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## **COMING TO GRIPS WITH A CRITICAL METHODOLOGY**

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### **Introduction and Background**

The emergence of a critical approach to language and discourse analysis is closely related to the prominence given to language in recent social theory. Recent social theory in the European tradition (cf. Foucault and Habermas) places language at the centre of relations of power as well as the centre of the production and reproduction of society. The writings of Gramsci and Althusser also stress the embedding of ideologies in social practices, much of which has been disguised as "common sense", a view which has motivated others to investigate the relationship between language practice and ideology. The work of Pecheux and the French school of discourse analysis has also focused widespread attention on the linguistic dimensions of ideology and the constitution of subjects. Last but not least, the rediscovery of the early Soviet critical work on language (for example, Bakhtin and Volosinov) has also given a significant boost to a critical study of language.

A "critical" approach is so called because its intention is "to show up connections which may be hidden from people" (Fairclough 1989:5). It is critical because it assumes that the links between people and society are not arbitrary and accidental (cf. Benesch 1993). It is an approach which stresses the strong and pervasive connections between linguistic structure and social structure and sees the linguistic within the social. Its goal is therefore to select and deconstruct these links and to understand the patterns of meaning involved in order to understand the nature of language and society, because people categorize the world, and are categorized themselves, through language.

Critical linguistics has a relatively short history. It was first proposed in Fowler, et al. (1979). Their orientation was continued by a group of scholars working in the University of East Anglia (Hodge and Kress 1988). Work on the connection between language and ideologies has been further developed by Lemke (1985), Thibault (1991), Fairclough (1992), Canacraajah (1993), Magalhaes (1995), and many others. Schenke (1991), Simon (1992) and Pennycook (1994) have continued the orientation by focusing on a critical pedagogy of language teaching and learning while Phillipson (1992) and Tollefson (1991) have focused on the level of language planning and policy.

On the whole, such studies attempt to advance a critical theory of language, that is, one which does not neutralize or suppress social conflict, antagonism and understanding of languages and their use. Here, societies are the ultimate objects of critique and languages and their uses only derivatively so, where they contribute to unjust social arrangement.

By focusing on the analysis of the power structure and the specific role of language and discourse in the development, maintenance and reproduction of the system, a critical linguistics reveals detailed insights about power, inequality, manipulation or oppression in society for which close collaboration between linguistics, discourse analysis and (other) social sciences is essential. It is aware that problems should be studied not as problems for their own sake or in the interests of government or elite groups but as problems for those who are their victims (Craib 1992).

It is also a linguistics unafraid of analyzing discourse features in text and talk which may be symptoms of larger problems such as class differences, racism, sexism and power (cf. Van Dijk 1991, Chew 1992, Birch 1994). It is a discipline more responsive and responsible to pressing social and political issues.

### A Critical Methodology

If one's research objective is to uncover the ideological messages prevalent in every encounter and show how the relations of dominance identified might determine and be determined by the discourse, it is important to choose a methodology which would be in harmony with that objective. Since language is not a neutral instrument and is biased in ways that are determined by any number of differing ideologies, knowledge and power systems and institutions, it becomes imperative to develop the means of understanding and explaining the mechanics of these multifarious ways.

A methodology must be found which is subtle and precise in its ability to explain and highlight everyday manifestations and displays of social problems in communication and interaction. It must be able to focus on the elemental concept of power especially vital in areas of inequality and injustice. Only in this way can the methodology recognize the macrosociological patterns and problems that characterize present day societies (Giddens 1993). In addition, there must be an attempt to bridge the gap between analyst and participant through the widespread development of rational understanding of theories of society (Cummings 1994).

Bearing in mind the theoretical foundations and objectives of a critical linguistics, a "critical" methodology is the natural assumption of any research undertaken with such unequivocal objectives. The term "critical" implies a political intervention to denaturalize search for empowering alternative practices. Thus, a critical methodology is engaged not only in description and interpretation but also in explanation.<sup>1</sup>

Generally, a critical methodology can be distinguished by 1) a critical approach to the data, 2) by the treatment of positivistic and naturalistic modes of research as complementary rather than antagonistic, 3) by its stand that research is basically reflexive in character, 4) by an ethnographic focus on the "ordinary" aspects of the routine and detail of everyday life, and finally 5) by its a priori preform focus on the social formation and the institution ("top-down") as well as its focus on linguistic features at the level of the discourse sample ("bottom-up").

### *A Critical Approach to Data*

A critical methodology does not treat data at its face value. Instead, data is treated as a field of inferences in which hypothetical patterns can be identified and their validity tested out. Data can be analyzed for what it says about the world as well as what it says about the actors themselves and their motivation. Finally, data can be used to throw light on the inclinations and motivation of the researcher. In other words, the methodology should enable the data to be understood by reference to unstated and seen but unnoticed background expectancies both subjects and observers always employ to recognize and to understand their activities.

In data analysis, a critical methodology will begin by focusing on points of divergence in the evaluation of the data, moments where "mere observation" and positivistic experimentation fail due to inadequacies of technique. This refers to a focus on the situations where the researcher is at a point of what Willis (1980) calls "maximum disturbance" where meanings are being contested.<sup>2</sup> This kind of focus allows the opening up of possibilities for critical and revelatory moments in the interpretive process.

Next, data should be viewed in light of the fact that patterns of communication are constitutive of a cultural environment (cf. Roberts et al. 1992). The methodology should be one which distinguishes between the knowledge that the participants use in acting out discourse and the specialist-oriented and "ulterior" knowledge of the analyst. In particular, the methodology should seek to uncover the hidden presuppositions derived in part from social science method, from the social objectives of the institution from which data is taken and from the everyday common sense knowledge of the participants.

Finally, it is advantageous for data to be treated from an interdisciplinary perspective since a critical methodology acknowledges that social phenomena are too complex to be dealt with adequately in only one field. There is a recognition that social processes are dynamic and not static, and thus the historical perspective, for example, should be given importance.

### *Positivistic or Naturalistic?*

A critical methodology is also one that is neither wholly positivistic nor wholly naturalistic. These two terms refer to the ongoing debate in the last two decades between two paradigms of research: positivism and naturalism, the former privileging quantitative methods, the latter

promoting ethnography as the central if not the only legitimate means of social research. Where positivism stresses hypothesis-testing and, in particular, the role of "crucial" experiments, naturalism portrays research as a process of exploration and argues that as far as possible the social world should be studied in its "natural" state. At the risk of oversimplification and to summarize these two opposing paradigms, one may say that research can be divided into "a type which wants to obtain proofs and a type which wants to understand" (Willis 1980).

While the objectives of a critical discourse analysis can be said to be more in line with the second of the two paradigms, with an "explanatory" rather than with an "experimental" framework and with a "qualitative" rather than a "quantitative" emphasis, it is important that a critical methodology should be open rather than closed, that is, formulated in such a way that it can be used to maintain a dialogue between the two types of research (Candlin 1990). In other words, both positivistic and naturalistic modes of research should be made complementary and should be utilized to discover underlying regularities and related to a set of normative patterns.

It is not possible to be totally positivist since objectivity cannot be sustained once the data is selected. Neither is it wise to follow an approach which is totally qualitative since this will lead to the tendency to ignore any data which lies outside the confines of the theory and which may prove important or significant. One notes here that "metaphors for particular ideologies may not be revealed even by traces in the discourse or by participant comments in the manner documented by Gumperz (1982) but may be significantly absent in that it is not what is said but what is not said that offers the clues the explanation needs." (Candlin 1987:24). Both paradigms should therefore be viewed holistically rather than as disparate competing forces.

### *Reflexivity*

A critical methodology is basically reflexive in character, that is, it acknowledges that researchers are a part of the social world that they study. The researcher should acknowledge the reasons behind the undertaking of the study and admit from the outset that this knowledge will inevitably determine the direction of the analysis.

By stressing reflexivity, a critical methodology utilizes this inevitable theoretical component to probe more self-consciously those areas about which knowledge is incomplete (Komter 1991). It is a methodology which demands consciousness of what one has done and what one has not done. In this way, it hopes that the researcher will be able

to be more self-conscious about how she arrives at a conclusion.

All sociolinguistic research is therefore "theoretical" Empirical research is a theoretical process and there is no scientific understanding of social reality which is independent of theoretical concepts. Research data obtained through a series of inferences and decisions made in the process of research successively delimits the possibilities for the interpretation of that data. In other words, no object can be viewed untheoretically. Even the most "naturalistic" of accounts involves deconstruction of native logic and builds upon reconstruction of compressed, select, significant moments in the original field experienced.

However, any research that aspires to be reflexive should also display an outline and acknowledgement of the theoretical organization of its initial assumptions or presuppositions. This theoretical organization concerns attitudes towards the social world in which the research takes place, a particular view of the social relationships within it and of the fundamental determinations, and a notion of the analytic procedures which will be used to produce the final account. It should also explain why certain topics have been chosen as research in the first place. While one's theoretical "confession" need not specify the *whole* of social reality in a given region, it should specify the kind of world in which its action is seen to be taking place. Even with respect to what remains unspecified by the larger "confession", it is important to recognize the necessarily theoretical form of what we "discover"

In addition, all theory and methodology including values, and aims and methods of representation of the data should be discussed explicitly Ethnographic methods such as the interviewing of participants and researcher's recording of field notes should also be included since they enable one to observe and record natural phenomena in as wide and varied a setting as possible without losing the rigour apparent in a positivistic approach.

Adopting a reflexive stand also means recognizing that the researcher must logically be looked upon as the research instrument par excellence and as an important part of the social world that he is studying (Hammersley 1990). In such a situation, the researcher and the research act itself become part and parcel of the social order under investigation. The acknowledgement that the researcher plays an important part in shaping the context becomes even more important when we realize that behaviour and attitudes are not stable across contexts.

*An Ethnographical*

A critical methodology is generally at home with the practices of ethnography especially where the collection and analysis of data are concerned. It may be noted here that a critical methodology does not view ethnography so much as an alternative paradigm to quantitative research but as one with characteristic advantages and disadvantages.

Although ethnographic data may seem impressionistic, and the units of analysis too ill-defined for rigorous or detailed investigation from a linguistic perspective, it should be remembered that ethnographic research has a greatly expanded understanding of what can constitute both valid data and appropriate analytical units. From a focus on categories such as speech events (the institutions) or genre, a large number of previously unexamined discourse phenomena have emerged as appropriate and significant areas of inquiry (Meyer and Scott 1992). This has made language-oriented ethnographic research quite distinct from that which is more linguistically driven. Compared to the traditional linguistic view of context which refers to the immediate surrounding discourse or immediate time-space situation of language production, the ethnographer has expanded notions of what counts as context. Context includes access to information such as past events and local epistemologies or typical patterns of novice-expert interaction. All these have made possible a fuller interpretation of language data (cf Eisenhart and Borko 1993).

The choice of an ethnographical approach is also particularly appropriate in critical linguistics since both operate on the assumption that the relationship between language and context is a mutually constitutive one. It is an assumption which has demonstrated the relevance of a broader view of context in the interpretation of language forms. A critical analysis of data becomes effective through the embedding of discourse materials in extensive ethnography. After all, once the ideological question is raised, the analyst must inevitably go beyond the specific text (Billig 1988). An ethnographic approach entails that in one way, the original text is a starting point or a search, rather than being the object of a methodological examination in itself. In another way, the text is not the starting point: the analyst will already have built up a knowledge of the topic before starting the search required or understanding the particular text.

Through triangulation procedures, it is also possible to retain something of the rigour of positivism while still acknowledging the legitimate importance of subjectivity in the practice of ethnography. This means that data gathered by observation should be supported by data elicited from those observed, as well as other data from other

sources such as the analyst's intuition. In other words, data should be supported by other occurrences, intuitive and experimental, and other participants' as well as analysts' accounts in order to increase its accuracy. Participants' accounts however cannot be taken at face value because very often participants are unaware of other factors which can better account for their stated motives. Therefore, their accounts should be themselves data in need of interpretation and explanation. Cicourel's (1975) "indefinite triangulation" refers to confronting participants' accounts of what happened. The accounts will usually be different leading to a plurality of accounts.

By using ethnographic tools, a critical methodology enables the researcher to be holistic. While most individual studies focus on only one aspect and ignore other aspects due to the need to abstract a part away from the whole so as to treat it in a manageable way, an ethnographic approach is one which recognizes that there may be many accounts and all may be true from the point of the subjective analyst but the best one is that which fits best with the whole (Grillo 1989).

#### *"Top-down" and "Bottom-up" Perspective*

Both "top-down" and "bottom-up" perspectives are important in a critical methodology. A "bottom-up" perspective involves the analyses of pragmatic, discursive, lexico-syntactic and phonological features and the light they may throw on schemata and the socio-cultural aspects of society. It builds up meaning, starting from the most elemental building blocks of sound and sense. It emphasizes that what people say and do is sequentially related, that is, what they say and do is produced in the context of a developing sequence of interaction.

On the other hand, to comprehend "from the top-down" is to apply broad expectations, "real world knowledge", general discourse knowledge, mutual knowledge, other previous experience and meanings already engendered within the present discourse, so as to "predict" and interpret the meaning content of a particular moment of discourse. The approaches of Foucault, Pecheux and de Certeau are typically top-down in the sense that they consider political institutional sites and the relations between power and signification to be crucial by building such considerations into a theory initially as its very *raison d'être*, rather than superadding them.

In a way, however, by doing so, they run the risk of having their investigations judged "empirically weak because they cannot account for actual discourse" (Staplers 1988:10). Another danger in such an exclusively top-down approach or an approach which moves far away

from the text is that we cannot easily determine where the significant data stops. Yet this kind of criticism should not lead one to reject a consciously theoretical approach, and hold an uncompromising empiricist conception of discourse. It should be possible for a critical methodology to embrace the strongest features of both traditions by being theoretically informed and critical, engaged with specific social and political issues, while also being analytically precise and grounded in actual materials (McHoul and Luke 1989).

A critical methodology therefore views theory and text both as valid starting points of analyses. It is a viewpoint which will enable the researcher to enjoy the advantages inherent in both top-down and bottom-up perspectives and to cancel out the dangers posed by adopting only one viewpoint. In short, the inclusion of both a top-down and bottom-up perspective results in a critical methodology which is not only theoretically informed and critical but also empirically and analytically precise.

### Conclusion

With its critical approach to data, its stress on reflexivity, naturalism and ethnography, and its concurrent "top-down" and "bottom-up" perspective, a critical methodology offers the widest scope for a more significant and socially relevant discourse analysis which does not aim to separate theory from application. In such a methodology, different interdisciplinary perspectives become available since it is a methodology which acknowledges that social processes are dynamic and not static and that social phenomena are too complex to be dealt with adequately in only one field.

Certainly, it is imperative to understand the main tenets of such a methodology especially if one's research goal is to select and deconstruct verbal discourse and to understand the patterns of meaning involved in order to understand the nature of language and society. Such a methodology is at once a justification for a critical linguistics. It is a methodology suited for and pragmatically affiliated to a linguistics or discourse analysis, which aspires to make a substantial contribution to the structural problems in society and culture and which believes that these problems are themselves linguistic or discursive, that is, expressed in, enacted, reproduced or legitimized by talk and text.

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**Notes**

(1) Description is concerned with the formal study of text, the decoding of form or surface features and analyst-constructed sentences. On the other hand, interpretation is concerned with a pragmatic array of functions, strategies of communication and actual spoken text. Explanation goes beyond description and interpretation to the exploration of how ways of talking are actually powerful indicators of sectional interests, beliefs and values or how the use of language is determined by the unstated values and interests of the social situation or generic form (Candlin, 1987).

(2) For examples of this procedure in language orientated research, see Harris (1995) and Chew (1995).