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Debating Theoretical Assumptions: Readings of Critical Linguistics[1]

1.   Introduction

This paper is concerned with critical linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA)[2], approaches to the study of language which analyse language as a social practice, language as action and language as a force which constructs reality. The label 'critical' signals an interest in the way representations of reality in public discourse are ideological and related to power relationships in society.

In line with other work in discourse analysis, language is analysed as a practice of constructing meanings from particular perspectives. Thus, language use is not seen as the mere utilisation of containers of pre-existing meanings, but as an active process of constructing reality. Thereby, all language use becomes significantly political in nature. Media discourse in particular has been analysed by critical linguists, for example to find out what kinds of

[2] For practical reasons, the terms *critical linguistics* and *critical discourse analysis* are used interchangeably in this paper. For a discussion of their differences, see Kress (1994).

representations are offered of politically sensitive issues such as race and gender relations or nuclear arms (e.g. van Dijk 1991, Fowler 1991, Chilton 1985). The aim of such analyses has been to link linguistic processes with social practices, notably the establishment and maintenance of power hierarchies.

The critical linguistic position on the relationship of language and the social has been both influential and contentious. It has been influential in providing ways of examining the role of language in mediating and transforming social life. Some critics have, however, voiced a concern that while addressing particular social and political concerns, critical linguists have ignored the need to build a coherent theoretical and methodological framework. The approach has been thought to contain inconsistencies and unresolved questions, ranging from the conceptualisation of ideology and power to methodologies of interpretation.[3]

Such inconsistencies are the theme of this paper. The paper addresses the question of what kinds of different readings can be made of critical linguistic theory, and focuses, in particular, on 'naive' readings. The discussion is based on the assumption that critical linguistics is particularly susceptible to simplistic and even contradictory readings. There are various reasons for this: many of the theoretical issues which critical linguistics has to deal with are highly complex and there are few signs of consensus on how they should be resolved. Consensus on theoretical claims is made difficult by the fact that the field is rather heterogeneous: different scholars within different disciplines promote different approaches (see e.g. the selection of texts in Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard 1996).

Another source of simplistic readings is that critical linguistics is fast becoming a model of analysis which is used in a variety of disciplines (e.g. within 'cultural studies') and at a variety of levels of study. Despite the obvious benefits of interdisciplinarity, there is a

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[3] For critiques of early critical linguistic writings, see Sharrock and Anderson (1981) and Thompson (1984: 124-126). For more recent criticism, see Widdowson (1995) and Potter (1996: 223-227).

danger that critical linguistics is interpreted in its most simple form, without questioning the theoretical and methodological background assumptions that the analyses are based on.

Thus, it is not unrealistic to assume that many newcomers to critical linguistics make naive readings. In my experience, for example, many students do their first critical linguistic analyses with rather unsophisticated notions of how ideological meanings are made and interpreted and how power is exercised through language.[4] Textbooks do not help much; they seldom present any comprehensive discussion of potential conflicts or inconsistencies.

What this paper sets out to do, then, is to present and critically discuss some simplistic readings that can be made of critical linguistic theory – the motivation being that such readings *can be* and *are* made by many. The readings are based mainly on the following writings: Fowler et al. (1979), Hodge & Kress (1979/1993), Wodak (1989), Fairclough (1989), Fowler (1991), and van Dijk (1993). These texts are often used as key readings in courses on critical linguistics, and it is therefore important to address them, despite the fact that their authors may no longer promote the same views.

Before presenting the readings, a few words of caution are perhaps in order. It should be kept in mind that there are several opinions on theoretical and methodological questions within CL and CDA. The problems I am about to review have also been addressed by many scholars in the field and developments have taken place. I have tried to reflect the variety of standpoints in the discussion, although the wealth and heterogeneity of writings means that it is difficult to represent all views. Finally, it should be emphasised that the readings present a simplified and generalised picture of critical linguistics, and as such, do not do justice to the

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[4] My own first impressions of CL provide some evidence of this. Here is a note I wrote before undertaking a critical analysis of company magazines in my second year at university: "The chemical companies give an image of an environmentally friendly company; how do they try to hide the truth?"

thinking of most critical linguists. Needless to say, it is not my purpose in any way to undermine the project of critical linguistics, but rather to examine some potential sources of contradictions and debates in its framework.

Section 2 will present and discuss three simplistic theoretical propositions that can be read into critical linguistics. Section 3 will extend the discussion to present the issues in the context of my own research on environmental discourse.

2.   Theoretical Propositions

1. Reality can be represented either truthfully or falsely in language.

This claim assumes that it is possible to represent reality in an unmediated, neutral form; critique is then based on whether this ideal is attained or not. Neutral representations are opposed to ideological representations, which are deemed to 'distort reality'. Ideology is, accordingly, conceptualised in negative terms, as the opposite of 'truth'.[5]

The idea that reality can be distorted for strategic purposes can be traced back to the classics of CL, where it is stated that

> Linguistic form allows significance to be conveyed and to be distorted. ... Language ... involves systematic distortion in the service of class interest. (Hodge & Kress 1979/1993: 6.)

> Our book was designed not as yet another academic study in sociolinguistics so much as a contribution to the unveiling of linguistic practices which are instruments in social inequality and the concealment of truth. (Fowler et al. 1979: 2.)

More recent work also suggests that reality can be put 'under cover':

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[5] Different conceptualisations of the term *ideology* are discussed in Thompson (1984).

> Generally speaking, we want to uncover and demystify certain social processes in this and other societies, to make mechanisms of manipulation, discrimination, demagogy and propaganda explicit and transparent. (Wodak 1989: xiv.)

The distinction between distortion and neutrality establishes a division between two kinds of language use: one a transparent, true way of representing reality, and the other distorting and false. As a result, analyses sometimes profess the aim of showing, for instance, how syntactic choices in news reports distort 'what really happened'. Tools for evaluating representations can be found in Hodge & Kress (1979/1993), who argue that a representation is more transparent and thereby less distorting if it encodes a causal relation instead of a non-causal relation. If causal processes (A did x to B) are constructed as non-causal (x happened), this is taken to be a sign of 'mystification' going on.

In fact, it seems to have become a trademark of a simple 'do-it-yourself' critical linguistics that agentless passives and nominalisations are worse alternatives than forms which include agents. Clauses which present causal processes 'clearly' (e.g. *Cars pollute the air*) are inherently better than clauses which do not encode a causal process, but present processes through such forms as nominalisations (*Pollution is a problem*).

Such a normative approach has methodological implications which are usually not examined in the literature. I am not arguing against the view that nominalisations or agentless passives *can* be used to obscure relations of causality. But as several critics and also some critical linguists have pointed out (Thompson 1984, Fairclough 1992a), it is not a plausible methodological principle that analysts can *read off* ideological functions (mystificatory intentions on the part of the text producer and ideological effects over the audience) from such language use, since meaning, it is argued, does not reside in texts but in the way they are written and read in particular social contexts. Therefore, the important question becomes how meanings are produced and received in particular institutional, cultural and political contexts by particular language users.

There are also theoretical inconsistencies in the idea that language use can be criticised because it is deemed to distort or hide reality: this claim is in contradiction to the view held by most critical linguists that language constructs reality and that our experience of reality is therefore always mediated through language. As Thompson (1984) argues, an emphasis on language can only undermine the view of ideology as distortion:

> once we recognise that ideology operates through language and that language is a medium of social action, we must also acknowledge that ideology is partially constitutive of what, in our societies, 'is real'. (Thompson 1984: 5.)

Potter (1996: 224) also points to critical linguists' uneasy relationship with constructivist ideas: he finds a contradiction in the way critical analyses often draw on an understanding of some 'actual' reality at the same time as arguing that reality is constructed and not just transmitted through language use.

The question of distortion vs. construction poses a dilemma for critical linguistics that has not been easy to digest. Constructivism does not fit well with the idea of 'ideology critique' or the normativity apparent in critical practice, nor is it helpful with regard to practical and social aims. The political origins of the framework are in British Marxist thought[6], and the 'social' agenda is still for many critical linguists equally important as the 'academic' agenda.[7]

Few solutions have been proposed to the problem, but it has not passed unnoticed within CL. As Fowler (1996: 4) notes:

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[6] This is witnessed not only in the way ideology and power are conceptualised but also in the theoretical significance of thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser.

[7] Practical projects have ranged from providing simple tools for analysing ideology in language to promoting 'critical language awareness' among the public (see Fairclough 1992c).

"Although the theory of critical linguistics is a value-free theory of representation ... in practice the instrumentality of the model is reformative". While the theory argues for a constructionist position, the practice consists of something quite opposed to constructionism, namely "[exposing] misrepresentation and discrimination" (Fowler 1996: 5).

2. Power in society is about the powerful controlling and manipulating the powerless through discourse.

The issue of power in discourse is another source of simplistic readings of critical linguistics. There are two issues worth noting: first, some writings in CL seem to say that social situations are *generally* characterised by unequal power relations (there are those with power and those without power). The second naive reading is that the powerful (e.g. government and media) exercise such a strong influence on the public that they can be seen as *dictating* public opinion.

In several critical linguistic writings, power relations are conceptualised in terms of the powerful controlling the powerless.

> power is the ability of people and institutions to control the behaviour and material lives of others. It is obviously a transitive concept entailing an asymmetrical relationship: X is more powerful than/has power over Y. (Fowler 1985: 61.)

> we can say that power in discourse is to do with powerful participants *controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants*. (Fairclough 1989: 46, original italics.)

Discursive power is also conceptualised in terms of *manipulation* and *domination*.

> ... hearers can be both manipulated and informed, preferably manipulated while they suppose they are being informed. (Hodge & Kress 1979/1993: 6.)

> power is ... enacted by persuasion, dissimulation or manipulation, among other strategic ways to *change the mind of others in one's own interests.* (van Dijk 1993: 254, original italics.)

In my view, a theory of power drawn up on the basis of these parameters easily results in simplistic analyses of discursive relations of power. We may, for instance, question whether it is a very fruitful starting point for any analysis to reduce the social world into two opposing groups. The division of language users into the powerful and the powerless allows them only two kinds of (permanent) roles or positions: they may be either rationally calculating subjects who use their power to manipulate and control other people to secure their own interests, or helpless objects and victims of manipulation who have no power to resist the dominant 'elites'.

The terms *domination* and *manipulation* also introduce the idea that the power relation between the 'power elites' and the public is unidirectional; manipulation is not something that can be resisted. Such a conceptualisation often brings with it other (questionable) assumptions such as a view of communication and meaning as transmission, which implies that media audiences, for example, simply take in ideological meanings offered by the media. It assumes that audiences are 'determined' by the meanings and that there are few options of resistant readings.

It must be noted, however, that recent work in critical linguistics has introduced different conceptualisations of meaning and power. Particularly Fairclough (1994) argues that power relations should be analysed in terms of power *struggles*, including resistance to power, and how power relations can be transformed in the course of discursive events.[8]

> In critical language studies as in other spheres, there has tended to be a one-sided emphasis upon ['power over' and domination], giving an overly

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[8] Fairclough is here influenced by Michel Foucault's analyses of power in modern societies (see e.g. Foucault 1978, 1984a).

pessimistic view of the sociolinguistic and discourse practices of a society
... as simply an apparatus of domination. (Fairclough 1994: 3246.)

In addition, the focus on intertextuality in some recent critical linguistic work (e.g. Lemke 1995, Fairclough 1992b) has contributed to a different view of meaning and consequently a different view of the effects of discourse on audiences. Meaning is not seen as a stable property or feature of texts but as something created in interaction. This view has it that texts do not carry with them the positions from which they *must* be read; instead, people interpret texts in the light of their experience of texts they have previously encountered. Consequently, a simple theorisation of power as manipulation is no longer appropriate.

This discussion shows that critical linguists are by no means unanimous on core theoretical questions. On the issue of where power is located and how it is produced in discourse, there are two opposing views. On the one hand, views such as van Dijk's emphasise the idea of "power elites" (van Dijk 1993); power is seen as a predetermined and static quality of one end of the power relation. Other work (e.g. Fairclough 1992a, 1994) emphasises the aspect of struggle and resistance, arguing that power relations are not fixed and monolithic, but dynamic and locally produced.

With respect to analysing the effects of discourse on the public, there are those who believe that the task of critical analyses is to "deconstruct" the "underlying meanings" of texts which otherwise remain hidden from readers (Wodak 1995: 204), and those who argue that meanings are not located 'in' the text but constructed in the relation between text and reader (e.g. Lemke 1995). In the first option, the issue is how readers *receive* meaning; in the second, how readers *make* meaning.

3.   Critical interpretations of ideological meaning are more authoritative than lay interpretations of meaning.

The assumption here is that the critical analyst has privileged access to the ideological meanings of texts and can provide us with an

authoritative interpretation of the text. The naive reading goes as follows: since it is possible for analysts to situate the text in a sociocultural, political and intertextual context, they can gain better access to its ideological meaning. For example, in a critical analysis of media texts, analysts are able to get to ideological meanings which remain hidden from most readers.

The idea that readings need to be justified in some systematic way has tended to remain a non-issue within CL. As Fowler explains in a recent overview of critical linguistics:

> The plausibility of the ideological ascriptions has had to rest on intersubjective intuitions supposedly shared by writer and reader in common discursive competence, backed up by informal accounts of relevant contexts and institutions. (Fowler 1996: 10.)

This is the issue that has perhaps attracted the fiercest criticism from outside critical linguistics. Bell (1991: 215-216) criticises early work in CL for drawing sweeping conclusions not supported by the data: "they have often leapt past the groundwork to premature conclusions about the significance of sometimes poorly described linguistic patterns". Widdowson (1995) argues that critical readings are necessarily partial since they usually propose only one reading of texts instead of presenting different interpretations that may be derived from them. For Widdowson, privileging a particular interpretation undermines CL as analysis. "To the extent that critical discourse analysis is committed, it cannot provide analysis but only partial interpretation" (Widdowson 1995: 169).

Critical linguists have reacted to such criticism in several ways. Fowler (1996) attempts to rectify the problem by calling for "full descriptions of context and its implications for beliefs and relationships" (Fowler 1996: 10). However, providing readers with "full descriptions" does not resolve the problem of justification. In a constructivist framework, descriptions of context are not treated as more authoritative than interpretations but are seen as constructions in the same way as interpretations are; there is nothing essentially factual about them (see Potter 1996). For instance, different analysts

are likely to offer different descriptions of contexts, depending on their position and perspective.

Fairclough (1989, 1996) offers a more elaborate discussion of interpretation and the position of the analyst.[9] He makes a distinction between interpretation and explanation, the latter being

> a matter of analysts seeking to show connections between both properties of texts and practices of interpretation ... in a particular social space, and wider social and cultural properties of that particular social space. (Fairclough 1996: 50.)

The aim of CDA is then not just to present interpretations (which are necessarily tied to the analyst's position), but to arrive at explanations which link the practices by which people interpret texts to aspects of the social contexts of these practices, for instance to power relations. Fairclough (1992a, 1996) also argues for the necessity of studying *empirically* the diversity of interpretations (e.g. in the form of audience research), but admits that such work is currently lacking.

Despite the fact that the problem of interpretation is discussed within CL, many analyses still reflect inconsistencies between theory and practice. For instance, few texts acknowledge the dilemma that the constructivist position presents to the status of critical readings: if it is argued that all discourse constructs its objects, critical linguistic discourse also constructs the objects it is interpreting. As Richardson (1987: 148) puts it, the critical linguistic aim of making "present-but-concealed meanings visible ... plays down any idea of analysis as constitutive of ideological meaning". Thus, the question seems to be, again, how fully critical linguistics can endorse a constructivist theory of language.

I would agree with those critics who ask critical analysts to be more reflexive about the positions they hold in relation to the

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[9] Fairclough (1996) is a response to the criticism presented in Widdowson (1995), which is followed by another critical reply from Widdowson (1996). The debate highlights many of the central problems regarding the status of description, interpretation and explanation in the critical linguistic framework.

discourses they analyse and the discourses they make use of in the analysis. Critical analysts need to be reflexive of their own constructive activity as producers of discourse, since as producers of discourse they are themselves involved in power relations.[10] As Sharrock and Anderson (1981: 290) argue, critical linguists should be wary of "exceptionalism"; that is, exempting themselves from the arguments they apply to everyone else.

3.   Discussion

I have now reviewed some simplistic readings that can be made of the framework of critical linguistics, emphasising the dilemmas and debates current in the field. The main contradictions revolve around constructivism. Difficulties arise when critical linguistics attempts to marry constructivism and normative critique, when it claims that discourse has manipulative effects and when it tries to argue for the authority of critical readings. These issues may seem – at first sight – overly complicated and irrelevant, but as I hope to have shown, they are central to the grounding of critical linguistic arguments and to the consistency of the theoretical framework and need therefore to be resolved in some way in all critical analyses. In the following, I will discuss some of the theoretical ideas presented above from the perspective of my own research interests.[11]

Representing reality

How can representations of reality be studied without making a

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[10] On questions of reflexivity, see Potter (1996).

[11] My current research studies the way in which environmental risks are constructed in British public discourse. It focuses particularly on the effects of intertextuality in the processes of collective meaning making by looking at how texts from different institutions (media, science, government, pressure groups) interact in the construction and definition of risks.

distinction between a neutral and a distorting representation? Potter (1996) follows the social constructivist tradition in arguing that what should be taken as the object of study is not whether representations are true or false but the way in which people go about constructing some things as real/true and others as not real/true. The emphasis is on *how* and *by what means* we construct the world, not whether there is indeed a real world beyond our constructions of it. As Berger and Luckmann put it:

> the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge'. (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 15.)

Another emphasis for Potter is how the constructions are used, what purposes they are made to serve. Here there is a convergence with critical linguistic aims. We can analyse whether and how particular constructions are used by social actors to gain particular goals without assessing whether or not these constructions are faithful to reality. For example, my studies on risk discourse analyse how different groups and institutions construct environmental risks, attempting to explain why the constructions differ across different domains. The aim is not to show that some constructions are more appropriate or true to reality than others. The outcome of such analyses is rather an understanding of how discourse is used to construct risks, and how discursive constructions are used to promote the agenda of a particular group or institution.

Where is power?

The question was raised earlier as to whether the idea of manipulation fits the critical linguistic framework if this framework is to take into account constructivism and intertextuality. If different readers read different meanings into public discourse, it is impossible to manipulate them in a simple way. But if manipulation and control are not particularly good ways of conceptualising power,

what are the alternatives? Where does power reside, if not in top-down relationships?

I would argue that effects of power are not created only or primarily by language users as individuals or by powerful groups; power can also be located in language systems, genres and discourses, which restrict the options language users have. Language users operating under such restrictions make their choices as part of a collective, and some restrictions affect all language users regardless of questions of power. In my view, therefore, interpretations of ideology and power in language should be based on an analysis of what alternatives are available in the language and in the discourse community. If language users have no alternative but to use a specific language form when operating within a particular language system and genre, then it is difficult to make any far-reaching interpretations of the ideological intentions behind the choice of that language form.

Conventions pertaining to genre have a significant role in shaping language use in particular institutions or communities, such as those of the media and science. For instance, the choice of individual journalists is severely limited by such things as space and time restrictions and the norms governing what a news report should look like. Thus, the analysis of whether passives and nominalisations function to hide agency in a news text should take into account the influence of conventions and practices of writing, editing and lay-out (see Bell 1991; Cameron 1996).

In scientific writing, relational processes and nominalisations may be preferred to material processes which represent causal processes transparently (Halliday & Martin 1993). For example, representations of the type *Pollution is associated with health risks* are both more typical and more acceptable than representations of the type *Pollution causes health risks*, let alone *Car exhausts kill people*. In both genres, explaining why certain language features are preferred to others is a more complicated issue than claiming that individual writers make strategic choices either to represent reality clearly or to distort it. Genre conventions are collective and the power they exercise over representations is thereby also collective

rather than individual.

Discursive restrictions are also collective. If discourses are defined as systematic ways of constructing some subject matter or area of knowledge (Fairclough 1992a), the way they exercise power is by limiting language users' options for construing experience – particular ways of representing things are considered to be more real than others, more acceptable than others, more true than others (see also Foucault 1984b). For example, medical knowledge can be constructed from either a 'mainstream' perspective or an 'alternative' perspective; these would constitute different discourses on the subject matter of medicine and offer particular choices to language users in constructing medical knowledge. Power is involved to the extent that constructing medical issues from a position outside socially validated discourses can result in not being taken seriously, or even being perceived as not speaking about medicine at all.

Interpretation

There are some reasons for arguing that analysts can have privileged access to linguistic and textual meanings in a text. They usually apply an analytic method more or less systematically and have a larger body of data to hand than most lay people. The data allows for comparison across texts and genres, whereby analysts can gain an understanding of the intertextual contexts of texts.

However, I believe these privileges only apply to systematic descriptive work. Interpretations are necessarily partial in that they are presented from a specific position within discourses. In my view, authoritative statements on interpretations can only be made on the basis of an analysis of the diversity of interpretations that are made about particular texts; i.e. on the basis of empirical studies into the reception of texts. The claims that critical linguists make about the constructive activity of discourse would be better grounded, if the effects of discourse were not simply assumed or accessed through intuition but studied in different discourse communities.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to show that analysts are always faced with particular options when choosing which assumptions their studies should be based on. Let me conclude by discussing perhaps the most important choice that analysts have to make: whether being critical equals being normative.

Normativity has a firm foothold in the tradition of critical analysis. For example, van Dijk argues that "any critique by definition presupposes an applied ethics" (1993: 253). From the very early days of critical linguistics, there has been an explicit aim to raise people's consciousness about how language can be used to produce inequality or create divisions in the social world. But critique has also meant offering better alternatives, establishing new norms.

But are there other ways of being critical? Fairclough provides a different definition of criticism: "'critique' is essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things" (1985: 747). Critique is seen as a recognition that language use is involved in causes and effects which language users are not necessarily aware of. An alternative to van Dijk's "applied ethics" would then be an analysis of such causes and effects without necessarily proposing normative alternatives; to show connections between discursive practices and social relations, to show how discourse produces truths and knowledges and what effects this may have.

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