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Editorial: Discourse Analysis With A Cause

by Teun A. van Dijk

The history of the humanities and social sciences in general and that of semiotics, linguistics and discourse analysis in particular, occasionally witness periods of specific social and political engagement. The late 1960s are a prominent and much cited example and there are good reasons to assume that one generation later, at the beginning of a decade of antemillennium soul-searching, a new period of critical research may develop. This is particularly true for the study of discourse which, during its 25 odd years of existence, has matured into an independent and rather successful new cross-discipline in many domains of the humanities and the social sciences. Of course, this "critical" or "political" phase in the development of discourse studies is neither unexpected nor unprepared. Since its foundation in the mid-1960s, and in close connection with French structuralism and the development of semiotics, several scholars have been engaged in critical or socio-political studies of text and talk. However, the major paradigms in the many varieties of discourse analysis were still inspired by linguistic, semiotic, anthropological, sociological or psychological approaches that focussed on the structures or strategies of discourse understanding and interaction. Even when social contexts were examined for instance in work associated with the other new discipline of these same 25 years, sociolinguistics, truly critical or political work was the exception. Discourse analysis, like other emerging disciplines, was too busy developing its own goals, orientation, methods and theories to bother with pressing socio-political issues. In that respect, it proved hardly more engaged than one of its influential mother-disciplines, linguistics itself, although at the end of the 1970s there were isolated attempts, principally in Great Britain and Australia, at "critical linguistics".

During the 1980s, "critical linguistics" merged with similar approaches in social semiotics, pragmatics or what will here be called critical discourse analysis. More systematically than before, this new orientation placed critical, socio-political and socio-cultural issues on the agenda. One important factor in this development is, of course, the feminist approach in women's studies. In the analysis of language use, discourse and women's communication, it became increasingly legitimate to ask questions about inequality, power and dominance in group relations and about the ways these are reproduced and legitimated by text and talk. By asking such questions as "Whose Language?", the study of language and discourse went beyond the sophisticated analysis of sentence or text grammars, speech acts, conversational interaction, text processing, communicative events or sociolectal variations. Beyond the social microstructures of situated text, understanding and interaction, such questions address the macrostructures of society including those of group relations, organizations and institutions. Socio-political "positions", of women, ethnic minorities, classes or world regions, as well as the ideologies that sustain their subordination, and their resistance, also required a discourse analytical approach. The nuclear arms race, ecological disasters, the continuing exploitation of the Third World and the political developments in Eastern Europe, have been among the issues that have similarly demanded attention also from discourse analysis.

The time has come, therefore, to put these scattered developments into a more homogeneous perspective. One way to do this, as usual, is to create an international journal. Such a journal, *Discourse & Society* now exists, and its success shows that it provides a much needed independent forum for research that hitherto remained rather marginal in a large number of linguistic, pragmatic, discourse analytical and social science journals. Obviously, this is not enough. Some 30 articles a year do not suffice to define a paradigm. For Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to become a prominent approach in the humanities and social sciences we should expect dozens of books, hundreds of articles and conference papers, and special symposia or conference sections, yearly.

It is even more important, however, to formulate explicit goals, principles, methods and theories that sustain such critical inquiry. That such foundations for the new direction in research should satisfy the usual criteria of scholarship should be obvious if we want to please the "others" in our discipline. However, critical research is always also, if not primarily, self critical about scholarly research. It does not merely change the prevalent methods, challenge a theory, or disrupt a paradigm. Rather, it asks questions about the very foundations and goals of science, and even deals with the sociopolitical positions of scholars themselves. Again, feminist theory formation and practice have shown that scholarship is inextricably linked with the position of women in general and female scholars in particular. The same is true for Blacks and other minorities in their critical analysis of racism and its manifestations in academia. Third World scholars daily experience what it means not only to carry out research in shabby conditions, but also to be marginalized if not ignored by "our" (north-western) journals and "our" (north-western) conferences. Politically no less relevant has been the close encounter between critical research on the international arms race, on pollution, refugees and war and peace in the Middle East on the one hand, and everyday resistance and political position-taking on the other hand. In other words, the study of discourse is part of this social, political and cultural world and the time has come to reflect systematically and extensively about its position in this world. In a world and a period where not only the fundamental problems have grown to a global scale, but in which also text, speech and communication have reached a scale of influence and power that directly signal the measure of dominance of those who "own" them, control them or have access to them, critical discourse analysis has a vast field of practice. Thus our special task is that of what I shall call *analytical resistance*. By analyzing the mechanisms of the discourses of power that reproduce and legitimate the many forms of inequality we may be expected to contribute our share to the struggles of resistance and change. Critical discourse analysis, thus, aims at the formulation of effective counter-discourse and the persuasive development of counter-ideologies. It does not simply speak *about* this world, but *in* this world. It does not indulge in the fashionable, postmodernist rejection of "old-fashioned" words such as "solidarity." Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) does not believe that Ideologies have come to their end. On the contrary, its task is to show that, more than ever, but more covertly and subtly, and hence more effectively, they are alive and kicking.

If we should have learned one thing from the late 1960s, it is that within the socio-political and cultural context of the 1990s, the effectiveness of CDA does not merely depend on the enthusiastic engagement or the ideological principles of its practitioners. Analytical resistance is pointless, for instance, without solid theories, powerful methods of research and persuasive applications that "work". One essential condition of

theoretical renewal is that it should be multidisciplinary. Serious social and political issues do not respect the traditional boundaries between different fields. During the last 25 years, increasingly sophisticated analyses of text and talk, thus, may have elevated the new cross-discipline to a level of academic respectability, but its socio-political effectiveness has remained slight. One of the causes of this lack of effectiveness is our limited insight into the details of the very role of discourse in society, polity and culture. That power, ideology, or group inequality is crucially reproduced and legitimated by text and talk, may have become a trivial insight. *How exactly* these processes operate, however, we hardly know.

Theoretically, this means that we need to examine the details of the *contextualization* of the many structures and strategies of discourse we have learned to analyze in the past decades. Societal structures, however, do not immediately influence text and speech, nor does discourse, or communication directly affect such structures of society and culture. We need at least the important interface of social cognitions, that is, detailed insight into the structures of knowledge and belief representations of language users as social group members. We need to make explicit with what cognitive strategies speakers translate such social cognitions into the many structures of their discourses and, conversely, how discourse structures in specific contexts affect such social cognitions. This will, at the same time, provide the necessary understanding of the processes of the other dimension of the socio-cognitive interface, that is, how social cognitions are being acquired, used and changed in the first place. In other words, social, political and cultural structures can operate through discourse only through the minds of language users, not as individual speakers, but as members of groups or cultures. This means that the discourse analyst should work in close collaboration with the socially oriented social psychologists as easily as with sociologists and political scientists, and conversely, that social scientists should not hesitate to integrate into their work cognitive or linguistic research results. There are vast fields of theoretical inquiry at the boundaries of these disciplines that remain virtually unexplored and that need to be investigated if we want to contribute to a truly effective critical discourse analysis.

To illustrate this general call to engage in critical discourse analysis, let me offer the example of the kind of issues I have been engaged in since 1980, the study of *racism* and its reproduction through various kinds of discourse. First a general observation, or rather question, that should be familiar to any scholar working on serious social and political issues: Why are so few scholars in discourse analysis, linguistics, semiotics and related disciplines actively interested in such a fundamental problem of "our" north-western society? Indeed, a similar question was asked by women who several decades ago took the initiative to again study the position of women in society and the power relations between men and women. Despite the complexities of the sociology of science, the answer boils down to the simple fact that most leading or influential scholars were men. The same is true for the lack of interest in the many fundamental issues related to the problem of racism; most prominent and influential scholars in "our" society are white. This means that, even if they have personal sympathy for equal rights, affirmative action, the struggle against Apartheid or anti-racist action, very few of them are deeply and personally concerned and motivated to engage themselves in that field of research and action, often leaving it to their few colleagues in the rather marginal Black Studies or Ethnic Studies departments. A brief inspection of the contents of 36 prominent journals in the social sciences and the humanities, including those on discourse and communication, pragmatics, political science, sociology and psychology

show for instance that the term "racism" occurs in only 3 of the 5,783 titles of articles published during the last five years. The term "discrimination" occurs 24 times, "prejudice" 8 times, and "racist" only 3 times. More than half of these studies appear in specialized journals of ethnic and racial studies. True, papers may deal with racism with other words in their titles, but we may safely conclude that hardly more than 1% of all articles in the social sciences deal with the fundamental social problem of racism. This is also true for the many books and papers in the fields of discourse analysis, linguistics, semiotics or communication. Social psychology may often deal with "stereotypes", but carefully avoids the (unscientific?) concept of "racism".

One of the most salient results of my present work about the reproduction of racism through elite discourse and communication is that racism is systematically denied, mitigated or otherwise marginalized as a problem by many white scholars, even those working on "ethnic relations." In this framework, then, it is essential to investigate more generally how white societies establish, maintain, reproduce and legitimate an often highly subtle system of white group dominance, featuring not only systematic discrimination in everyday life, but also the accompanying social cognitions (attitudes, ideologies) of own group preference if not superiority.

It is a major task of critical discourse analysis to examine in detail the many forms and strategies of white text and talk that contribute to such processes of reproduction. From everyday conversations with friends,-to textbooks, literature, movies, advertising, news reports, a multitude of institutional (including scholarly) reports and dialogues, among many other forms of discourse and communication, we witness the defensive or persuasive expression of underlying ethnic or racial prejudices developed to sustain the status quo of white dominance. Overall topics, narrative structures, argumentation strategies, lexical style, rhetoric, semantic moves, and conversational features may thus all contribute to the expression and signalling of white group membership, self-serving face-work ("I am not a racist, but..."), and the systematic, though subtle derogation of the "others". We thus witness how discourse expresses and confirms the racial or ethnic status quo more overtly and crudely in spontaneous and unmonitored "street-talk" or conversations among friends or family members, but certainly more influential in the more guarded and hence seemingly "tolerant" public texts of the political, corporate, media, academic, legal, social or professional elites. There are few areas where the term "silent majority" is less adequate than here.

The complexities of such a study of the discursive reproduction of racism are considerable. It first requires the creation of a sophisticated "diagnostic" battery of structures of text and talk that are preferred in the expression or legitimation of ethnic prejudices or dominant group relations. Even pauses, repairs and hesitations in conversation may be relevant to detecting underlying processes of self-monitoring speech on "delicate" topics. Narratives about personal experiences with "them" may suddenly not only lose their Resolution category--thereby signalling how the "unresolved problem" of "foreigners" in the neighbourhood or city is cognitively represented in mental models--but also essentially become embedded in an argumentation in which "lived" personal events are used as persuasive premises that support a generally negative conclusion: "They" do not belong here. Tolerance is generally proclaimed, also by the most outspoken racists: "We have nothing against them but ..". Even representative of the Front National in the French Assemblée Nationale, as well as their friends in other European parliaments, may often be heard

claiming that they are of course not racist. Thus, a vast discursive framework is being set up to signal compliance with the "official" norm, while at the same time seeking the strategic subterfuges that allow them to "speak the truth" about their fellow citizens of colour.

These discursive structures and strategies should be seen as the external, and hence social, manifestations of the underlying representations and processes of social cognitions shared by many or most white group members. These cognitions allow them not only to master and explain the social world of ethnic and racial diversity around them, but are also brought to bear in the practices of everyday racism. From the apparently trivial, but in effect highly demeaning "irregularities" experienced by minorities in the everyday life of shops, public transport, work or school, to the more structural and consequential practices of political decision-making about virtually all the aspects of their social life, corporate or public hiring and firing, education, research, media coverage, and other practices of the elites, we witness the system of a dominant consensus (with its many varieties and contradictions) that can only be kept in place by a powerful framework of corresponding social cognitions. Discourse--and especially elite discourse--is the key of this reproduction process, while combining social cognitions with social practices at the level of the everyday implementation of the overall system of racism.

Racism is but one example among many. Critical discourse analysis has a long agenda. It is not a fashion, but a mission. It is a mode of research and not a passing paradigm. By definition, it combines theory and practice. It is multidisciplinary and does not fear to explore everybody's backyard. Its practitioners know they sometimes get into trouble. When "formal" linguistics, text analysis, semiotics or psychology appeared to be leading to rather easy grants and subsidies, the monies for critical research suddenly appear to be less available. Critical discourse analysis is difficult, theoretically, analytically and practically. At the same time, it is rich and challenging. It is real scholarship. It may make a difference.

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