodologia denominada “análise trifásica”.

Keywords: security; environment; discourse;

Palavras-chaves: segurança; meio ambiente; discurso;

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