Discussion

Description and interpretation in critical discourse analysis

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Abstract

In this response to a critique by Hugh Tyrwhitt-Drake of an earlier article (Flowerdew, 1997a), this paper discusses questions of description and interpretation in critical discourse analysis (CDA). In particular it discusses these issues under the following five postulates: CDA does not deal with ‘facts’; CDA is reflexive; CDA is open to multiple readings; CDA must be plausible; and CDA is subject to the same limitations of linguistic communication as any other discipline. © 1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In his article, ‘Resisting the discourse of critical discourse analysis: Reopening a Hong Kong case study’, Hugh Tyrwhitt-Drake (TD) uses my paper, ‘Reproduction, resistance and joint-production of language power: A Hong Kong case study’ (Flowerdew, 1997a), as a means of critiquing what he sees as flaws in the ‘theory’ (his parentheses) that underlies critical discourse analysis (CDA). Specifically, he accuses much of CDA and my paper in particular of being flawed, “based as it is on partial description and political commitment rather than on rigorous analysis and open-minded enquiry” (1999: 1081–1088). It is one of the ironies of TD’s paper that his critique betrays the same ‘flaws’ that he claims for the work that he himself criticises.
Taking these flaws with regard to TD's paper one by one, TD is guilty of partial
description, it seems to me, in taking only one paper by a rather less known critical
discourse analyst and on this basis making strong claims about CDA in general.
With regard to his analysis of my own paper, he is highly selective in focussing on
only two examples of analysis from a very complex paper.

As far as political commitment is concerned, it seems that TD is highly commit-
ted. It is clear from his article that his commitment is to undermining CDA and more
particularly me. In the service of his cause he uses an at times flamboyant rhetoric
(viz. the first paragraph of the conclusion) which gives a strident tone to his critique.

Turning now to rigorous analysis, as already noted, because of his partial descrip-
tion, TD provides little evidence in support of his position. In his analysis of my
paper he either fails to notice or ignores the hedging, modality and alternative inter-
pretations I put forward in my own analysis, misrepresenting my tentative sugges-
tions as hard and fast claims (a point I will return to).

Finally, as for open enquiry, while TD is zealous in critiquing CDA and myself,
he finds nothing positive to say about either. Surely, in the sort of balanced argument
that he calls for he must be able to find something positive. In particular, with regard
to my analysis of the discourse of the former Hong Kong Governor, Chris Patten,
TD is unwilling to accept any sort of critical reading. One is left with the impression
that TD wants to take everything Patten said at face value, denying any possible
implicatures. This is very strange for an article published in Journal of Pragmatics,
a journal specialising in the study of that phenomenon.

Rather than giving a blow by blow refutation of the points made by TD, which
would be tiresome (readers can after all refer to my own article and decide to what
extent it is flawed in the way that TD claims), I will take the opportunity of this
invitation to respond to consider an issue – the relation between description and
interpretation – which arises in discussion of CDA and which is of interest to me
and I hope others, and which is alluded to in TD's paper. The ideas presented here
are based upon my own conception of CDA, which I have developed in studying
issues of discourse in Hong Kong's political transition. I make no claims as to
their applicability to the work of others. I will discuss questions of description and
interpretation under the following headings, which I present in the form of postu-
lates:

(1) CDA does not deal with 'facts'.
(2) CDA is reflexive.
(3) CDA is open to multiple readings.
(4) CDA must be plausible.
(5) CDA is subject to the same limitations of linguistic communication as any other
discipline.

2. CDA does not deal with 'facts'

TD has the following to say on the relation between description and interpretation:
“the kind of judgements that are made in critical discourse analysis have much to do with opinions and values, rather less to do with facts.”

While I would contest – at least in my case – what TD says about opinions and values, I would agree with what he says here regarding the factual basis for CDA. TD seems to believe, however, that there is something wrong in this, that linguistic communication is somehow precise and that there is only one possible reading, the ‘literal’, ‘factual’ one, of a given utterance. In his article, TD applies positivistic criteria to CDA. He talks about the ‘anti-empirical, anti-rational approach of much of the work in critical discourse analysis’, of the need for ‘objectively examined data’, and about ‘measuring’ the degree to which language is manipulative.

The applicability of scientific positivism, with its emphasis on predictability, measurement and precision as means of evaluating scientific facts has been questioned in the social sciences and humanities at least since Weber (1949). Whether it is social constructivism, post-modernism, phenomenology, or ethnography, research approaches in the social sciences and humanities in the last fifty years have been adapted towards an acceptance of ambiguity, imprecision, probabilistic interpretation and diversity of opinion. This has been necessary because the issues these disciplines deal with are resistant to objectivisation. They are not based on ‘facts’, to use TD’s expression.

In spite of the predominant Chomskyan rationalist approaches in mainstream linguistics, researchers concerned with language use have also come to accept this relativism. Pragmatics, which underpins all discourse analysis (critical or otherwise), unless it is a dull formalism, is concerned with implicature, not facts. It accepts indeterminacy in linguistic message production and reception, seeing effective communication not as the precise articulation of a message by an encoder and the exact decoding of this message by a decoder (the so-called code model of conversation, which itself is based on the ‘conduit’ metaphor), but as a narrowing down of possible ambiguities as an interaction progresses and the language is matched with the (situational and linguistic) context. This is not to say that there is no relation between linguistic form and meaning. If there weren’t we wouldn’t be able to hold a simple conversation (Cameron, 1998: 439). Although individual utterances are susceptible to multiple interpretations, in an interaction or a text the possible ambiguities are narrowed down and ultimately a decision is arrived at as to what they mean.

Just as in everyday conversation utterance interpretation consists of a narrowing down of possible ambiguities based on context, so it is in discourse analysis. In my own work, where there are no grounds for favouring one interpretation over another I say so and present these alternatives (I do not, as TD claims, view the possibility of alternative interpretations as ‘an unpalatable fact’.) In this regard, it is unfortunate that in his critique TD interprets alternative possible interpretations in my article as outright claims.

Where there are multiple possibilities, CDA should put forward alternatives and argue for the most plausible one. Judgement does, however, need to be exercised. Some implicatures are more easily read than others. When Chris Patten referred to the ‘colonial oppression’ of his period as governor (e.g. Patten, 1998: 81) – as he did on various occasions –, based on our knowledge of one, his political situation, two,
the textual context of the expression and three, his penchant for irony, it would go against all the contextual evidence to take this at face value; the expression ‘colonial oppression’ is better interpreted as an ironical allusion to the sort of language that Patten’s detractors might use against him. This seems a relatively straightforward analysis. When Patten referred to the former Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping (when he was still alive, but officially retired), as the ‘Chairman of the All-China Bridge Federation’, on the other hand, – as he again did on several occasions – the implication is perhaps less clear. Based on my extensive study of Patten’s use of language and its political context, it seems to me that this was a way of mildly ridiculing Deng and perhaps suggesting that he was no longer relevant as a representative of the Chinese government – the only official title Deng held was that of chairman of a bridge club; he was therefore irrelevant politically. In addition, it seems to me that Patten’s references to Deng by the use of such an expression were a part of the Hong Kong governor’s overall ridicule and demonisation of the Chinese government (Flowerdew, 1998), with which he conducted a ‘war of words’ during the five years of his governorship. However, I have no way of ‘proving’ this (although with more space I could describe those aspects of the context which make such a reading possible) and so such an interpretation needs to be put forward as a possibility, not a certainty. As Lakoff (1990: ch. 14) points out, however, the wilful use of ambiguity is a favourite device of politicians, and it therefore follows that CDA should highlight the possible (multiple) interpretations that seem plausible when ambiguity occurs.

In order to do the sort of analysis that I am arguing for, attention to context is vital. TD claims that in CDA and in my work, analysis is provided to support a pre-conceived interpretation. This is an argument that has been put forward also by Widdowson (e.g. 1995, 1996) on various occasions. TD’s position with regard to my analysis is that I have decided to be critical of Patten and that I have selected data to support this position.

In the article TD has chosen to critique, my analysis was designed to test van Dijk’s theory of production, resistance and joint-production of language power in discourse (van Dijk, 1993). Most of the data I adduced in the article supported van Dijk’s position. I readily admit that it was because the meeting which was the focus of the analysis was characterised by features which, to me, at least initially, were consonant with van Dijk’s theory that I conducted the detailed study. However, having done so, I was able to suggest a possible extension of van Dijk’s model, presenting data which indicated that – in the meeting that was the focus of the analysis at any rate – strategies of resistance may actually play an important role in facilitating reproduction. These observations, based on a single language event, would need to be corroborated by further case studies before any generalisations can be made.

In another article (Flowerdew, 1996), which analysed the same public meeting, while also pointing to certain manipulative devices used by Patten, I highlighted Patten’s role in opening up public discourse in Hong Kong and making it more open and democratic. My position on Patten in the two articles referred to and in my other work is that the last colonial Hong Kong governor did a lot to ‘democratise’ public discourse in Hong Kong. He did this from a paradoxical position as colonial governor in charge of an un-elected government. Some of his applications of language
power were manipulative, especially in the way he tried to promote a positive legacy of 150 years of British colonial rule in Hong Kong (Flowerdew, 1998b). I don’t see any inconsistency in these alternative interpretations. To put it bluntly, there were positive and negative aspects to Patten’s governorship; and in my work I tried to demonstrate these two sides to his discourse.

3. CDA is reflexive

To counter TD’s critique that interpretation in CDA is based on preconceived ideas rather than objective analysis in more general terms, his position misses the fundamental dialectic between discourse and context, between what is often referred to as the ‘macro’ and the ‘micro’. By familiarising oneself with the situation of the text, one is able to interpret it; but at the same time, in analysing the micro features of the text one also gains insights into the situation in which it was produced. This is what is meant when discourse analysts talk about the reflexive relation between language and context or society. This idea has been around a long time. It is part of the hermeneutic tradition, where the relationship between text and the situation of its production is referred to as the hermeneutic circle. It is also fundamental to Hallidayan linguistics, which was in turn based on Malinowski and Firth.

According to TD, interpretation in CDA and in my article is preconceived; but if this were true, it must have been conceived somehow, and the most likely source of this is exposure to the discourse at the macro level. In the case of Patten, therefore, TD claims that even before I study any of the texts, I have decided to be critical of the former governor. But if this were the case (and I don’t agree that it is), then it can only be because I have already been exposed to Patten’s discourse – perhaps not at a very detailed micro level, but certainly in general, at the macro level. This is to assume also (contrary to facts) that interpretation is not affected and revised as analysis progresses, at either the macro or micro level, or both.

4. CDA is open to multiple readings

If discourse is open to multiple readings, as I have been claiming, how does one decide which is the ‘correct’ or ‘best’ one? I think the answer to this question is that one doesn’t. One needs to accept that there are multiple perspectives and that there are limits to objectivist impartiality. It is true that the stance of most of those engaged in CDA is to take up the position of the powerless in preference to that of the powerful, although, as TD’s paper shows, it is quite possible for CDA to adopt the position of the powerful, to have a critical discourse of the right; it all depends on what you make the subject of your analysis.

TD claims that there is a clique of critical discourse analysts intent upon hegemonic control. He offers no evidence for this and the fact that he himself and Widowson have published critical articles on CDA seems to suggest that this clique,
if it exists, is not being very successful. As with historiographical texts (and discourse analysis is itself historiographical), any discourse analysis text must accept that it is potentially in dialogue with other texts interpreting the same (communicative) event or series of (communicative) events. With regard to my own work, given that Governor Patten had a whole public relations department in the British Hong Kong Government working on his behalf, that he encouraged his close friend David Dimbleby to produce a favourable television series and write what many consider to be a hagiography of his governorship (Dimbleby, 1997), and that he wrote his own heavily marketed, self-justificatory book about his time in Hong Kong (Patten, 1998), I have no illusions about my interpretation taking on hegemonic status.

5. CDA must be plausible

If one is to accept multiple readings, that is not to say that one should accept or assign equal value to them all. As I already mentioned, there are systematic (although not one-to-one) relationships between linguistic form and meaning; certain implications, according to contexts, are more obvious than others. Readings which mistakenly (or wilfully) fail to take account of such relationships (that is to say where Grice's (1975) cooperative principle or Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance conditions fail to function appropriately) are unlikely to be taken up. CDA must be plausible to recognised experts – as happens in the peer review process, for example.

To be plausible, an analysis would normally need to explain how the data were collected and selected and provide an adequate description of the context needed for the interpretation. Given the length constraints in scholarly journals, there are practical problems here. That is why, in addition to scholarly articles, I published a book about Governor Patten’s Hong Kong governorship, several chapters of which were devoted to the historical background going right back to the Opium Wars and Britain’s seizure of its future colony from China (Flowerdew, 1998a–d). This context was essential, I felt, to understand the ‘war of words’ that Patten conducted with China and its supporters in Hong Kong and Patten’s promotion of a positive interpretation of Britain’s legacy to its former colony. In addition to this historical research, I also created a corpus of media comment on Patten, along with the primary corpus of his speeches, interviews, writings and other public pronouncements.

Plausibility is also enhanced in CDA if similar pragmatic phenomena have previously been identified by other researchers. As in other research, the literature review is therefore another important means of increasing plausibility. The approach to theory building in CDA is basically by means of case studies. Case study research is cumulative, multiple cases further confirming, developing, or questioning the results of earlier studies. That is an important aspect of my paper, to test further the ideas on production, reproduction and co-production put forward by van Dijk. An ironic aspect of TD’s paper is that he himself uses this approach when he draws on insights put forward by critical discourse analysts van Dijk and Fairclough – the people he is ostensibly critiquing – in support of his own argument against me. If CDA is so pernicious, why is TD using its findings?, readers might ask themselves.
There are other ways of enhancing plausibility in CDA. One is ‘self disclosure’, as a means of signalling potential bias ‘up-front’. In his book *Language and power*, in the chapter analysing a political interview with Margaret Thatcher, Fairclough (1989: 176) tells his readers that his view of Thatcherism “owes most to the political analysis associated with the Communist Party journal *Marxism Today*”. To me, this asks more questions than it answers. It is so brief, for example, that it tells us very little about Fairclough, except perhaps that he sympathises with the left wing in politics. In addition, self-disclosure carries the danger of reification. Is a given self-disclosure in a given text also relevant to earlier or subsequent writings by the same author one wonders?

Another way of enhancing plausibility is to triangulate the analysis by interviewing the subjects who produced the texts, other interested stake-holders or subject-matter experts, and then presenting them with the results of the analysis. In this way one recognises and privileges the meanings that actors give to their actions or the actions of others they are associated with (the Weberian ‘verstehen’). In CDA, there are obvious problems here: people are unlikely to be open if they feel they may be subjected to criticism; and the question of the ethics of the data collection process also arises. In my work on Governor Patten I was fortunate enough to be able to interview both him and two of his close advisors (Flowerdew, 1998c,d). Although there are no specific aspects of the *Journal of Pragmatics* article which were dependent upon these interviews, they confirmed my impression of the great importance Patten attached to language and specifically public meetings such as the one that was the focus of the analysis, the need he felt to win the support of the Hong Kong public, and his disdain for the Chinese government. My interview with him was also crucial for other studies I conducted where, for example, it was important to know that certain sections of speeches and public addresses were written by him personally and not by his advisors.

One further step in acknowledging human agency, and therefore an element of doubt, is to break away from the unified authorial voice which claims to provide an omniscient, final account (the traditional stance of the discourse analyst). The voice of the analyst may be dialogised, presenting more than one possible interpretation. This is what I tried to do in considering the possible motives of the subjects in my paper. TD, however, wants me to either give a definitive interpretation or, preferably, for him, not to consider the issue at all, as it is beyond the bounds of ‘empirical’ study.

6. CDA is subject to the same limitations of linguistic communication as any other discipline

Thus far in this consideration of the nature of description and interpretation in CDA I have discussed the status accorded to the data, the way it is analysed, the possibility of multiple readings, and the need for plausibility in interpretation. All of these considerations affect the legitimacy ascribed to the analysis. In this final section I will consider the question of the language used in communicating the analysis.
While in the previous sections I have been concerned with questions of evidence, here I am concerned with the way this evidence is presented.

It seems to me that critical discourse analysts are in a rhetorical dilemma. Our lives as analysts (and communicators) would be made infinitely simpler if we could place our trust in some sort of code or conduit model of communication based upon the belief that perfect understanding is achieved by the precise articulation of a message by an encoder and the exact decoding of this message by a decoder. To do this, however, would at the same time do ourselves out of a job. Such a model, however, based upon what Harris (cited in Cameron, 1998) has called the 'telementational fallacy' (that communication is achieved by the precise transfer of ideas from mind to mind) and the 'fixed code fallacy' (that such communication is achieved by the use of a fixed code matching linguistic forms and meanings), has been discredited at least since Grice. Communication is imprecise, involving inferential processes which communicators derive from the context of the utterances being processed.

If this is the case, and I take it that it is for the great majority of readers of Journal of Pragmatics at any rate, then, as analysts, we must accept that the texts we produce, like those that we analyse, as already mentioned, are susceptible to multiple possible interpretations. Indeed, new readings of previously analysed discourses/texts may offer as insightful interpretations as do initial analyses of discourses/texts which have previously been untouched. In this regard, it is a pity that TD did not devote his time to conducting his own analysis of Patten’s discourse, rather than limiting himself to critiquing mine, worthy as such an undertaking may be.

This being so, what measures can one take to ensure that what one writes as an analyst has the best chance possible of being interpreted in the way intended? One way would be to use as simple language as possible. CDA would be written in a simple, transparent style, avoiding the subtle implicatures and rhetorical devices that typically mark other writing in the human sciences in general. Might such a rhetoric—"unadorned by figures, unmoved by emotion, unclouded by images, and universalistic in its conceptual or mathematical scope" (LaCapra, 1985: 42)—satisfy critics such as TD who fail to grasp our intended implicatures? Such self-denial (we would be denying ourselves the persuasive repertoire used in other disciplines) in the use of such an intentionally simple style, however, would be to suggest or pretend that transparency and objectivity in language representation are possible.

Even in the physical sciences, it is now beginning to be recognised that the supposedly systematic, objective structure of the scientific report is something of a pretence. Scientists do not typically conduct a literature review, design a research method, collect and report the findings, and finally discuss the significance of their findings in strict serial order, as the IMRAD (introduction – method – results – discussion) rhetorical structure of the research report suggests (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). The actual research process is much more messy than this. All of these stages may be being worked on at the same time; the method may not be appropriate the first time it is tried and need modification; the results may not be as expected and the procedure may need to be repeated. This process does not come about without the intervention of individual human agents, as again the report suggests, by its use of impersonal rhetorical devices such as the passive voice. The scientific report thus
serves to mask the unsystematic and human aspects of the research process as it actually is.¹

But even the positivists, in recognition of this, are beginning to abandon their insistence on total impersonality, allowing, for example, the use of the first person pronoun – which used to be called the intrusive ‘I’ – and active instead of passive voice. This is to me an acknowledgement of human intervention in the scientific process. By being more open, perhaps science becomes more credible.

Atkinson (1990, 1992) makes a number of points about the limitations of language in writing in the social sciences. First, analysis is the result of an individual exploration. Inevitably it will be marked by the individual sensibilities and style of the author. Second, we can strongly influence the apparent character of our subjects by our choice of textual form. Third, analysis is a literary work and as such will reflect the literary style of the analyst. It follows, therefore, that however factual any text may seem, however simple it may appear, it is subject to the way the reader and writer process it. Language is not a transparent medium through which the world can be experienced or expressed.

If this is the case, is it not better to accept that language cannot be neutral in the way it represents the world, that it is always incomplete? A simple style is, after all, a type of rhetoric. Neutrality itself is not the absence of a position, but one position among others, just as an absence of markers of modality in a text or stretch of text – as in the methodology and results section of the traditional scientific report, for example – does not mean that there is no attitude expressed by the speaker/writer. Elegant, carefully fashioned prose, with a measured use of metaphor, irony, parallelism and other figures of speech is likely to establish greater credibility than writing which does not bear such characteristics. The purpose of rhetoric, since at least Aristotle, after all, has been to persuade by appealing to the aesthetic sensibility. It would be odd, on the one hand, to deny CDA the tools which are available to others, and counter-productive, on the other, in so far as that is the language which others consistently use and with which they are most familiar.

As students of language, however, both writers and readers of CDA texts are uniquely qualified to approach such texts with a full reflexive awareness of the possibilities and limitations of their use of language. A reading of a CDA text involves a consideration of its pragmatic properties, or rhetoric, in the Aristotelian sense of the term. Plato wanted the poet to be excluded from the Republic on the grounds that rhetoric is potentially corrupting. However, as I have argued above, if style cannot be separated from argument, then rhetoric will be present in the Republic, with or without the presence of the poet. This point is exemplified in TD’s article. TD accuses me and CDA in general of using the same rhetorical tools as our subjects; but as I have pointed out, TD also uses them himself in his critique of me and CDA in general.

¹ Gilbert and Mulkay (1984: 59) write as follows: “Empiricist discourse is organized in a manner which denies its character as an interpretative product and which denies that its author’s actions are relevant to its content”.
7. Conclusion

To conclude this article, and as a confirmation of the place of rhetoric in CDA, I would like to paraphrase the conclusion to TD’s paper. (To make sure that the implication is not misapprehended, I would like to state baldly that this is pastiche [see the first paragraph of TD’s conclusion], although with a serious import.) The aspect of TD’s paper which gives me greatest concern is not that it treats discourse as if it deals with ‘facts’; nor that it fails to realise that discourse analysis is reflexive; nor that it ignores the possibility of multiple readings and that alternative readings can be evaluated on the strength of their plausibility, as assessed by various criteria; nor that it is unaware that discourse analysts are subject to the same limitations of linguistic communication as their colleagues in other disciplines. The really disappointing thing about TD’s paper is that, on the one hand, it is not a little more generous and collegial towards its target, and that, on the other, it fails to provide an analysis of Patten’s discourse of its own.

References

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