# SEXISM IN ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

# SEXISMO EM LIVROS DIDÁTICOS DE INGLÊS: UMA ANÁLISE CRÍTICA DO DISCURSO

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**Abstract**: The present study aims to analyze the unit 4B of the English as Second Language Book American English File, entitled "That's a cool car!", in terms of critical discourse analysis, based on Fairclough 2003' theory. The author proposes that social practices are built by a system of ideologies that supposedly represent society. In this perspective, applying CDA's theory to the unit, it will be possible to visualize how the language chosen by the book's authors shape social practices, concerning the theme of sexism in teaching English. The main focus of this analysis will be considering Fairclough's concepts of Ideology and Assumptions, where through discourse it is possible to identify the disseminated assumption that women prefer cars for their colors and practicality, whereas men prefer fast and expensive cars, which propagates an ideology of sexism. Finally, adaptations of exercises are presented in order to develop students' critical thinking about this matter.

Keywords: English; textbooks; sexism; critical discourse analysis.

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**Resumo:** O presente estudo tem como objetivo analisar a unidade 4B do livro de Inglês como Língua Segunda American English File, intitulado "That's a cool car!", sob a ótica da análise crítica do discurso, com base na teoria de Fairclough (2003). O autor propõe que as práticas sociais são construídas por um sistema de ideologias que supostamente representam a sociedade. Nessa perspectiva, ao aplicar a teoria da ACD à unidade, será possível visualizar como a linguagem escolhida pelos autores do livro molda as práticas sociais, no que diz respeito ao tema do sexismo no ensino de inglês. O foco principal dessa análise será considerar os conceitos de Ideologia e Suposições de Fairclough, onde, por meio do discurso, é possível identificar a suposição disseminada de que as mulheres preferem carros pelas suas cores e praticidade, enquanto os homens preferem carros rápidos e caros, o que propaga uma ideologia de sexismo. Por fim, são apresentadas adaptações dos exercícios para desenvolver o pensamento crítico dos alunos sobre esse tema.

Palavras-chave: linguística aplicada; livros didáticos; sexismo; análise crítica do discurso.

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#### Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis' theory from Fairclough studies how discourse represents the world in texts, and as a social practice. Aspects such as how society is shaped according to discourse and also how society shapes each discourse are a matter of debate on CDA, and in this analysis they will be projected in an ESL book. The chosen book for this study is American English File, by Oxford, in its second edition. The book's organization relies on 3 different aspects: Grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The unit observed will be the 4B and the contents previewed are presented in the following table:

Frame 1.	Unit 4B	Contents	Previewed
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Unit's Title	Grammar	Vocabulary	Pronunciation
That's a cool car!	Adjectives	Colors and Common	/ɔ/; /ar; /ɔr/;
		adjectives	

Source: Authors, 2024.

By conducting this analysis, we will be able to project an environment of discussion and enlightenment in classroom, combining the teaching of English to CDA and identifying how the use of linguistic choices creates some assumed taxonomies and constitutive ideas from men and women's cars. To make this distinguishable, the texts offer stereotypical

perspectives that are conventionalized in society, along with assumptions of which car is more suitable to each person, depending on the sexual genre. In this Unit, the object of analysis will be several types of genres, such as dialogues, listening activities, reading and speaking activities, text and a pronunciation exercise that discuss types of cars, which mostly differs them by a man and a woman's car.

#### **Literature Review**

Many social problems affect societies and one of them is sexism. The prejudice and discrimination against someone because of their sex has been an issue in societies, leading them to develop the idea of men being as the one that is the only strong and clever one. Sexism is a debated theme in the 21st century and nowadays people are more aware of its influence in everybody's routine which ends up building beliefs that go through generations, such as an old belief that women should stay at home and only men should work out of the house. This debate has been applied in many areas aiming to develop a critical thinking and awareness of this issue, especially in education. Considering that, this paper focuses on the presence of sexism in language teaching materials. Puig (2018) researched this issue in the same textbook series analyzed in this paper and she concluded that "(t)he presence of sexism in EFL materials has been analyzed by researchers considering different areas that promote gender bias." (Puig, 2018, p. 4)

The future analysis was based on the theory of Norman Fairclough (2003) (1989), Critical Discourse Analysis, which aimed to provide concepts and tools for a critical analysis of language concerning social issues in society and perceived through this same language. For Fairclough (1989), through language is how power relations are manifested. Therefore, language brings consciousness and being conscient leads to emancipation. According to the same author, "Ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation." (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9)

From that, it is possible to understand that ideologies are the ideas that guide people's relations and build the culture of a society. The author points out that these are also responsible for relations of domination and exploitation, that is, ideologies can prevail over the influence and power of one group over another. These ideologies can be noted through what Fairclough defines as assumptions. Fairclough comments that:

Implicitness is a pervasive property of texts, and a property of considerable social importance. All forms of fellowship, community and solidarity depend upon meanings which are shared and can be taken as given, and no form of social communication or interaction is conceivable without some such 'common ground'." (Fairclough, 2003, p. 55)

Therefore, assumptions are meanings expressed that carry an idea of a person or society. These meanings, however, can be very implicit, since they are treated as common-sense. In other words, assumptions are common ideas based on an ideology that are internalized in the person or group and expressed through the discourse. For Fairclough, common-sense assumptions are ideologies and these are related to language because "using language is the commonest form of social behavior, and the form of social behavior where we rely most on 'common-sense assumptions'. (Fairclough, 1989, p. 2). That is, it is possible to analyze and understand the power relations in a context due to the analysis of the language that is being used.

# Methodology

For this study, Unit 4B of the textbook American English File (2013), titled "That's a cool car!" was selected to conduct a critical analysis based on Fairclough's theory. The selection was based on the observation that the main topic of the material involved a sexist idea of a distinction between men and women's relation to cars. The analysis focuses on Fairclough's concepts of Ideology and Assumptions, identifying how discourse produces and reinforces the notion that women prefer cars for their colors, practicality and low cost, while men prefer fast and expensive cars, this way propagating a sexist ideology.

The methodology involves a detailed content analysis of text choices, dialogues, images and exercises within the unit, examining how the language use reflects gendered ideologies. Pedagogical adaptations are then proposed to challenge sexist assumptions and encourage critical thinking among students, aiming to empower educators with strategies to promote gender equality and critical discourse in the classroom.

#### **Results and Discussion**

#### Analysis of the unit:

The unit 4B aims to work with adjectives, colors and common adjectives with students and to achieve that, the chosen themes were colors and cars. Even though there are not critical exercises, the texts presented in the unit are able to generate valuable discussions about the themes. For starters, the first text (Image 1), a conversation, brings statements of fact, that is, statements about what is.

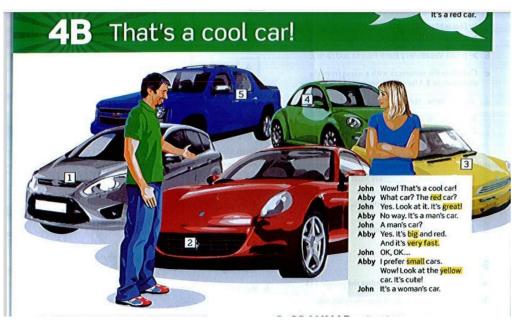


Image 1. First text

This can be noticed through the use of relational processes which identify types of cars and attributes specific features for them, such as:

"It's a man's car. [...] It's big and red. And it's very fast." "Look at the yellow car. It's cute!" "It's a

woman's car."

These statements of fact in italic and bold are expressing the existence of a division into two specific types of car: a car for the masculine gender and a car for the feminine. This ends up functioning as a Propositional Assumption, as Fairclough defines, "assumptions about what is or can be or will be the case" (Fairclough, 2003, p.55). Moreover, these statements are categorical, that is, they do not present negotiation in their speech: what is said is being said as the general truth and there is no space for discussing this meaning. In other words, the text states that it is a fact that there is a difference between men and women's preferences for cars and that applies for all participants of these groups.

The other present text in this unit is in a reading exercise that points out the most important

Source: American English File, 2013, p. 23.

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topic of this analysis, introducing the question "Which are important for men and which are important for women?", as it is possible to see below.

Image	e 2. Second text
What car? Men and women ar	re different.
mportant questions for men: ?? Mercedes, BMW, and Audi are very popular with nen. 90% of drivers of the luxurious Mercedes 85 AMG (top speed 186 mph / 300 kph) are nen. Big SUVs are also very popular with men.	Important questions for women: 

Source: American English File, 2013, p. 24.

The article exhibits the differences between men and women, pointing out that those differences matter when it comes to choosing a car. According to Fairclough (Chapter 6, 2003), "unstated conventions are non-established rules that are followed and respected in common sense", which are exemplified in this idea of women having preferences on choosing a car that involve their behavior as bad driver, lower purchasing power and concerned mostly about the aesthetics aspects of a car. The important questions presented in the pre-reading are given as options to complete the article's choice, which start with the men's ideas of a nice car. The following table explains the relevant topics for men and for women and can be used for.

Frame 2. Lexical choices for men vs women car

Aspects considered important by the article		
Men	Women	

Firstly, the brands given for men are from cars are	The brands mentioned as the most popular for
imported and launch on a higher price range	women are car brands considered cheaper and
compared to the women's options (Mercedes,	smaller, according to the text (Honda, Hyundai and
BMW, Audi)	Volkswagen)
The adjectives used to describe men's cars in the text	The adjectives referring to women's cars start being
are: luxurious, fast and big	suggested on the title, differently from the men's
	adjectives (1. nice color), and the ones present in the
	text are: sports car, not so expensive,
	safe and small

Source: Authors, 2024.

Men's cars text implies by the use of the selected adjectives (Table 2) the unequal power relation between men and women, since men here are stated as richer, better drivers and relating to new capitalism mentioned by Fairclough, more powerful than women concerning those aspects. Meanwhile, women are being categorized as poorer, more worried about safety once they are represented as - have bigger chances to suffer a car crash linked to being a worse driver. The options for the answers include different adjectives that reinforce a pattern of choice divided by the driver's genre, a man or woman.

Taking Fairclough's (2003) theory on CDA, the relations of power and language is a medium through which power relations and ideologies are enacted and reinforced. In this exercise it is possible to examine sexist ideologies embedded in and perpetuated through discourse, by the offering options for cars that are important for man and women, distinguishing a stereotype of women's driver which are:

- More inexperienced (a car easy to park);
- More worried about the car's appearance (color, size);
- Less financial able to afford a car (is it cheap, luxurious);
- More concerned about safety (safe), in contrast with men, who prefer a fast car;

This stereotypical representation of men and women is reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes, establishing also a socially accepted and sustained idea of women as "bad/worse" drivers, compared to men's conduct.

The activities do not raise awareness and deconstruction of these assumptions and this can easily lead the student to believe it is a general fact. It is important to bring texts and exercises that

develop students' critical thinking in order to not propagate a sexist ideology which diminishes the woman as superfluous, weak and even dumb. For this reason, the following section presents adaptations for this unit aiming to develop a critical consciousness in students about this topic.

## Adaptations proposals:

Activity 1: The first activity (Image 3) of the unit focuses on vocabulary and speaking activities. This activity explores isolated terms of nationality and adjectives found in the dialogue (Image 1), however it does not address the sexist distinction made in the text when mentioning a woman's car and a man's car.

**Image 3.** First activity of the textbook

1	VOCABULARY & SPEAKING colors and common adjectives					
a	(2) 29.)) Match the cars and nationalities. Listen and check.					
	American Italian   British Japanese   German					
b	(2) 30)) Listen and read the dialogue. What are the two cars?					
c	Look at the highlighted words. Guess their meaning.					
d	(2) 31 (1) Listen again and repeat the dialogue. Then practice it with a partner.					
e	▶ p.121 Vocabulary Bank Adjectives.					
f	Look at the picture of the cars 1–5. Practice with a partner.					
	1 Ask and answer.					
	What color is it? { It's red. It's a red car.					
	2 Describe the cars. Use two adjectives.					
4	Car 2 is fast and expensive.					

Source: American English File, 2013, p. 24.

In order to explore the discourse critically, the teacher could include the following questions:

a) What are John and Abby talking about? () sports

() trips () cars () houses

b) Does Abby like cars?

c) Connect the car to the adjectives related in the text.

1) Woman's car

2) Man's car

() great () yellow () big () cool

() very fast () cute () red () small

d) Why do you think certain adjectives are used for women's cars and others for men's cars? \_\_\_\_\_

e) How do you think this text influences our ideas about what kind of car men and women should drive?

() It reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. () It tells people which cars to buy. () It doesn't differentiate between women and men.

Activity 2: Another adaptation idea would be to complement the dialogue with two authentic texts that explore the topic of female drivers and the stereotypes attached to them. The teacher can apply this activity to encourage the students to think more critically and to raise awareness about this social practice.

# Image 4. Headline Text 1



**Kamrun Naher** 24 June, 2024, 11:05 am Last modified: 24 June, 2024, 11:31 am

Source: Adapted from https://www.tbsnews.net/features/behind-wheel-how-women-drivers-navigate- roads-and-social-barriers-8 83036.

Image 5. Headline Text 2



Lifestyle / Hot Pot Column

# I'm the proof women drivers are worse than men

By Debbie Mason ( China Daily )

Updated: 2011-10-27 10:37:07

Source: Adapted from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2011-10/27/content 13986981.html

Exploring the texts

# a) Look at texts 1 and 2. Where were they published?

c) When were they published? Do you think the date affects the content of the texts?Why?

d) Which are the genres of the texts? () Research Article

() Cartoon

() News headline () Comic Strip

() Letter

e) Who are the authors of the texts?

f) What do you think are the "social barriers" mentioned in text 1?

Activity 3:

3	Image 6. In	ird activity of the text	tbook
at the questions. V the article.	Which are importa	ant for men and which are	important for women?
olor? 3 Is	s it big?	5 Is it easy to park?	7 Is it safe?
4 Is	s it cheap?	6 Is it luxurious?	
le and check.		VICTORADON	
or disagree with t	he article?		
<mark>ghlighted</mark> words. ( our teacher or a die	Guess their meani ctionary.	ng.	
and w	omen a		questions for women:
	?	1 2	i i i i i i i i i i i i i i i i i i i
Mercedes, BMW, and Audi are very popular with men. 90% of drivers of the luxurious Mercedes S65 AMG (top speed 186 mph / 300 kph) are men. Big SUVs are also very popular with men.		women. 65% of are women. Thr	and Volkswagen are popular with drivers of VW Beetle convertibles ee of the top five women's cars (but not very expensive sports
	the article. olor? 3 Is 4 Is cle and check. or disagree with t ighlighted words. our teacher or a dia it car? and w nt questions for _???	the article. olor? 3 Is it big? 4 Is it cheap? cle and check. or disagree with the article? ighlighted words. Guess their meani our teacher or a dictionary. <b>It car?</b> and women a nt questions for men: _??	olor?     3 Is it big?     5 Is it easy to park?       4 Is it cheap?     6 Is it luxurious?       cle and check.     6 Is it luxurious?       or disagree with the article?     1       ighlighted words. Guess their meaning.     1       our teacher or a dictionary.     1       ott car?     1       and women are different       Int questions for men:     1       ?     ?       ?     ?       ?     ?       WW, and Audi are very popular with     Honda, Hyundai,

Source: American English File, 2013, p. 24.

As we saw before, this reading exercise reinforces sexism through the division of car's adjectives for each gender. For that, it was considered the following questions to develop a critical view of the topic.

*Question A' adaptation*: In order to raise awareness on the differences between adjectives used to refer to men's cars and women's, the following question can be proposed:

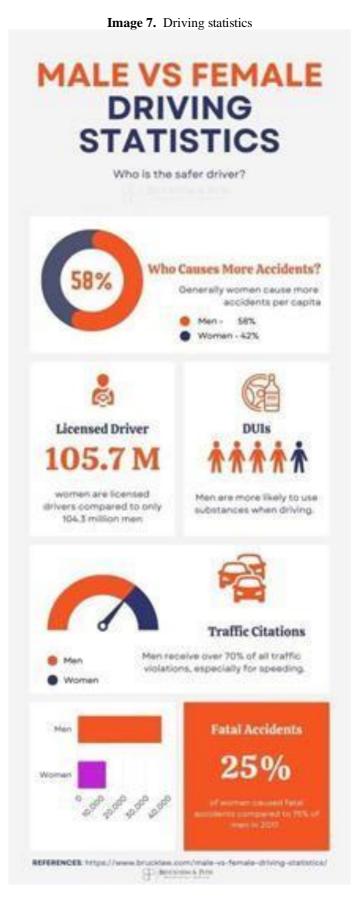
"Do you think the adjectives used for each gender correspond to reality nowadays? If so, why?"

The following reading exercise will also highlight the approximations between best and worst drivers concerning gender and can enlighten discussion in terms of stereotypes deconstruction in class.

*Question B*: Do you agree or disagree with the article?

This reflective question directed to the reader asks for their opinion on the matter, even after constructing an atmosphere of unequal relation of gender involving moral evaluation and assumptions stated concerning inequity between male and female. This question can be adapted by the offer of different contexts for the students. Proposing this question to the students allows open responses, so the teacher's guidance is extremely important in order to provide discussion and awareness on stereotypical ideas and comments. Providing extra data concerning the topic is an alternative, taken the example image 7.

This image was taken from a law private office in Washington, D.C., updated in April 2024, provides specific data on which gender provokes more accidents leading to a "worse driver" title. In the classroom, the teacher can provide printed copies of the image or use a projector for discussing it. Concerning the book's audience as a starter, the language used in the image is accessible according to their English proficiency and can be read by the students without major difficulties. It also provides extra driving vocabulary that can be useful for English for Specific Purposes, in terms of vocabulary for driving in English speaking countries(e.g. Drivers license, DUIs...).



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Activity 5:

**Image 8.** Fifth activity of the textbook

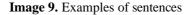
5	SPEAKING & WRITING				
a	Talk in small groups abou	t your car or your family	's car.		
	My car is a Honda Civic. I It's small and it's green. I	t isn't a very new car. It's a great car.			
b	Write about your "dream"	car.			
	My dream car is a car. (nationality) It's 	(model) It's a / an (color) It's	and		

Source: American English File, 2013, p. 24

The activity 5 focuses on Speaking and Writing skills based on the unit topic, that is, to talk and write about cars. It is divided into three exercises, being a) to orient students to practice speaking, specifically about the family's car; b) to write about their dream car; and c) to tell a classmate the text they wrote in exercise b. Both exercises a and b present ready examples for students to follow. In these cases, students would have to change the main information of the text for their own, in order to talk about their own cars.

The activity, even though it is quite objective and well explained for students to practice these two skills, it does not raise awareness about the problematic main assumptions made in the whole unit: that there are cars only for men and cars only for women. Considering this, it is suggested to add one more exercise in this activity.

Before students read and do the activity 5, the teacher, in order to provide ways of negotiation for students in another language, would present ways to say your opinion, to agree and disagree with someone's statement. For that, the teacher can write on the board these common statements or share with students the materials below, which are available on the internet.





Source: https://kabardesa.my.id/expression-of-asking-and-giving-opinion.html



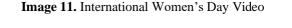
Image 10. Examples of agree and disagree sentences

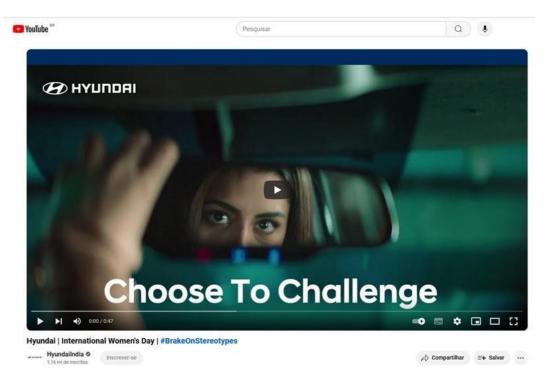
Source: https://www.englishlessonviaskype.com/how-to-agree-and-disagree-in-english/

After that, students would do the first activity, to talk about the cars in their families and give their opinions about them, making use of what they learned before. After that, the teacher can do or not the activity b and c and finish the unit with the following exercise.

Students would watch the video (Image 11), available on YouTube. After watching, they would have to answer the following questions below:

a)	What is you	r opinion on the text	s of this unit? Do yo	bu agree that cars only for men and
	only	for	women	exist? Why?





Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MO3Cd40MaRk

b) How does this commercial reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes about women's and men's driving abilities? What assumptions about gender roles and abilities does it bring?

c) After watching the video, do you think men drive better than women? Why?

Students are expected to make use of the first material and content they learned before the activity 5, "How to give your opinion". After writing their answer, they are supposed to read them for the class and the other classmates are supposed to comment using the ways of agreeing and disagreeing from the second material, "Everyday English". The teacher can decide if the debate after this will continue in English or their native language. It is important to point out that during this activity many different opinions and stereotypical ones may arise. For that reason, it is important for the teacher to be prepared to guide the discussion in a way that may develop students' critical view of the topic and visualize that the assumption of men driving better than women and that there are cars for each gender is the result of sexism ideas.

# Conclusion

Norman Fairclough's theory of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is influential in understanding the complex relationships between language, power, and society. Fairclough's approach emphasizes how discourse shapes social structures and practices, including those related to gender. When analyzing gender awareness in the context of men's and women's cars, Fairclough's theory can be applied to reveal how language and visual texts contribute to the construction and perpetuation of gender norms.

By applying critical discourse analysis to the study of gender awareness in this lesson, we can uncover how language, images, and social norms work together to maintain and reproduce gendered identities and power structures. The textbook's unit not

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only didn't raise this awareness, but also contributed to maintain the stereotypes about women and cars.

However, this analysis shows that it is possible to work with this unit in class to challenge this preconceived idea if the teacher complements the material with other texts to achieve this goal. By integrating other perspectives and providing opportunities for critical discussions, teachers can help students recognize and question the implicit gender prejudice present in the textbook. This approach not only enhances students' critical thinking skills but also promotes a more inclusive classroom environment.

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