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M. Cristina Caimotto

# Discourses of Cycling, Road Users and Sustainability

An Ecolinguistic Investigation

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*For Vanessa, whose smile when she rides her balance bicycle says it all.*

## PREFACE

This book is the result of an experiment, the attempt we are sometimes drawn to, of bringing together what seem to be very different aspects of one's own life. We thus throw a new light and a new perspective on what had appeared very familiar until the day before the idea dawned in our mind. This book is conceived as part of the Critical Discourse Studies approach. One of its tenets is that the researcher's motivation lies not in an interest in language for its own sake but an interest in how a social or political issue is played out in language. As van Dijk (2001, 96) puts it 'Critical Discourse Analysis is biased—and proud of it', as—unlike other scholarship—the researcher's own sociopolitical position is not denied but explicitly defined and defended. My advocacy activity brought me to form the plan for a linguistic investigation of the discourse of everyday cycling that, thus far, has not been analysed from a CDS perspective. The city where I live—Turin, Italy—has a history of car manufacturing and was designed to accommodate for people moving around mainly in their private car. But since 2010, a group of local citizens gave life to the largest parade<sup>1</sup> in Italy to advocate for better conditions for cyclists, promote the advantages of everyday cycling and ask the administration to foster change towards a more sustainable modal mix. I have always been

<sup>1</sup>Bike Pride FIAB Torino, a local advocacy association federate of the national FIAB (Italian Federation Environment and Bicycle) and the ECF (European Cyclists' Federation) was born in 2013 to reunite the citizens who had been organising the 'Bike Pride' parade since 2010.

passionate about slow, recreational cycling—a passion one can hardly share in a city where the car is dominant in every possible sense and in a country with an important sport cycling history, where most people conceive cycling as a demanding sport activity. Having used a bicycle as my main means of transport through most of my adult life, I was naturally drawn towards the advocacy group and I soon found myself acting as president of the advocacy association during the political campaign for the mayor's election in 2016.

Being a linguist, I observed the discourses deployed to either promote or reject an increase in bicycle use from a language perspective and I frequently had a feeling that the issues being debated reached far beyond the practicalities being discussed. This book aims to transform that feeling into an analysis grounded in linguistics. Drawing from a cross-disciplinary approach, disentangling, pinning down and observing the various discourses that are drawn upon when cycling is discussed—liberty, public property, social class, norm and deviancy, safety, stigma, discrimination, hate and human rights—to name but a few. The texts under scrutiny are in English, because English linguistics is my field of research and because this allows me to step back and analyse discourses that I am familiar with—due to my advocacy activity—but with which I am not directly involved. This would not be true if I were analysing the texts produced by the local media, policymakers or—even closer—local advocacy groups.

Given its experimental nature, the aim of this work is to offer new insights, to look at the issue from a new and refreshing perspective. It does not aim to offer definitive solutions, but to draw attention to the topic, presenting observations that can be the starting point of an interdisciplinary debate around what can be done discursively to improve the effectiveness of any policy promoting cycling and perhaps environment-friendly policies more in general. The analysis offers advocacy groups and policymakers increased awareness of discourses that are not evident on the surface and offers linguists a new object of study, full of complexity and fascination.

Turin, Italy

M. Cristina Caimotto

## REFERENCE

- van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 95–120). London: Sage.

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