

# **Discourse**

## **A Critical Introduction**

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utterance tells us something about the social context in which it is being produced: is this a formal or an informal occasion? Are things such as social class, gender, ethnicity, or professional status played out in the utterance? Are social roles reinforced or put up for negotiation? Are social rules being followed or broken? And so on. Indexical meaning is what anchors language usage firmly into social and cultural patterns.

The fact is that people give off and pick up all of this information while engaging in communication, and that the diacritics mentioned above are the signals triggering such interpretations. Consequently, a sociolinguistic notion of meaning is one that embraces all of these 'meaning effects' and looks for the way in which 'pure' meaning comes alongside 'social meaning'. This is a far richer concept of meaning, a *communicative* or *semiotic* one that is fundamental to any discourse-analytic enterprise. It is not an unproblematic notion of meaning, however, for it displays the tendency to move the analysis away from the linguistic aspects of communication to its contextual aspects. As we shall see in chapter 3, this invites complex forms of analysis and exposes the limits of linguistic technique. But, at the same time, it is the point where discourse analysis becomes necessarily an interdisciplinary field of scholarship.

The second main concern of sociolinguistics is the *distribution of linguistic resources in society*. William Labov's path-breaking studies on sociolinguistic variation in New York (Labov 1966, 1972) demonstrated that seemingly unimportant features of speech such as the pronunciation or absence of pronunciation of the [r] sound in words such as 'fourth (floor)' systematically differed according to the social background of speakers. The tiny features thus became indexes of large patterns of social stratification in society. Two things were clear: first, not everyone in New York City spoke the same 'English'; and second, *it mattered*, it provided all sorts of clues about the social background of people, it pointed towards their identity and towards the organisation of social structure in general.

Basil Bernstein almost simultaneously developed a thesis identifying two different 'codes' in education, understood as structured patterns of language use (Bernstein 1971): an 'elaborate' code, and a 'restricted' code. The former was said to convey primarily abstract, 'decontextualised' propositional meanings, while the latter articulated more relational, involved forms of meaning. The precise nature and dynamics of this difference is highly debatable (and was, in fact, hotly debated), but Bernstein's main point was that the distribution of codes corresponded to social class differences, and that this had real effects on education

performance. Children from privileged backgrounds would typically control the 'elaborate' codes, while children from less privileged social backgrounds would control the 'restricted' codes, and the education system would systematically tend to attribute higher value to the elaborate codes. Success in education, Bernstein argued, was dependent on the particular set of linguistic resources to which pupils had access, and this pattern of access was unequal and tended to privilege the privileged. This aspect of Bernstein's thesis remains valid; Pierre Bourdieu's work on economies of symbolic forms and systems of reproduction in society expanded the same theme and arrived at broadly similar conclusions (Bourdieu 1982, 1984, 1991; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

The principle we need to distil from this is that 'it is a fallacy to equate the resources of a language with the resources of (all) users' (Hymes 1996: 213). Connecting to what we said earlier, 'language' needs to be seen as a collection of varieties, and the distribution of such varieties is a matter of analysis in and of itself, for no two human beings, even if they speak the same 'language', have the same complex of varieties. Their *repertoire* is different; they will each control a different complex of linguistic resources which will reflect their social being and which will determine what they can actually do with and in language. The repertoires allow people to deploy certain linguistic resources more or less appropriately in certain contexts. To quote Hymes (1996: 33; see also Hymes 1974b and Gumperz 1972):

A repertoire comprises a set of ways of speaking. Ways of speaking, in turn, comprise *speech styles*, on the one hand, and *contexts of discourse*, on the other, together with *relations of appropriateness* obtaining between styles and contexts.

And this is where inequality enters the picture: not everyone will have the same means of communication and, consequently, not everyone will be able to perform the same *functions* of communication. People are restricted as to what they can do with and in language, depending on the range and composition of their repertoires. In that sense, apart from what people do to language, there is a lot that language does to people.

### **1.3 FIVE PRINCIPLES**

In trying to sketch my own intellectual space I have deliberately gone back in history, all the way to the classics of our branches of scholarship. The reason is that concepts, methods, and viewpoints come with



a history of use and interpretation, and this history matters: 'we must think historically while we think theoretically' (Darnell 2001: 1). The history of concepts sometimes provides us with new opportunities for employing them, stretching them, connecting them to other concepts and methods – opportunities often seemingly impossible when one accepts a synchronic hegemony over the interpretation or 'allowable use' of a concept. We can, and should, sometimes take fresh looks at old and dust-covered concepts and approaches, for they often underlie a contingent history of further development often partially realising the original agenda of the approach.

Let me now try to summarise what has been said so far. In developing a critical science of language, we should at least take stock of what is around. One can be eclectic (and this book will surely be an exercise in eclecticism) but, even so, a number of basic theoretical principles will have to be used in order to provide sufficient coherence in the argument. The building-blocks for my attempt are rooted in the critical pool provided by linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, and they define in my view the intellectual history of these traditions to such an extent that they should not require much empirical substantiation anymore. I can safely use them as fundamental points of departure. They can be defined as follows.

1. In analysing language-in-society, the focus should be on *what language use means to its users*. We can, and must, start from the observation that language matters to people, that people make investments in language, and that this is a crucial part of what they believe language does for them and what they do with language. Consequently, we need to find out *how* language matters to people. The 'insiders' view' of Boasian anthropology is a crucial tool in understanding the dynamics of language in society, and it is the cornerstone of ethnography.
2. We have to be aware that *language operates differently in different environments*, and that, in order to understand how language works, we need to contextualise it properly, to establish the relations between language usage and the particular purposes for which and conditions under which it operates. Every 'model' offered as a blanket explanation should be critically checked against the specifics of the case we are investigating. This goes for language, its structure, and functions, but also for society, power, history, and so on. This, like the first principle, is a principle derived from Boasian anthropology and, like the first principle, it is fundamental to ethnography.

3. Our unit of analysis is not an abstract 'language' but the *actual and densely contextualised forms in which language occurs in society*. We need to focus on varieties in language, for such variation is at the core of what makes language and meaning social. Whenever the term 'language' is used in this book, it will be used in this sociolinguistic sense. One uneasy by-effect of this sociolinguistic use is that we shall often be at pains to find a name for the particular forms of occurrence of language. The comfort offered by words such as 'English', 'Zulu', or 'Japanese' is something we shall have to miss. We shall have to address rather complex, equivocal, messy forms of language.
4. Language users have *repertoires* containing different sets of varieties, and these repertoires are the material with which they engage in communication; they will determine what people can do with language. People, consequently, are not entirely 'free' when they communicate, they are constrained by the range and structure of their repertoires, and *the distribution of elements of the repertoires in any society is unequal*. Such inequality of repertoires requires us to use a sociolinguistic backdrop for discourse analysis because what people actually produce as discourse will be conditioned by their sociolinguistic background. The notion of 'voice' must be situated at the intersection of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

To these four principles I shall add a fifth, one that derives from very different sources but which I believe is indispensable for an analysis of discourse in the modern world.

5. We have to conceive of communication events as ultimately influenced by *the structure of the world system*. In an era of globalisation, the threshold of contextualisation in discourse analysis or sociolinguistics can no longer be a single society (or even less a single event) but needs to include the relationships between different societies and the effect of these relationships on repertoires of language users and their potential to construct voice. The world system is characterised by structural inequality, and this also counts for linguistic resources (Wallerstein 1983, 2001; Blommaert 2003a). This fifth principle is a perspective on the four other principles: it adds a new dimension to the various foci of attention derived from the critical pool.

The well-informed reader will notice very few similarities between the principles formulated here and those used in mainstream CDA



(compare, for example, Fairclough 1992a; Wodak 1995; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). I shall use a very different angle to approach the same topics and issues, in an attempt to widen the range and punch of a critical analysis of discourse. The ethnographic bias in my approach is clear: yet, equally clear should be the larger scale, sociolinguistic, and world-systemic framing of ethnography. If a conventionally worded label should have to be struck on the collection of principles, it could be an 'ethnographic-sociolinguistic analysis of discourse'. A less conventionally worded label, however, could be just 'ethnography': it is a common misunderstanding that ethnography is an analysis of 'small things', local, one-time occurrences only. It is, and always has been, an approach in which the analysis of small phenomena, is set against an analysis of big phenomena, and in which both levels can only be understood in terms of one another (Hymes 1972, 1974a are recommendable; see also Burawoy 2001). The reduction of ethnography to a study of local, small-scale events is an illustration of what I mentioned above: the contingent histories that only realise part of the original agenda.<sup>4</sup>

To this set of principles I shall add a very eclectic theoretical, methodological, and technical-analytic apparatus, drawing mainly on sources from (different branches of) linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and history. This eclectic apparatus should enable me to look at language in society in ways that allow *simultaneously* to focus on linguistic form and on social environment, and to avoid a discontinuity between various levels of explanation. The target of such explanations will be *language-in-society* – a notion which I have already used several times in this chapter, and which I take to be an object in its own right referring to the intrinsic interrelatedness of language and society, in fact, of the irrelevance of their separation as different terms. The shape in which language-in-society comes to us is discourse, as outlined above. In arriving at such explanations I shall undoubtedly violate all kinds of disciplinary orthodoxies and I shall allow myself the freedom to use whatever can be useful for solving my analytical problems. I beg the guardians of disciplinary orthodoxies for forgiveness – it is my deep belief that science has everything to gain from consciously exploring the margins of its own system.

#### 1.4 CENTRAL PROBLEMS: THE ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

I shall have to address several general problems in this book and a discussion of these problems will provide the main architecture of the

book. Over the course of several chapters, I shall appear to move gradually away from 'micro', i.e. textually focused, issues to 'macro' issues, such as inequality and history, and then return to the textual level. Every chapter can, to some extent, be seen as a relatively self-contained discussion of a particular theoretical and methodological domain. But connections and overlaps between the different chapters are obvious, and particular data sets – material typical of modern globalisation processes – will no doubt provide coherence across the different chapters. Imagine these materials are a Coca-Cola can on a table; if you walk around the table while watching the can, stop every now and then and describe the can as you see it. The description will each time be partly similar and partly different. Yet it is the same can, and no single description of it is comprehensive, since every single description is biased by the particular position from which we described it. My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive analysis, but to identify and illustrate various positions from which we can analyse social facts of globalisation.

The discussion of the various problems will, to some extent, be put in perspective by the way in which they are being treated (or fail to be treated) in contemporary CDA. Consequently, I shall devote chapter 2 of this book to a detailed discussion of the origins and contemporary preoccupations of CDA. At the same time, the aim of the discussions is not so much a critique of CDA as an independent attempt to come to terms with the central problems in our field of inquiry. Consequently, whereas CDA will receive pride of place in this book, it is definitely not the key in which the various discussions of the central problems should be read.

Perhaps the most crucial problem in our field is that which defines our tradition: the relationship between linguistic forms – 'text' – and context. This will be the topic of chapter 3, but will, at the same time, be the pervasive motif throughout the book. The reason for this is obvious and has already been emphasised repeatedly here: whenever the analysis of language aspires to be critical, it needs to engage the world in which language operates. Analysis in CDA as elsewhere almost invariably focuses on text-context relations as the site of power or inequality, on connections between linguistic occurrences and social relations or structure – and it very often claims that communication actually constructs context or social structure. Such claims need to be examined, and an examination of them will open up a whole set of different problems, which will be the topics of the chapters that follow. My examination of the problem of context will lead us through the ways in which context is being used in CDA and in another prominent