Lecture 1 Critical Discourse Analysis: revealing the meanings hidden in language

Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a set of tools drawn from linguistics, traditionally Halliday's (1978) Systemic-Functional Grammar, that are used to analyse language in speeches, news items and conversations. These tools allow us to reveal ideas, values and opinions in the texts that may not necessarily be obvious on first reading or hearing. Often these things are 'buried' in the texts as their producers seek to conceal or evade making them obvious, for example in political rhetoric where politicians harness language for the purposes of persuasion. But this process of using language to persuade and influence through language is by no means confined to such official talk and is characteristic of everyday conversation, news and other media texts. In fact there is no neutral way to represent the world through language as all the words we use are motivated and are laden with certain kinds of meanings and values. Yet the untrained ear or eye will may not be able to detect exactly how this works, even though we may often get the sense we are being encouraged to think in a particular way. In such cases, we may be aware *what* speakers, or text producers are doing but not exactly *how* they do it. It is how language can be used to subtly convey ideas and values that CDA can draw out. And through this we can often get a much clear idea of what is actually being conveyed.

Discourse

The term 'discourse' is central to CDA. In CDA the broader ideas communicated by a text are referred to as discourses (Van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2000; Wodak, 2001) These discourses can be thought of as models of the world, in the sense described by Foucault (1977). The process of doing CDA involves looking at choices of words and grammar in texts in order to discover the underlying discourse. One example of such a discourse is that 'immigrants are a threat to a national culture'. This is a model of events associated with the notion that there is a unified nation and an identifiable national identity and culture. Normally this discourse encompasses a mythical proud history and authentic traditions. We can see this discourse in the following editorial from the *Daily Mail* (25.10.07) titled "Britain will be scarcely recognisable in 50 years if the immigration deluge continues". The item goes on to discuss how 'we' need to 'defend' our 'indigenous culture'. Who 'we' are remains unspecified as does the nature of our 'indigenous culture '. In Britain's evolving multicultural makeup and the diversity of ways of life and cultural values that have long been present based around social class, regional and other groupings how can we pin such factors down? In the headline immigration is described using the term 'deluge', a metaphor that draws on the idea of masses of rainfall that overspill, creating floods and damage. While the author of this text is keen to point out that they are not racist, everything else they say suggests that they are. Of course in this case it is clear that this *Daily Mail* text is anti-immigration and most likely racist. But by looking at the word choices in the text we can pinpoint exactly why this is so, which is equally more important in text where the discourse is less obvious.

There are other discourses for thinking about nation and national identity. A sociologist or historian would tell us that what we think of as nation and national identity are for the most part invented, with only a relatively short history (Hobsbawm, 1984; Gellner 1983). Here the proud history and indigenous culture under threat by the immigrants is itself not factual at all. And Marxist thinkers would point to such an emphasises of difference on the basis on national identity, as concealing actual divisions in society between the rich and the exploited and poor, and therefore is a concept serving the interests of the powerful.

Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) suggest that we should think about discourses as including, or being comprised of kinds of participants, behaviours, goals, values and locations.   We see this in our example from the *Daily Mail*. This discourse involves participants: real British people and immigrants. It involves values or an 'indigenous culture'. It specifies that 'we' must 'defend' this culture. This discourse represents a 'we' who should not see incomers as opportunity for change and growth, nor as fundamentally the same as ourselves on many levels, but as a threat to be repelled and something that will change 'us'.

What we can see from the *Daily Mail* example of the national 'we' versus the deluge of immigrants is that discourses do not simply mirror reality but, as Fairclough and Wodak (1997) point out, bring into being 'situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relations between people and groups of people' (p258).

Fairclough explains that these discourses, such as of national unity or racial or cultural superiority, project certain social values and ideas and in turn contribute to the (re)production of social life. In other words it is through language that we constitute the social world, or put simply how we talk about the world influences the society we create, the knowledge we celebrate and despise and the institutions we build.   For example, if in a society the discourse that dominates our understanding of crime is that it is simply wrongdoing which requires retribution then we build prisons and lock people away. Yet it is the case that most people who end up in prisons are from poor or more vulnerable sections of the population.   Sociologists and criminologists will tell us that if we are born black in countries like Britain or America then our life position will mean that we are much more likely to end up in prison. This is because of the complex relationship of poverty, race and inequality. Yet we do not organise our societies on the assumption that crime is associated with such factors. Nor do we tend to associate crime with what global corporations provoke in third world countries or the acts of our governments when they go to war, or reorganise society in the interests of the wealthy. It is our dominant discourse of crime that means we build prisons, use the police in the way that we do, take particular crime prevention measures and vote for political parties that will be tough on crime, rather than creating societies where it is less likely to take place.   Of course in this sense we can see that certain discourse represent the interests of specific groups. In the case of crime it will be in the interests of those who have wealth and power to conceal its relationship to factors such as race and poverty.

Power and ideology

The question of power has been at the core of the CDA project. The aim is to reveal what kinds of social relations of power are present in texts both explicitly and implicitly (Van Dijk, 1993:249). Since language can (re)produce social life, what kind of world is being created by texts and what kinds of inequalities, interests might this seek to perpetuate, generate or legitimate? Here language is not simply a neutral vehicle of communication but a means of social construction. Therefore discourse does not merely reflect social processes and structures but is itself seen to contribute to the production and reproduction of these processes and structures. As Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 258) state, 'the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them'.

Fairclough, (1985) drawing on the ideas of Gramsci (1971) explains that language is one place where we can see the operation of ideological interests. Ideologies are sets of assumptions or beliefs in the way the world works and are closely tied to power. Ideologies are closely linked to language since language is such a common form of social behaviour and where we exchange our common sense knowledge of the world. Language can be used to legitimise forms of social organisation, social relations and power. Institutions and individuals often draw on discourses and practices without thinking, because they appear common sense and taken for granted. But through analysis of the language which realises these discourses we can reveal the extent to which they support particular ideologies.

We can summarise what CDA is and what it does using this quote from Ruth Wodak, one of its pioneers:

> "CDA may be defined as fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequalities as it is expressed, signalled, constitutes, legitimised and so on by language use (or in discourse)." (Wodak, 2001, p.2).

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Tropical savanna pastoral region
The environmental conditions of this region mean that it is poorly suited to most forms of agriculture. It receives most of its rainfall during the summer monsoons, and then experiences a winter drought. Furthermore, the natural savanna woodlands vegetation and grasslands have few nutrients for intensive grazing, the soils are poor, the region is a long distance from markets, and transport facilities are poorly developed. Thus, the land is used for little else except extensive beef cattle grazing on farms which sometimes exceed 15,000 square kilometres in size.   The large size of the farms is needed because of the land's poor carrying capacity, which may mean one beast needs 20 to 30 hectares to survive. Attempts were made to establish irrigation agriculture around the Ord River in the 1960s, but saline soils, high costs of long distance transport to markets, and the costs of dam and irrigation canal construction led to the virtual failure of the scheme in the early 1970s. It was intended to produce cotton, sugar cane and rice in the Ord River Scheme. Another land use, mining, is now of greater value than beef grazing. Important minerals include uranium (Rum Jungle, Ranger, Nabarlek), bauxite (Weipa, Michell Plateau), iron ore (Yampi Sound, Fraces Creek), managanese (Groote Eylandt), copper, lead, silver, zinc (all at Mount Isa) and gold (Tennant Creek). The largest towns in the region are Darwin and Mount Isa, each with just over 35,000 people.
(S.B. & D.M. Codrington, (1982) *World of Contrasts: Case Studies in World Development for Secondary Geography,* William Brooks, Sydney, p193)

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