

## **Poverty in the neoliberal tale of language textbook**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents the results of the critical analysis of English language textbooks. The research was focused on the textbook images of poverty to show possible contributions of educational materials to promoting a neoliberal system. The research methodology was based on content analysis realized with ATLAS.ti 7 qualitative data coding program, and Critical Discourse Analysis allowing for the analysis of discursive strategies at thematic, grammatical, lexical, and compositional levels. The analysis of the texts showed clear tendencies regarding the presentation of the problem of poverty, with privatizing responsibility for its causes and effects, marginalizing systemic solutions, a high degree of generality, objectifying people affected by poverty and presenting the issue in an optimistic light. The textbook message fits into the neoliberal story of equal opportunities for every human being, at the same time trivializing the analyzed problem and limiting the possibility of reflection on the systemic contexts of poverty.

**Keywords**

content analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, textbooks, poverty, neoliberalism

**Ubóstwo w neoliberalnej opowieści  
podręcznika językowego****Abstrakt**

W artykule przedstawiono wyniki krytycznej analizy podręczników do języka angielskiego. Badania koncentrowały się na podręcznikowych obrazach ubóstwa, aby pokazać potencjalną rolę, jaką pełnią materiały edukacyjne w promowaniu systemu neoliberalnego. Metodologia badań opierała się na analizie treści realizowanej za pomocą programu do jakościowego kodowania danych ATLAS.ti 7 oraz na krytycznej analizie dyskursu pozwalającej na analizę strategii dyskursywnych na poziomie tematycznym, gramatycznym, leksykalnym i kompozycyjnym. Analiza tekstów wykazała wyraźne tendencje w przedstawianiu problemu ubóstwa, z prywatyzacją odpowiedzialności za jego przyczyny i skutki, marginalizacją rozwiązań systemowych, dużym stopniem ogólności, uprzedmiotowieniem osób dotkniętych ubóstwem i ukazywaniem problemu w tonie optymistycznym. Podręcznikowy przekaz wpisuje się w neoliberalną opowieść o równych szansach dla każdego człowieka, trywializując jednocześnie analizowaną kwestię i ograniczając możliwość refleksji nad systemowymi kontekstami ubóstwa.

**Słowa kluczowe**

analiza treści, krytyczna analiza dyskursu, podręczniki językowe, ubóstwo, neoliberalizm

## 1. Introduction

The unquestionable popularity of teaching English worldwide is related to the popularity of language learning materials, including textbooks. Although their main goal is to teach students the basic skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening), the question of how they realize this remains open. The texts, exercises, or pictures included in the textbooks cover different topics and the choice of materials illustrating these topics depends on the decisions of the publishers and authors. Critical analysis of textbooks focused on their hidden curriculum proves that specific difficult and controversial topics are avoided. This phenomenon has even gained the specific name of *vanilla content*, and the acronym PARSNIP (from the words: politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork) is used to refer to potentially controversial content (Banegas 2010). The conceptual scope of individual terms expressed by the acronym is extensive, including possible references to political and social problems. For the purposes of this study, the authors decided to analyze how one of these problems – poverty – is presented in the textbooks. One of the important reasons behind this choice is the seriousness of this phenomenon in the world and the increase in the number of people exposed to extreme poverty in recent years (The World Bank 2022, United Nations 2022, World Economic Forum 2022). At the same time, it is important to see this problem in association with the dominant neoliberal ideology, proclaiming individual freedom, agency, and equal opportunities for each person, while releasing the state from all obligations and responsibilities. As Dixon notes,

Neoliberalism [...] postulates that poverty is an objectively knowable social phenomenon. It theorizes that poverty's causal explanation is grounded in the inappropriateness of the hopes, aspirations, and goals of those living in poverty. It moralizes that the poor have a moral obligation to critically assess the consequences for themselves and others of their decisions not to work even when

work is available, for which they should be held responsible. It concludes that the work-shy poor-by choice — the undeserving poor — cannot be trusted not to abuse tax- finance welfare support. [...] The neoliberal poverty discourse is, essentially, a discourse on human nature. It asserts that the poor can choose not to be poor. (Dixon 2012: 1)

The notion of poverty as one of the main global problems and perceiving the neoliberal system as the one trying to neutralize or “nullify” this problem (also by privatizing responsibility for its causes and effects) was the basis for the main research question of our analysis. Thus, we concentrated on how the issue of poverty is presented in English language textbooks to find the possible connections between the image of poverty on the pages of textbooks and their role in promoting or contesting the neoliberal ideology.

One of the first pieces of research devoted to the neoliberal contents of textbooks was published by Auerbach and Burgess (1985), who analyzed American textbooks for immigrants. The authors pointed out that in addition to learning the language, they also prepared for a particular type of job: low-paid and low-prestige. Contemporary textbook research is focused on the analysis of how textbooks present social classes, the world of work and how they construct individualistic and efficient neoliberal identity (Babaii and Sheikhi 2018, Bori 2018, Gray and Block 2014, Pogorzelska 2023). The authors of the research are also engaged in the exploration of consumerism, tourist discourse in educational materials, superficial multiculturalism, and celebrity culture, as well as marketization and instrumentalization of language learning (Babaii et al. 2019, Babaii and Sheikhi 2018, Bori 2018, Kramsch and Vinall 2018, Pogorzelska 2023).

## 2. Methodology

The research methodology was based on content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. Using content analysis methodology, the authors used inductive and deductive coding (Friese 2012, Patton 2015, Saldaña 2013). In practice, this meant that coding was realized with a previously prepared list of codes, but this list was expanded and refined in the process of a cyclical return to the analyzed texts. The application of Critical Discourse Analysis stemmed from its basic assumption concerning the ideological entanglement of language and its role in reproducing inequalities. The critical aspect of discourse analysis entails the unveiling of the implicit ideologies and perspectives communicated through language, which are often treated as universally accepted truths (Fairclough 2001, Machin and Mayr 2012).

The source of the texts for analysis was textbooks used around the world and published by leading British publishing houses. The list of textbooks contained 19 B1/B2 level titles and since some sets included a student's book and a workbook, the analysis comprised a total of 32 books. The analysis covered texts of more than 50 words, which guaranteed their informative value and logical coherence. After selecting the texts, they were transcribed in the ATLAS.ti 7 qualitative data coding program, which was also used for the first and second coding cycles. In the first cycle, the texts were marked with an appropriate code if it was possible to extract a direct or indirect reference to the problem of poverty. This way, 104 texts were isolated and subjected to the second coding cycle, which was repeated and modified many times and consisted in assigning codes derived from the Critical Discourse Analysis to fragments of texts. In practice, it involved coding these fragments with the application of discursive strategies present at various levels: thematic, grammatical, lexical, and compositional (Fairclough 2001, Molek-Kozakowska 2018, Pogorzelska 2023), both in quantitative and qualitative aspects.

The analysis of the thematic level made it possible to encode the detailed subject matter (causes, symptoms, solutions of the problem) of the texts and the use of presuppositions. The latter are statements of the nature of certainties that do not need to be justified, allowing phenomena to be presented as natural and causeless (Machin and Mayr 2012, Van Dijk 2006). Moreover, thematic analysis is also related to the level of generality of the message. In this part of the research, the presence of depersonalizing strategies such as aggregation (referring to people using *many, thousands, majority, etc.*) or genericization (describing individual people only as members of a specific community: *poor people, the poor, etc.*) is sought (Van Leeuwen 1996, 2008).

The analysis of the grammatical level consisted of examining whether and how the agency of the described actions is expressed in a given text. This level of the research can show whether textbook characters are activated or passivated, and thus whether they are presented as actively participating in reality and causative or as objects of someone's activity (Van Leeuwen 1996, 2008). This stage involves examining the presence of impersonal structures (e.g. nominalizations and passive voice) as well as structures with an object or with inclusive "we" (Fairclough 2001, Machin and Mayr 2012, Van Dijk 2006, Van Leeuwen 2008). Another aspect was the analysis of the level of the modality of the texts: depending on the phrases used, the texts can be characterized by low or high modality, expressed by specific markers (e.g. *maybe/ probably/perhaps* for low modality or *must/certainly* for high modality) (Mautner 2011).

The lexical level of analysis was focused on examining the presence of specific terms, e.g., euphemisms. In contrast, the study of the compositional level referred to the structure of the text as a whole, in which certain topics occur in a specific order, which allows emphasis on some threads and marginalizes others (Fairclough 2001, Molek-Kozakowska 2018).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Thematic level

The analysis of the thematic level made it possible to extract texts describing the causes, symptoms, and solutions to the problem of poverty. Only 15% of the fragments referred to the causes of poverty. In one-third (33%), references were found to symptoms, while the overwhelming majority (80%) described the solutions to the problem. Most of the solutions suggested were related to charity actions (66% of texts in this category) of various organizations or individuals, such as running a shelter for persons experiencing homelessness or volunteering in different campaigns (e.g. Borkowska et al. 2022: 190, Haywood et al. 2020: 38, Mitchell and Malkogianni 2022: 66). Charitable work directed at persons living in poverty was often described by the stories based on a similar scenario, with main roles played by people from Western countries providing aid, and the grateful, but silent recipients of such support coming from the Global South. The text titled *If they hadn't owned a goat...*, presenting the story of Beatrice Biira, is representative for this type of narration:

Beatrice Biira, her mother and her seven brothers and sisters lived in a small village in Uganda. They were very poor and basic necessities were a luxury. If her family had had \$20, they would have paid for Beatrice to go to school, but they didn't have this kind of money. When Beatrice was nine, a life-changing event happened to them. The family was given a goat by a small charity called Heifer International. Within three months of receiving the goat, Beatrice and her family had raised enough money from the sale of the goat's milk to send Beatrice to school. Although she was much older than the other children in her class, she did well, studied hard and soon won a scholarship to a school in Massachusetts, USA [...]. Beatrice has many people to thank for their support and encouragement along the way. But most of all, she's grateful to that first goat. (Wildman et al. 2015: 96)

While the textbooks are full of wordage suggesting individual responsibility, references to system solutions, for which states and governments would be responsible, are very difficult to find in the analyzed material. If they appear in the context of solving the problem of poverty, they are presented as the bodies to be mobilized for action, not as the main decision-making and executive force. For example, in one of the articles, we find a description of an expedition of three Norwegian bloggers to a clothing factory in Cambodia:

The three friends leave Cambodia absolutely devastated, but with a promise to tell everyone about the girls and the price they pay for us to wear cheap fashions. They have already managed to make the Norwegian Parliament take action against companies which produce clothes in such an unethical way. Their programme, *Deadly Fashion*, has been seen by millions of people around the world... Will this encourage people to boycott firms which do not care about the idea of fair trade and exploit children to make huge profits? Time will tell! (Rosińska and Edwards 2019: 8)

In another text we find information about a famous footballer, Marcus Rashford, who is attempting to bring about social change, and he has persuaded the British government to fund school meals for children in need (Rybak et al. 2022: 12). Governments, therefore, appear as parties to be reminded and mobilized to take action but are nowhere mentioned as the main driving force for desired change. They are replaced in this role by charity activities, as suggested below:

The head of the World Food Programme says that Bezos and the other space billionaires could save millions of people from hunger by donating the money that they are spending on rockets. Instead of preparing to send our factories into space, we should be fighting for our planet. (Wood 2022: 23)



Another feature of the texts is the widespread use of presuppositions. Below are three representative examples:

In the mid-1930s hard times returned. America was suffering from the Great Depression and across the country, millions of people were out of work. (Wildman et al. 2015: 22)

In an ideal world, there would be no poverty, homelessness, or suffering. In real life, however, homelessness is still a major issue. (Dooley 2020b: 44)

It also means that in families where children have to work during the day, they can attend school in the evening. (Cornford and Watkins 2019: 37)

Whether it is about events from the past, as in the first passage, or contemporary problems, such as experiencing homelessness or child employment, thanks to presuppositions, the situations are presented as causeless “that’s how it is/was”. Such a presentation severely limits any opportunities for constructive discussion – the phenomena caused by people and their concrete actions are naturalized as part of the reality we can come to terms with, but changing it is beyond our imagination.

Another feature of the texts is their high degree of generality. In 82% of the texts, poverty is described without details, and generality is often achieved through nominalization (see below) and depersonalization. People living in poverty are commonly depersonalized through aggregation when presented as an unspecified number (“So many children around the world are starving or treated badly”, McBeth et. al. 2022: 92). Depersonalization is also achieved through genericization i.e., presenting people as a mass of indistinguishable individuals who have only one feature (e.g., homeless people/the homeless, poor communities). In some cases, it is impossible to see people at all, as a place replaces them:

It's cheap, simple solution to the problem of water pollution in poor countries around the world. (Rybak et al. 2022: 229)

Srinivasa Ramanujan [...] came from a poor village where he received little to no formal education at all. (Borkowska et al. 2022: 166)

Referring to a place, as in the last examples, makes it possible only to mention the problem, but the concrete people experiencing poverty are invisible. Characters who appear in these few texts where poverty is described in a more detailed way and a reader can find out real experiences of real people, either live in the Global South, or belong to history. For example, one of the most poignant descriptions of poverty and hunger found in the textbooks comes from 19th-century Dicken's novel, *Oliver Twist* (Borkowska et al. 2022: 80-81). Referring to a topic as being limited to certain geographical areas or past times makes it easier to distance from it and not treat it as a matter of importance here and now.

### **3.2. Grammatical level**

One of the most frequently repeated features of selected texts at the grammatical level is the use of nominalization in the form of phrases such as *poverty, famine, hunger, starvation, homelessness, and hardship*. The use of nominalizations allows only a general reference to the problem, as the issue remains in the sphere of an abstract noun with no connection with its real symptoms, as one can see below:

This organisation operates in 190 countries to save and protect children's lives and help them fulfill their potential. [...] Its aim is to reduce child mortality and poverty. [...] This is a worldwide organisation that is trying to tackle all acts of discrimination and the inequality that leads to poverty. (Rybak et al. 2022: 269)

As mentioned, poverty is usually presented as a causeless phenomenon. Even if there are references to this problem's roots, they are nominalized and framed as *unemployment, economic crisis, global crisis, and environmental issues*.

Another grammatical feature of the texts is the use of the passive voice to describe people, as the following examples illustrate:

Cotton has been grown in Mali for hundreds of years and the crops have been harvested by people like Makandiafing Keita for generations. In the past, life on cotton plantations was difficult and while big profits were being made by major companies, the workers were badly paid and the living conditions were very poor. (Wildman et al. 2015: 70)

Often [...] they're left homeless and helpless in a foreign land. In many cases, their health is badly damaged because of poor nutrition and disease. (Dooley 2020b: 44)

The use of the passive voice contributes to the objectification of people without homes, which is particularly visible in the description of the proposed solutions, as in the text about people experiencing homelessness:

They're given help applying for jobs, advice about interviews, and even placed on training schemes. They are also provided with instruction in life skills. (Dooley 2020b: 46).

Even if the passive voice is not used, people are often passivated by using structures with an object. The effect is similar as in the case of passive voice – poor people are presented as the objects of somebody else's actions:

Oxfam is a British charitable organization focused on relieving poverty and hunger around the world. It was founded in Oxford in 1942 with the original aim of helping to feed the starving

citizens of Greece during the famine there caused by the Axis occupation during World War II. (Dobb et al. 2022: 259)

[...] 1.3 billion tons of the food that is produced in the world every year isn't actually eaten. [...] If this mountain of food actually reached consumers, it would feed three billion hungry people. (Rybak et al. 2022: 115)

Describing the thematic level, attention was drawn to the privatization of solutions to the problem of poverty, which was manifested in a small number of texts indicating the responsibility of the state in this respect. In addition, privatization is also conveyed using the inclusive “we” commonly used in the texts, which is most aptly summed up in the quote: “If we all work together, we can make our world a better place for everyone” (Dooley 2020b: 44). Attributing responsibility to the inclusive “we”, in fact, blurs the cause and, consequently, also puts the blame on those who are in no way responsible for the described negative phenomena. At the same time, in most texts where an unspecified joint responsibility is implied, low-modality verbs are used:

[...] maybe it could help solve world hunger in developing countries. (Spencer and Cichmińska 2019: 43)

[...] we should take action against companies which employ children. (Rosińska and Edwards 2019: 9)

Tonight's documentary [...] will also analyse how a massive distribution of wealth might enable the reversal of the social injustice we are seeing today. (Rosińska et al. 2022: 215)

Using such verbs instead of those indicating high modality (e.g. *have to / must*) does not imply the problem's urgency or seriousness but rather its relative insignificance.

### 3.3. Lexical level

A characteristic feature at the lexical level is the use of euphemisms that refer to the problem of poverty but in a much milder and more indirect way. In such cases, for example, a phrase replacing *hunger* is *food shortages*, and people affected by poverty are described with the use of soothing, general expressions, e.g., *low-income people*, *people in need*, *underprivileged groups* or *vulnerable people*. These phrases are most often used in the context of the activities of charitable initiatives, which makes readers suppose that they are referring to poor people. A similarly veiled way of description can be found in the following examples:

[...] people in developing countries who are struggling to improve their lives. (Bowie et al. 2019: 99)

Smithfield has always had a strong desire to make sports available to children of every age and social demographic. (Evans and Dooley 2020: 115)

In one text we can read about “families whose incomes put them below the breadline” and “politicians who need to try to balance the books” (Rosińska et al. 2022: 215), so both framing problem and solution are mitigated by specific lexical choices.

Describing the methods of depersonalization, it was pointed out that in some texts, people are replaced with references to a place. In addition, even these references are mitigated by using euphemisms when places are described in the following way:

Fatema lives in a village in a rural part of Bangladesh. It’s an underserved area, and it was largely cut off from the modern world. (Rybak et al. 2022: 274)

14-year-old Joshua was born on a council estate. Like many of his peers, Joshua experienced hard times and misfortune in his early life. (Wildman et al. 2015: 56)

[...] we bring sports close to home in disadvantaged communities. (Falla and Davies 2020: 21)

A group of kids from a historically underprivileged neighbourhood in the American Midwest. (Brayshaw et al. 2020: 41)

In all the examples cited, we are dealing with suggestions open to interpretations of the problem, but poverty is quite effectively erased. For example, the phrase *a historically underprivileged neighborhood* can have many meanings and only the context suggests that one of the features of the neighborhood is poverty.

### 3.4. Compositional level

The compositional level refers to the structure of the whole text and a recurring pattern, identified in 63% of texts, is their division into two parts: the first presents the causes and/or symptoms of poverty and the other one is focused on the solutions, which is well illustrated in the fragment below concerning the project of one of the organizations:

The World Bank defines extreme poverty as living on less than \$1.90 a day, but it's not just about money; people living in extreme poverty also lack safe homes, clean drinking water, enough food, access to healthcare or education, and they often work in dangerous conditions. The Borgen Project is a non-governmental organization with one mission: to end extreme poverty. [...] The Borgen Project now has volunteers working in over 900 US cities and in many other places around the world. The aim of the organization is to spread the word about extreme poverty. [...] Extreme poverty is still a major issue in our modern world, but the good news is - thanks to campaigning by organisations like the Borgen Project - the situation is improving. (Dooley 2020a: 70)

Very often, a word or phrase that signals the possibility of a happy outcome (*fortunately, the good news is, let's hope*) is used either to separate the two parts or, as in the text quoted

above, underline the accessibility of a solution. Such structure, supported by particular, uplifting expressions, contributes to creating the optimistic tone of the message conveyed. The text below serves as a good example of a textbook approach – optimistic and carefree, but detached from the realities of many people's lives, also by suggesting that serious problems (lack of freedom, control of the rich over everything, environmental disaster) belong to fictional dystopias:

In 1516, Sir Thomas More wrote his famous book about a perfect society, which he called Utopia. A utopian society is very progressive and has very little crime, violence or poverty. A dystopian society is basically the opposite of that. These societies have governments that use cruelty and fear to totally control their populations. Police or other government agents constantly watch people to make sure they are behaving properly and use violence or imprisonment if they are not. Ordinary citizens have little or no freedom as the rich and powerful control everything and get all the economic benefits. As well as terrible inequality, these societies usually have very serious environmental issues. Fortunately, at the present, dystopian societies exist only in fiction as writers and filmmakers create them to warn us about possible dangers in the future, if positive changes do not happen. (Dobb et al. 2022: 261)

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

The analysis of the texts showed clear tendencies regarding the presentation of the problem of poverty. First, most texts refer to possible solutions, which seem to be at hand, accessible and available thanks to individual people or charities. Second, systemic solutions related to state activity are either effectively removed from view or described as possible additional support that governments can be encouraged to do, without being the driving force in the process of preventing or combating poverty. Third, the texts suggest individual responsibility through a thematic concentration on these issues and the frequent use of appropriate grammatical structures with an inclusive “we”.

Moreover, poverty and its associated problems are usually described with presuppositions and with a high degree of generality, without referring to specific people – their voices, experiences, features, and identity components. In many texts, people are either portrayed as an indistinguishable mass by reference to place, or they are completely erased. Problems are presented in the form of nominalization, which allows them to be referenced in an impersonal and causeless way, depriving them of the human dimension. A similar function is performed using passive voice, objectifying people and excluding their agency, needs, and feelings. Moreover, euphemisms used in the texts and their structure create an optimistic message whose inseparable final accent is a reference to solutions. All the strategies described above perform similar functions, allowing for *polishing* problems - showing them in an optimistic, light version that does not require reflection on the systemic causes of poverty and making it possible to trivialize complex, serious issues by offering simple solutions.

By avoiding individual stories, detaching problems from the broader socio-political background, presenting them in general, and anonymizing people, textbooks fit into the neoliberal story of equal opportunities for every human being, ignoring multiple identity components such as gender, origin, or health status. The polishing of poverty is also related to the broader issue of social class erasure (Block 2015, Grady 1997). As Gray and Block claimed, in the textbook world, where everybody belongs to the middle class, there is no room for showing systemic class differentiation because it would contradict “the neoliberal mantra [...] which allows poverty to be explained by individual fecklessness or lack of aspiration” (2014: 68). Class erasure is an element that fits into the zero-drag approach – the individual is freed from all constraints, whether class or otherwise. Textbook characters confirm this approach being devoid of the complicated ballast associated with belonging to a different class and the consequent limitations. This way, textbooks can easily promote individualism, combined with a belief in success as



a simple sum of willingness, determination, and hard work (Pogorzelska 2023).

The textbook message reproduces the ubiquitous neoliberal tale about individual responsibility for the causes and solutions to the problem. At the same time, with the plethora of proposed solutions being the responsibility of either private individuals or charities, there is no mention of the responsibility of states, governments, or large corporations. Presenting a different perspective would inevitably lead to conclusions that would threaten the foundations of the ideology, but this is precisely what contemporary schools need. It is not an easy task, but the first step is to be able to critically deconstruct the textbook contents that we often perceive as neutral and free of any ideology.

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