
MANAGING LABOUR CONFLICT THROUGH LANGUAGE IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA: PUBLIC SECTOR STRIKES IN THE UK AND SOUTH AFRICA

Claudia Ortu

(University of Cagliari, Italy, and University of Johannesburg, South Africa)

Abstract

This article highlights both the differences and the common points in the discourse of two governments vis-à-vis trade union protests in the public sector. The comparison is between two English-speaking countries, Great Britain and South Africa, where the cultural-political settings of the protests are quite different and, consequently, governmental reactions to them necessarily take such differences into due consideration.

The history of the two trade union movements and their relationship with the rest of society, which is part of the political culture of a country, have many points of divergence as well as some similarities. Moreover, the two moments in history that are used to illustrate such differences are quite distant from one another: the British 'Winter of discontent' of 1978-79 and the 2010 public sector strike in South Africa. Nonetheless, both the events and political practices dealt with in this study are placed inside the same socio-historical context: that of the long wave of neoliberal hegemony.

The study is post-disciplinary in its implications (Jessop and Sum 2001), while on a more operational level it adopts a pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation theory (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992; van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Kruiger 1987; Ietcu 2006) combined with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in its Hallidayan version (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). Disciplines such as political economy and history are used to clarify the context in which the discourse takes place and to select the most meaningful genres – conceived of as institutionalized ways of acting semiotically (Fairclough 2006) – and texts for the creation of the corpus.

1. Introduction

The role of trade unions has been subjected to major pressure in the industrialized world since the 1970s, when the neoliberal ideology presented itself as the only way out of the crisis of the Fordist mode of production (Jessop 2002). The pressure of such ideology changed the way in which governments manage labour conflict, in both semiotic and non-semiotic aspects (Fairclough 2006) of the social and, increasingly, professional practice of governing liberal democracies throughout the world.

In many European countries the trade unions were attacked by governments as well as by the capitalist class in their battle to "achieve the restoration of [their] class power" (Duménil and Lévy 2004, quoted in Harvey 2005: 16). Indeed, trade unions have been considered one of the obstacles to the full implementation of the neoliberal project (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001) since its very beginning, as they are one of the few agents in

civil society that were, and in some places still are, able to organize forms of resistance to the various regional and national *inflections*¹ of such a project.

Policies deriving from neoliberal ideology have been directed at downsizing the provisions of the welfare state and public sector with cuts in expenditure which have normally resulted in retrenchments and real wage cuts for public employees (Harvey 2005). This might be one of the reasons for the high level of resistance of the trade unions in the public sector.

This particular aspect of the neoliberal project makes it all the more interesting to concentrate on episodes of industrial unrest in the public sector. The ones chosen for this particular study are the 'Winter of discontent' of 1978-79 in Britain, which can be seen as a prototypical case that represents the beginning of the hegemonic dominance of the neoliberal ideology, and the public sector strike of 2010 in South Africa, seen as the latest manifestation of massive public employee protest in the English-speaking world.

In the context of worldwide acceptance of the neoliberal dogma, which is globally recognized as the response to the economic crisis of the mid-1970s, Britain was the country that pioneered a reorganization of the state and the economy according to such a dogma. At the onset of the neoliberal transition in the late 1970s, the trade unions organized more than 50 per cent of the labour force in the country (Lindsay 2003: 140). Moreover, Labour governments such as the one led by James Callaghan answered with a corporatist policy (Harvey 2005) to the crisis of accumulation in the capitalist system and the subsequent crisis of the Fordist mode of production (Jessop 2002; Harvey 2005). For trade unions this meant that they were invited to work with the government as *estates of the realm*, consulted on matters of economic and industrial policies, but in return they agreed to limit their activity in the economic sphere in exchange for services granted to the workforce through the state apparatus. Such an exchange – industrial peace for participation in the policy-making process and welfare services – is normally referred to as a Social Contract, which was symbolically broken by the 'Winter of discontent'. Thus trade unions played, in the years leading to the strike, an important role both in the economy and in the public discourse on economic matters.

The second case study, that of South Africa, gives an insight into the way in which neoliberal discourse has developed through the decades. Indeed, South Africa is no exception to the penetration of the neoliberal ideology, together with the discourse that characterizes it, and different governments have used many of the syntactic and argumentative strategies that characterize neoliberal discourse (Ortu forthcoming) since the 1980s. On the other hand there are many variables linked to the particular political culture of the country, shaped by the long struggle against the racist regime of *Apartheid*, that influence the language of the government. The main variable of this sort is that the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is a partner in the *tripartite alliance* (made up of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and COSATU) that has governed the country since the first free elections of 1994.

The particular role of COSATU, both in the struggle for democracy since the year of its birth (1985) and now in government, has not prevented the organization from keeping both its character as a social movement and its capacity for mobilizing large numbers of

¹ I use the grammatical term *inflection* metaphorically, to describe the practice by which the roots of neoliberal discourse are adapted to different regional and national contexts through minor but meaningful changes.

workers (Wood and Dibben 2006). In fact, the Confederation started a confrontation with the ANC in all possible arenas as early as 1996 when it became clear to them that the first democratic governments of South Africa were going to embrace the policies of structural adjustment which were the concrete face of the neoliberal ideology in the so-called developing countries. Indeed it is in 1996 that the government adopted a new macro-economic framework called GEAR (Growth Employment and Redistribution), which committed the country to export-led growth, the privatization of state assets, public sector cuts, exchange control relaxation and financial liberalization, which led to a dramatic flow of capital from the country. Such measures are all characteristic of the usual package of structural adjustment programs normally imposed on poor countries by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but they were voluntarily undertaken by the ANC government in 1996. Especially the last two measures have had a significant impact on the lives of ordinary South Africans, as many jobs were lost to international competition while new jobs could not be created because the capital accumulated in South Africa could, and did, leave the country without being reinvested in its productive system.

Such measures were strongly opposed by workers and their representatives in all sectors of the economy, but, as anticipated above, opposition in the public sector was by far the most significant as public sector workers in the country are at the centre of the reform project undertaken by the ANC. Indeed public employees have gone on strike four times since the end of *Apartheid* – in 1999, 2004, 2007 and 2010.

The 1999 strike came as a surprise both for the ANC and political analysts as the alliance between COSATU and the ANC did not seem to allow for such confrontation. Nonetheless, the strike was generally perceived as a show of maturity of the political system and of the confederation itself, which demonstrated its independence from the government. The 1999 strike, as well as the following two strikes of 2004 and 2007, took place under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki, who had taken the place of Nelson Mandela in May 1999. Mbeki, who was known for his pro-market stance, had been responsible for most of the economic policies implemented in the country since 1996 and he was the main architect of the GEAR programme. The 2007 strike was, more than any of the other strikes, a clear attack against his leadership and it can be considered as the beginning of the fight that led to his ousting as head of the ANC during the party conference held in Polokwane the same year. In such a context COSATU was one of the most important players to advocate for change during the conference and it secured a victory for the candidate who promised more worker-friendly measures during the campaign: Jacob Zuma.

The strike of 2010 took place during Zuma's presidency, a presidency that was supposed to take forward a more progressive agenda than that of its predecessor; a government that had to live up to a worker-friendly reputation, just like that of James Callaghan during the 'Winter of discontent'. The reputation of the government in charge at the time of the strike is, together with language, another point of contact between the two case studies presented in this article. The fact that both governments were perceived, and presented themselves, as worker-friendly governments was bound to influence the semiotic choices of their representatives during the dispute. It was indeed necessary for both governments to keep their alliances with the trade unions in as good a shape as possible in order to secure their electoral success.

The other factor that makes the two strikes the most appropriate ones in order to proceed to a comparison is that no other strike in Great Britain after 1979 can be compared to any of the South African strikes, either in terms of turnout or duration. Indeed,

Great Britain witnessed many other strikes in the public sector – the firefighters’ strike of 2004, the Public and Commercial Services Union strike over pensions in 2013, and the recent Road and Maritime Transport Union strike of 2014, to name just some of the many manifestations of discontent with neoliberal policies that still goes on in the country – but due to the legislation implemented by the Conservative governments of the eighties (see Ortu 2012 for more details) and never repealed by subsequent Labour governments, those strikes could only involve limited numbers of public sector workers, as their different trade unions are prevented from declaring a strike together.

In the next sections I will describe my methodology and illustrate how a genuinely transdisciplinary approach can contribute to research in the social sciences in general and in linguistics in particular. Then I will move on to present some examples of my analysis of the two cases which will then be compared in the concluding section.

2. Theoretical underpinnings and methodology

This study places itself in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The aim of CDA is that of entering social problems through semiosis. According to such an approach we need to place ourselves at the intersection of the semiotic spheres with other spheres of the social in order to determine the ideological content of semiotic realizations.

Looking at the socio-historical context in which the discourse is developed, and assessing its success by incorporating the evidence coming from disciplines that study the non-semiotic aspects of the development of our societies is the *sine qua non* condition for an evaluation of the ideological content of any discourse. For this reason a study such as the one presented here can only be undertaken in a transdisciplinary way, i.e. by putting “the logic of other disciplines at work” (Fairclough 2003: 16) in the study of discourse, and allowing the individual researcher to deal with the different disciplines.

The practice of transdisciplinarity described above is bound to show how the disciplinary boundaries that have characterized scientific research in the last two centuries (Jessop and Sum 2001) are a limit to a more coherent understanding of the world, especially in the social sciences (Sayer 2000). Researches can go beyond such limits by moving towards a post-disciplinary approach, i.e. by following “ideas and connections wherever they lead instead of following them only as far as the border of their discipline” (*ibid.*: 88).

Consequently, this study puts the logic of disciplines such as history, political science and political economy at work in the context of linguistics, in general, and discourse analysis, in particular. Nonetheless, it tends towards a post-disciplinary outcome by focusing on the social phenomenon that interests the researcher, i.e. the tendency of world governments in the neoliberal era to weaken trade union action, and follows the Ariadne’s thread through its different semiotic and non-semiotic aspects.

First of all the interaction of the above-mentioned disciplines was used to arrive at a choice of texts which is not arbitrary, thus overcoming the problem of choosing between an in-depth linguistic analysis and the will to obtain results that are, at least partially, generalizable.

2.1. Building a corpus through the transdisciplinary approach

History, and economic history in particular, helped in roughly delimiting the period of time that needed to be covered as presented in the introduction, but then, in order to analyse the semiotic dimension, a choice of texts had to be made.

The first step was to decide which genres, conceived of as ways of acting semiotically (Fairclough 2003) in the social practice of governing a country in the neoliberal era, were particularly relevant in the discourse on trade unions. Political science and state theory were of a paramount importance in this phase. Thus, in the corpus we find laws on trade union rights (in the case of South Africa this also includes the Constitution of 1996) as well as specific policy documents which cover the field of legislative action. Moving towards genres that are directed at a wider audience, green and white papers, i.e. consultation documents on proposed legislative action, were included. Finally, proceeding towards the extremity where the discourse community of reference includes virtually all citizens in the country, we arrive at the field of action of propaganda. Electoral manifestos, official declarations to the mass media, press releases and interviews released by members of government are included in order to represent this field. The texts belonging to the genres outlined above cover a 29-year time span for the British case (1978-2007), and 16 years of democratic rule (1994-2010) for South Africa.

History and political economy guided the choice of events and their “discourse moment”, i.e. texts (Fairclough 2006: 30) that needed to be analysed. As stated in the introduction, the moments in which trade unions and the workers they represent decided to strike were chosen as the most representative ones.

The reasons for choosing the two strikes for comparison have been illustrated in the introduction, and they are mostly linked with the scope of the present study, that is, on the one hand the exploration of neoliberal discourse with its common features and, on the other hand, the assessment of the influence of different political cultures in terms of its *localization*.

The extracts that will be used in the next two sections to demonstrate the findings have been chosen because they resonate with one another and they cover the three macro-topics of anti-trade union discourse that I have described elsewhere (Ortu 2012), namely union values, economic and institutional landscape and union action.

2.2. *Argumentation analysis and Systemic functional grammar*

Once the relevant texts had been chosen, the tool of Argumentation analysis proved useful in two ways. Firstly, looking for arguments is a good way of choosing portions of the text that need to be analysed in more depth, a way of avoiding arbitrariness when doing qualitative analysis. Indeed, since argumentation is a social activity used in order to convince someone of one’s standpoint or claim (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992) – in other words, if there is no need to convince someone there is no need for an argument which is the product of such social practice – arguments in the texts are bound to be *places* where the authors/speakers invest most of their meaning-making effort. This takes us to the second function of argumentation analysis: the exploration of common sense in the neoliberal era. This will become clearer as I describe argumentation analysis in more depth in the next sections.

In order to analyse an argument we need to get, from the actual text produced, to what is called a logical minimum. Thus, the first step in the analysis of the arguments is to reconstruct them in order to arrive at a “logically valid” form (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992: 60) by making missing elements explicit in their “pragmatic optimum” form (*ibid.*: 64). I will use Toulmin’s (Toulmin, Rieke and Janik 1984; Toulmin 1958) categories of *ground* as the proof of evidence given by the arguer to defend her/his opinion, and *warrant*, i.e. the linking passage between the grounds and the *claim*,

that is, the opinion defended/justified through argumentation. The choice of Toulmin's taxonomy has the advantage of allowing me to include Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012: 23) discussion of the concept of *topos* and to conclude with them that Toulmin's warrant has to be looked at as what, in previous works, I referred to as *topos* (Ortu 2008, 2012).

This is particularly important when dealing with arguments with the concept of common sense in mind. Indeed, I maintain that when the arguer does not express such warrants, he/she feels confident in the fact that such considerations are part of the shared, common knowledge of her/his audience. It is through the analysis of the warrants that we can understand what ideas about the functioning of the economy and institutional roles of the social actors are taken for granted in the discourse of governments.

Systemic functional grammar, at a finer level of analysis, helps us to explore the other two topics. Instances of classification (Fairclough 2003) are bound to show relations of equivalence and difference built in the texts and, consequently, convey the government's idea on union values and union action. The latter topic is also explored through the transitive structure, and thus the instantiations of the ideational metafunction, according to the actors' position and processes in which they are involved.

3. The 'Winter of discontent' in Great Britain

The historical moment which came to be known as the 'Winter of discontent' can be conventionally limited to the period of time which stretches from the start of the Ford car workers' strike (October 1978) to the defeat of the Labour government of James Callaghan in a motion of no confidence in March 1979, followed by the general election won by the Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher.

After a series of strikes in the private sector, also public employees decided to down tools in the most massive labour strike since the general strike of 1926. Television programmes and newspapers were full of images of uncollected rubbish, people sent back from hospitals and unburied bodies in cemeteries. It is mostly with those images that such a moment of crisis has become fixed in the public imagination.

The first text analysed here is an excerpt from the House of Commons Public Questions (PQ) held on 22 January 1979, the day before the beginning of the public sector strike. Callaghan makes an evaluative statement about the action. The strike is called "unnecessary and unjustifiable" and "wrong both in principle and in practice". While trying to reassure the House that contingency measures had been taken in order to keep essential services going, Callaghan construes trade union action through the following representation.

On contingency plans, I am told that what is planned by the unions is "a demonstration of what we can do". I hope that the Right Hon. Lady will not press me to say what the Government's response will be. There is no doubt that the unions propose a series of guerrilla actions to try to discomfort the public and to get at the Government machine in the most vulnerable areas. I ask the Right Hon. Lady not to press me to say what we are doing in response. I do not want to give those who are planning these strikes any more ammunition than I have to.

(Callaghan 1979) [Emphasis added]

Here Callaghan projects a locution based on the words supposedly spoken by the strikers, according to which the action taken is “a demonstration of what they can do”. It is very difficult to verify whether the clause was ever uttered by any of the union leaders involved, but if we are meant to believe the indications of the text, this is direct reported speech and the voice of the union is framed by the text. The co-text in which it is framed is a very meaningful one. Indeed, through classification (Fairclough 2003) trade union action is described as “guerrilla actions”, attempts to “discomfort” the public and to “get at” the government machine in its “most vulnerable areas”. The military semantic field thus activated is then extended by the use of the term “ammunition”. The metaphor of guerrilla warfare is conjured up. Indeed Callaghan refuses to say what his plans are to counter the ‘attack’ because that would give the revolutionaries precious information, i.e. “ammunition”, to go on with their disruptive activity, and it would signal even more “vulnerable areas” to hit.

Through these linguistic choices, a distinction starts to be drawn between that part of the trade unions usually represented by TUC officials, who are considered as partners, and the more ‘militant’ part of the TUC which is deemed to be ‘irresponsible’.

Moving a bit further down the timeline but staying on the same side of government practice, we now explore a different genre: House of Commons Question Time. The debate analysed here takes place the day after the big demonstration by public employees in all the major cities of the country on 22 January 1979. Question time is a means commonly used in Parliament to debate on the topical issues of the day (Chilton 2004).

During the Question time, the Labour MP Mike Thomas asks about two hot topics of the day: the approval of Callaghan’s reaffirmation of the pay policy, and the question of public employees on strike. Thomas makes it clear that the formula thought out for the private sector (pay limits, productivity bargains and help for the low-paid) cannot work for the public sector. It is Callaghan’s answer to the second part of the question that is particularly interesting for the present analysis:

On the last part of the question, of course the private sector is in a different position from the public sector. There is at least some operation of market disciplines in the private sector and people can lose their jobs, as indeed they are losing them at present, especially in industries where they price themselves out of work. The difference between that and the public sector is that nobody so far has lost his job as a result of wildly inflationary wage increases over previous years. It is essential to be absolutely frank, and I must point out that there are limits to what the Government are prepared to ask Parliament to vote in the way of votes for public expenditure. Therefore, if more money is taken out in higher wages because of the comparisons to which my Hon. Friend correctly draws attention, there is less money for the services which the public employees are there to provide. That is an inescapable truth.

(Callaghan 1979)

Here the prime minister starts by acknowledging that there is a difference between the two sectors and then he goes on by saying, roughly, that yes, there is a difference between the private and the public sector, namely that in the public sector the boss (the government) is not so free to sack the workers as in the private one. He then grasps the opportunity to subtly threaten public sector workers with the possibility of unemployment. First of all, we can look at the arguments he uses.

Claim: PRIVATE SECTOR WORKERS ARE SUBJECT TO MARKET RULES, PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS ARE NOT

1. WORKERS WHO DON'T PLAY BY THOSE RULES IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR ARE PUNISHED WITH UNEMPLOYMENT

2. WORKERS WHO DON'T PLAY BY THOSE RULES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR ARE NOT PUNISHED WITH UNEMPLOYMENT

Warrant (WHAT IS RIGHT FOR ONE TYPE OF WORKER SHOULD BE RIGHT FOR THE OTHERS TOO)

3. (MARKET DISCIPLINE IS NEUTRAL AND NATURAL).

The warrant working here – which is not explicitly stated and has thus been put into parentheses – is the very common one that the same rules should apply to all the players in the same game. But there is a problem with both the third *ground*, i.e. market forces are natural and neutral – again put in parenthesis to signal that it is missing – and with the fact that those rules should apply to public employees. Argumentation theory allows for an evaluation of the *grounds* used in arguments by resorting to expert knowledge in the relevant fields of expertise (Ietcu 2006). Indeed, it is highly questionable that a public service should respond to market rules. The services offered by the state in a Keynesian Welfare National State were there precisely because, before the hegemony of neoliberal thought, it was commonly agreed that market mechanisms produce problems and that the state should correct those problems and protect the most vulnerable sectors of society by supplying services that respond to a logic of public good or utility and not to that of the market (Jessop 2002).

Deriving from the argument above is the threat that the Prime Minister makes to the public employees on strike that they could start losing their jobs if they go on asking for higher wages.

Claim: CIVIL SERVANTS COULD START LOSING THEIR JOBS

1. THERE IS A LIMIT OF ACCEPTANCE FOR NEW EXPENDITURE IN PUBLIC SERVICES

2. THUS IF WE GIVE HIGH SALARIES WE WOULD HAVE TO CUT SERVICES

Here a very common warrant in government discourse, mainly used by social-democratic governments, is at work and it is that of 'limited resources', which we might otherwise refer to as the 'too short blanket', that roughly says: "as the resources are limited we cannot spend more on one side without cutting on another". The warrant in this case is based on a false analogy (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) in the sense that the resources of a government cannot be thought of as a too short blanket; indeed, governments have the possibility to find more resources elsewhere if they are really willing to provide public services.

4. South Africa and the 2010 Public Sector Strike

The strike of 2010 left a lasting impression on South African public opinion, especially because of the images of disrupted public services which flooded all media outlets throughout the duration of the protest. The importance of public opinion in this strike was crucial from the moment strike action was first threatened and talks were still

underway. Indeed, South African political commentators such as Steve Friedman had warned COSATU that they needed “to start worrying about changing public opinion” because “the sense that strikes are getting out of hand may be particularly strong this year” (Friedman 2010: 8). Indeed, until that point, the general public had been mostly sympathetic with public employees when they had downed tools in the previous strikes.

In 2010 most of the newspaper discourse on the strike revolved around the lack of leadership and “backbone” in government, mostly referring to President Jacob Zuma.

The PSA, the white trade union in the public sector, was the organization that kicked off the strike on July 29. COSATU unions joined the action for a one-day strike on 10 August and then went back to work. The strike only became indefinite on 18 August (and it ended on 8 September with a defeat for the unions), when the Minister of Public Services and Administration, Richard Baloyi, declared the government’s offer final and said it would be implemented unilaterally. The statement in which this announcement is made was delivered by the government spokesperson Themba Maseko on 18 August. The text has been chosen for analysis because of its role in shaping public opinion, as it was widely reported in the press and in all media outlets, and because it represents a turning point in the confrontation, as the unilateral declaration of the offer as final sparked outrage on the union side and actually produced an escalation in the dimension and the vehemence of the strike.

The main argument in the press statement is that the offer is final because there is no money:

The 8.6% demand is simply not affordable as every additional cent spent on salaries means less money for other essential services to the public. Increasing personnel expenditure means that there will be less money for education, learning materials, healthcare and health facilities, medicines, roads, economic infrastructure and other essential services that are part of the Government’s electoral mandate. It also means we cannot employ more teachers and nurses. Government is of the view that it would be unwise to borrow money to finance current expenditure, as this would continue to place an untold debt burden on future generations.

(Maseko 2010)

The argument is a compound one, where grounds become claims for sub-arguments, but the main one can be schematized as follows:

Claim: THE 8.6% DEMAND IS NOT AFFORDABLE

1. EVERY ADDITIONAL CENT SPENT ON SALARIES MEANS LESS MONEY FOR SERVICES;
2. SUCH SERVICES ARE PART OF OUR ELECTORAL MANDATE;
3. (IN ORDER TO AFFORD THE DEMAND THE GOVERNMENT WOULD HAVE TO BORROW);

Warrant: IT WOULD BE UNWISE TO BORROW MONEY TO EXPAND THE CURRENT EXPENDITURE.

Ground number 3 is not actually expressed in the passage, but it is activated by the following sentence “it would be unwise to borrow money to expand the current expenditure” which, in the schema, functions as a warrant. Here a contrast is created between the needs of the public employees and those of the South African people who depend on the services that they provide, through the use of budget restrictions. A classic example

of the warrant of the ‘too short blanket’ which allows for the transition from ground number 1 to the claim according to which the resources of the state are limited. As we will see in the concluding remarks, though, there is a substantial difference between the two, and this can be seen by the fact that Maseko needs the other part of the argument, the one on the burden of debt, in order to justify it. The political culture both of the general public and of the unions is such that a rebuttal on that warrant would be very easy; indeed there is no reason for the state to have limited resources as it can always increase taxes on the rich, for example.

President Zuma stepped in quite soon in the unfolding of the strike, first to say that the violence of the strike “is not part of the ANC tradition” (Bowman and Olifant 2010: 1). The speech, which was reported by nearly all South African newspapers, was given at the reburial of the uMkhonto we Sizwe² cadre Ivan “Jerry” Khuzwayo in Camperdown, KwaZulu-Natal.

After reporting on the issue, newspapers kept it going by inviting opinion makers and analysts to discuss whether or not this was the case: for example, an article in *The Citizen* on 23 August clearly states that “This brutality is part of the ANC tradition” (Anonymous 2010). This episode demonstrates how powerful people can actually influence the agenda of what is discussed in a country.

[...] Zuma said: “Even during the dark days of the liberation struggle this never happened. When people were striking, they would still allow a nurse or doctor to go into a hospital. They knew how critical it was to save lives and you should bear this in mind. It will taint our history and legacy when you have women giving birth on the street. We cannot afford to deviate from the good values the struggle taught us.”
(*Sunday Tribune* 22 August 2010, p. 1)

The demonstrative pronoun *this* probably refers to something that had been introduced before in the speech, but the newspaper does not report it. Nonetheless, the cohesive device seems to be working in two directions: backwards and forwards. Indeed *this* is elaborated (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) in the sentence that follows, explaining what it is that did not happen during the liberation struggle. Here Zuma is referring to the use of pickets in the workplace, in this case hospitals, which are normally used by workers on strike to try to convince other fellow workers to join in the protest. The third and final elaboration of *this* comes with an example given by Zuma, the reference to the woman giving birth on the street. This is probably what closes the circle; indeed the episode of a woman who had to give birth in a hospital parking lot because she was not allowed inside the facility during the strike had just been reported by the media when Zuma spoke, and it was the talking point of the day. With this last step in the analysis it is also possible to draw a conclusion on the reference of the first occurrence of *this* in the extract above. Indeed, with all probability the pronoun refers to the same episode.

Naturally this only makes sense if we bear in mind the history of the struggle for liberation and the role that COSATU played in it. As the only legal black organization in the country, COSATU was the one force that could actually hit at the *Apartheid* machinery and stop it through strikes, since 80 per cent of the workforce in

² Mkhonto we Sizwe, or MK, was the military arm of the ANC.

the country is black. This is what makes the construal of in-groups and out-groups particularly challenging and complex in South Africa.

A look at the pronouns used in the extract will better illustrate the complexity referred to above. The first part of the extract builds a distinction between the strikers of the past – “people [...] on strike”, “*they*” who would still allow medical operations to go on, thus the good strikers – and, by implication, the bad strikers of 2010, who let “*this*”, the meaning of which has been clarified above, happen. In the first part of the extract the only possible direct reference to the 2010 strikers seems to be the impersonal *you* underlined in the extract. Here Zuma seems to be addressing the strikers and to be providing them with a value that they should embrace, a value that comes from the past unity of the democratic movement. Indeed, President Zuma is not looking for direct confrontation nor for an expulsion of the working class from the history of the liberation struggle. Consequently, in the second part of the excerpt he construes a unitary vision of the alliance by referring to “our history and legacy” and by the use of an inclusive *we* in the last sentence, where he warns that what he sees as the continuation of the liberation movement cannot deviate from its tradition.

In an interview given by President Zuma to the state channel SABC, he also said that the government could fire the whole public sector if things were not resolved, as reported by many newspapers and websites:

He was then asked whether the government reserved the right to fire them.

“Of course, yes. That’s in the law. That’s why I’m saying that is a bit of a concern, because if you declare a strike in that manner... you can’t sit for a year without the kids going to school”.

(SAPA 2010)

Here the anaphoric reference of the demonstrative pronoun *that* is to the prolonged strike action declared by the unions after Maseko’s press statement of 18 August analysed above. The use of the indefinite *you* as the actor of, in this case, the material process of ‘declaring’ clearly refers to union representatives who are represented as declaring a strike in a manner that is not even defined, hence the suspension dots in the utterance. My suggestion is to interpret what follows – “you can’t sit for a year without the kids going to school” – as a hypotactic causal clause linked to the main one through *because*. Indeed, this is the reason that Zuma finally gives for the possible firing of the public sector workers on strike. What lies behind that particular choice of words is the reference to a superordinate authority, “the law”, which apparently allows for it.

5. Conclusions

The analysis presented in the last two sections has explored the topics of trade union action and trade union values as well as that of the economic and institutional landscape concerning the relationship between trade unions and the neoliberal state in two different political cultures.

The hegemonic neoliberal thought at a transnational level is the common ground on which the two discourses unfold, although in different historical moments, while the other common characteristic between the two national experiences is the presence of

a supposedly left-wing government as a counterpart to union action. Language is also a unifying factor. Despite the fact that for most of the speakers in the South African context it is not their mother tongue, English is the main language for official/public discourse.

The two political cultures seem to influence the discourse significantly, as will be clear after the comparison that follows.

First of all, I would like to look at the practice of argumentation and especially the use of warrants. The warrant that I called a 'too short blanket', i.e. the impossibility for the state to increase workers' salaries because of lack of money, which is a common aspect of neoliberal discourse, is present in both discourses but it is *inflected* differently. If in the British case it is used to threaten retrenchments, in the South African case it is used to say that the progressive agenda of the ANC, "the Government's mandate", might be undermined by an increase in expenditure for salaries. Indeed, Maseko says that the government will not have money to increase state services and hire new teachers and nurses. The threat of retrenchments, advanced by Zuma in the last excerpt analysed, is linked to this idea of the progressive agenda of the ANC. Indeed, the point for Zuma was that the government could not allow a situation in which children were prevented from going to school to last for a whole year. Thus, the possibility of retrenchments is not justified with the operation of market mechanisms as in the British example, but with the implementation of a progressive agenda that is normally referred to as a "developmental agenda". Such a difference can be explained by the different political cultures of the two countries and also by their different position in the world economy. Britain in the late 1970s was in a deep crisis and the prevailing mood was that of "limiting the damage", while South Africa is one of those BRICS³ countries which, despite the worldwide financial crisis beginning in 2008, was still witnessing general economic growth, at least in its GDP. The problems for South Africa at the moment of the strike were wealth redistribution and youth unemployment. Thus, while the general neoliberal idea of the limited resources of the state applies in both discourses (together with the lack of any reference to the possibility of increasing taxation), the reasons presented for it are very different.

The representation of union actions and values is also different in the two contexts. If in Britain we have the representation of union action as guerrilla warfare, and a deliberate intention to "get at the government machine" is attributed to the trade unions on strike, in South Africa the disruption of services is seen as an unintended result of union action, something that trade unions should consider, and that should bring them to their senses, but not something that they wanted or planned beforehand. The historical relationship between the parties in government and the trade unions both in their development and in the context of the two strikes can explain the difference in this case. The Labour Party of Great Britain had been created in 1906 by the trade unions whose leaders thought workers needed a political arm that could represent them in Parliament. Since then, trade unions have been the backbone of the party in financial terms as well as in terms of the provision of activists inside and outside the party. Moreover, unions provided a large majority of votes to the Labour Party at least until 1990 (Minkin 1991:

³ The acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, i.e. the five most powerful emerging economies of the world and the only ones that maintained a growth in their GDP during and after the economic crisis of 2008.

663). The relationship of the TUC with the Labour Party had been in a deep crisis for a long time when the strike took place, in a way the party was blamed for not being able to deliver according to the mandate of its f(o)unders. Indeed, at his last appearance at the TUC annual meeting, James Callaghan had been violently contested, despite the final decision to still back Labour at the forthcoming elections. Callaghan's reaction during the strike denounces a different perception of the relationship with the TUC and an attempt at asserting the primacy of the party which, being in government, had the general interest of the country at heart, over the *sectorial* interest of the unions.

The situation for the ANC was very different. Indeed the ANC was formed as a liberation movement in 1912 and COSATU was only created in 1985. Nonetheless, as underlined above, the confederation was pivotal in the actions undertaken by the ANC during the struggle against the Apartheid regime in the 1980s. Such actions also included strikes, very long and at times violent ones. Thus, with such recent memories of strikes, rightly celebrated and remembered as actions that led to the fall of the racist regime, it would have been very difficult for Zuma to use the same rhetorical strategy as the one used by Callaghan. Indeed the respect for strike action is still, and mostly thanks to COSATU's ideological work, a non-negotiable aspect of South African political culture, and an attack on such a right could have encountered some difficulties in resonating with the general public.

The methodology used for the analysis, with its focus on transdisciplinarity, made it possible to highlight the differences between the two case studies without hiding their similarities. The outcome of the research is post-disciplinary in its implications as it allows us to arrive at a conclusion that covers all the aspects of the social problem taken into consideration. Indeed, we may conclude that the management of labour conflict through language in the neoliberal era is rooted in basic tenets such as that of the limited resources of the state, while still allowing for a localized interpretation. The study demonstrates that the social practice of governing a country, and its inevitable conflicts, in the neoliberal era cannot be completely understood without taking into due consideration how the discourse of governments is accepted and becomes hegemonic in different political cultures. This also shows a peculiarity of the neoliberal ideology, that of being particularly versatile and of successfully adapting to different contexts in order to get to the same results in each of them. This particular aspect, which was only visible through an analysis that takes semiosis into account, explains the continued success of the neoliberal ideology despite the worldwide crisis witnessed since 2007 and still underway at the moment of writing.

References

- Anonymous 2010. This brutality is part of the ANC tradition. *The Citizen* 23 August (Johannesburg): 12.
- Bourdieu P. and L. Wacquant 2001. Neoliberal Newspeak: notes on the new planetary vulgate. *Radical Philosophy* 105 (Jan): 1-6.
- Bowman C. and N. Olifant 2010. Enough. *Sunday Tribune*, 22 August.
- Chilton P. 2004. *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough I. and N. Fairclough 2012. *Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.

- Fairclough N. 2003. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough N. 2006. *Language and Globalization*. London: Routledge.
- Friedman S. 2010. Unions need to start worrying about changing public opinion. *Daily Dispatch*, 7 June.
- Halliday M. and C. Matthiessen 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 3rd ed. London: Hodder Education.
- Harvey D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ietcu I. 2006. *Discourse Analysis and Argumentation Theory*. Bucharest: Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti.
- Jessop B. 2002. *The Future of the Capitalist State*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Jessop B. and N-L. Sum 2001. Pre-disciplinary and post-disciplinary perspectives. *New Political Economy* 6/1: 89-101.
- Lindsay C. 2003. A century of labour market change: 1900 to 2000. *Labour Market Trends* 111/3: 133-144.
- Maseko T. 2010. Statement on the Cabinet Meeting of 18th August 2010. Government Communications (GCIS). Available at: <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=12276&tid=15427>.
- Minkin L. 1991. *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ortu C. forthcoming. Trade unions in South Africa and the discourse of the neoliberal state. In M. Dedaic (ed.), *South African Political Discourses*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Ortu C. 2008. The denial of class struggle by British Governments in their anti-union discourse (1978–2007). *Critical Discourse Studies* 5/4: 289-301.
- Ortu C. 2012. *Industrial Relations and Conservative Governments in the Eighties: Argumentation and Linguistic Strategies for the Taming of Trade Unions*. 2nd ed. Rome: Aracne.
- Reisigl M. and R. Wodak 2001. *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*. London: Routledge.
- SAPA 2010. Zuma: Govt has right to fire strikers. *News24*, 19 August. Available at: <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Zuma-Govt-has-right-to-fire-strikers-20100819>.
- Sayer A. 2000. For postdisciplinary studies: sociology and the curse of disciplinary parochialism/imperialism. In J. Eric and T. Eldridge (eds.), *For Sociology: Legacies and Prospects*. Durham: Sociologypress: 83–92. Also available at: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/centres/ias/events/general07/docs/interdisc/Sayer%202000.pdf>.
- Toulmin S.E. 1958. *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toulmin S.E., R.D. Rieke and A. Janik 1984. *An Introduction to Reasoning*. London/New York: Macmillan.
- van Eemeren F.H. and R. Grootendorst 1992. *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies: A Pragma-Dialectical Perspective*. London: Routledge.
- van Eemeren F.H., R. Grootendorst and T. Kruiger 1987. *Handbook of Argumentation Theory: a Critical Survey of Classical Backgrounds and Modern Studies*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Wood G. and P. Dibben 2006. Broadening internal democracy with a diverse workforce: challenges and opportunities. In S. Buhlungu (ed.), *Trade Unions and Democracy: Cosatu Workers' Political Attitudes in South Africa*. Cape Town, HSCR Press: 45-74.