Discourse analysis, culture, and critique: A brief comment

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Discourse analysis, culture, and critique: A brief comment

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Discourse, in the form of written or spoken text or interaction, can of course be isolated as an object *sui generis*, observable properties of which can be described and ‘analyzed’, thus revealing formal patterns. But would we want to call such an enterprise ‘discourse analysis’? Probably not. As early as 1975, Sinclair and Coulthard’s seemingly mechanistic Initiation-Response-Feedback model for the analysis of classroom interaction clearly situated itself against the background of a specific institutional context with its own norms and expectations which, far from being culture-free, also allowed for considerable processual dynamics and variation. Thus, certainly from the point of view of a linguistic pragmatics that takes itself seriously as an interdisciplinary science of language use (see Verschueren 1999), it does not make sense to talk of or analyze discourse without viewing it as a human phenomenon, with all the cognitive, social, and cultural implications that such a characterization entails. It is, therefore, a somewhat puzzling experience to read Michelle Scollo’s eloquent and lengthy plea for ‘cultural approaches to discourse analysis’, puzzling mainly because the present author could not agree more, or would have trouble imagining a discourse analysis that is ‘non-cultural’.

Yet, the issue is so important that Scollo’s reminder may be useful. Particularly useful is its framing in the context of an ethnography-of-speaking program which takes into account the reflexivity of all verbal behavior. In that context, however, another reminder is called for. As early as 1958, Peter Winch drew attention to the fact that all social action is meaningful in the sense that it is interpreted by the people involved in it. That means, social practices cannot be understood without grasping the concepts in terms of which actors themselves interpret what they are doing. This idea of the essential reflexivity of all human behavior justifies the tenets of the ethnography of speaking, but it also underlies all investigations, by linguists and anthropologists alike, contributing to an understanding of metapragmatic awareness (ranging from studies of a mere metapragmatic lexicon, as in Verschueren 1985, to deeply critical theoretical considerations, as in Silverstein 1993). Whether or not the term is used, it is a focus on metapragmatic awareness that is the key to attempts at avoiding culturally biased unidirectional approaches to language use in diverse socio-spatial-cultural settings, as aimed at by Shi-xu (2005) in his *Cultural Approach to Discourse*, as well as by Sachiko Ide and others in their program for an emancipatory pragmatics (see Hanks, Ide, and Katagiri 2009). It is because of the inseparability of

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practices and concepts that a distinction between ‘communication practice’ and ‘cultural discourse’, attributed by Scollo to Carbaugh, hardly makes sense. But let us assume this is merely a matter of terminology. There is, however, an extra complication. Because of a firm pragmatic belief in the pervasiveness of variability, aspirations to a pancultural theory, also attributed to Carbaugh, are virtually incompatible with the goals of a truly culturally grounded approach to discourse. Put more mildly: an assumption of minimal universality must be the starting point, and if a pancultural theory is possible at all, it must be built up gradually on the basis of empirical findings which are themselves not based on a preconceived model. This leaves us with the question of what tools to use for the empirical research itself. Only the least constricting or most open theory of language use imaginable can possibly provide an answer, whatever such a theory may be. And we must keep in mind that even a wide-open theoretical framework may first have to be broken down under the weight of practices-as-conceived-by-participants before it can be built up again.

This leaves us with the role of critique. It is certainly the case that, as Scollo argues, not only Blommaert- or Shi-xu-type research can be characterized as ‘critical’ because of their explicit preoccupation with patterns of power and dominance and their effects, whether locally or globally. Critique may indeed be an implicit corollary of all ethnography of speaking or Carbaugh-type cultural discourse analysis as, if for no other reason, such analyses may reveal potentially damaging cultural bias in dominant communication theories. There is a two-pronged point in Scollo’s formulation, however, where it becomes harder to follow the comparative (or contrastive) reasoning that is set up after reference has been made to the deeper similarity just mentioned.

Thus, first of all, Carbaugh’s model would crucially differentiate itself with its emphasis on understanding communication and discourse ‘as much as possible from members’ point of view’. Leaving aside the issue of the extent to which also openly critical approaches must take into account reflexivity (as argued above), there seems to be a gap between the principle and the research practices. Put differently, the research practices only follow the principle to a certain level. In particular, Scollo’s article seems to focus exclusively on members as producers, not as interpreters (except in the strictly reflexive sense, which is of course vital in its own right). The example referred to is Carbaugh’s examination of communication at a television station in which multiple participants referred to ‘the communication problem’. Indeed, this shows how critique can be approached ‘from members’ point of view’. But what is left out of the picture is the fact that the participants talking about their communication problems are involved in an interaction which is itself embedded in a totally different form of communication: that between the producers of the television program (the television station) and their audience(s). Meaning that is generated at that higher level is probably more important for an understanding of the social functioning of the analyzed, embedded discussion.

This links up with a second issue, namely Scollo’s statement that ‘critique is problematic for ethnographers, as it takes them out of the native point of view’. There is no reason at all why looking (critically) into the meaning effects of an (embedding) television program could not take into account ‘the native point of view’. One would have to be careful, though, not to restrict that point of view to the side of the producers of utterances. In other words, the research principle should be taken to all levels of communicative structure where, certainly in the study of media discourse, the researchers themselves also belong to the category of participants.
When this is done, the potential points of convergence between the approaches compared by Scollo may be both more numerous and more imperative than one would at first sight imagine.

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