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The Dialectics of Discourse

Discourse and social practices

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA) is based upon a view of semiosis as an irreducible element of all material social processes (Williams 1977). We can see social life as interconnected networks of social practices of diverse sorts (economic, political, cultural, family etc). The reason for centering the concept of ‘social practice’ is that it allows an oscillation between the perspective of social structure and the perspective of social action and agency – both necessary perspectives in social research and analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999). By ‘social practice’ I mean a relatively stabilised form of social activity (examples would be classroom teaching, television news, family meals, medical consultations). Every practice is an articulation of diverse social elements within a relatively stable configuration, always including discourse. Let us say that every practice includes the following elements:

- Activities
- Subjects, and their social relations
- Instruments
- Objects
- Time and place
- Forms of consciousness
- Values
- Discourse

These elements are **dialectically** related (Harvey 1996). That is to say, they are different elements but not discrete, fully separate, elements. There is a sense in which each ‘internalizes’ the others without being reducible to them. So for instance social relations, social identities, cultural values and consciousness are in part semiotic, but that does not mean that we theorize and research social relations for instance in the same way that we theorize and research language – they have distinct properties, and researching them gives rise to distinct disciplines. (Though it is possible and desirable to work across disciplines in a ‘transdisciplinary’ way – see Fairclough 2000.)

CDA is analysis of the dialectical relationships between discourse (including language but also other forms of semiosis, e.g. body language or visual images) and other elements of social practices. Its particular concern (in my own approach) is with the radical changes that are taking place in contemporary social life, with how discourse figures within processes of change, and with shifts in the relationship between semiosis and other social elements within networks of practices. We cannot take the role of discourse in social practices for granted, it has to be established through analysis. And discourse may be more or less important and salient in one practice or set of practices than in another, and may change in importance over time.

Discourse figures in broadly three ways in social practices. First, it figures as a part of the social activity within a practice. For instance, part of doing a job (for instance, being a shop assistant) is using language in a particular way; so too is part of governing a country. Second, discourse figures in representations. Social actors within any practice produce representations of other practices, as well as ('reflexive') representations of their own practice, in the course of their activity within the practice. They '**recontextualize**' other practices (Bernstein 1990, Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999) – that is, they incorporate them into their own practice, and different social actors will represent them differently according to how they are positioned within the practice. Representation is a process of social construction of practices, including reflexive self-construction – representations enter and shape social processes and practices. Third, discourse figures in ways of being, in the constitution of identities – for instance the identity of a political leader such as Tony Blair in the UK is partly a semiotically constituted way of being.

Discourse as part of social activity constitutes genres. Genres are diverse ways of acting, of producing social life, in the semiotic mode. Examples are: everyday conversation, meetings in various types of organisation, political and other forms of interview, and book reviews. Discourse in the representation and self-representation of social practices constitutes discourses (note the difference between 'discourse' as an abstract noun, and 'discourse(s)' as a count noun). Discourses are diverse representations of social life which are inherently positioned – differently positioned social actors 'see' and represent social life in different ways, different discourses. For instance, the lives of poor and disadvantaged people are represented through different discourses in the social practices of government, politics, medicine, and social science, and through different discourses within each of these practices corresponding to different positions of social actors. Finally, discourse as part of ways of being constitutes styles – for instance the styles of business managers, or political leaders.

Social practices networked in a particular way constitute a social order – for instance, the emergent neo-liberal global order referred to above, or at more local level, the social order of education in a particular society at a particular time. The discourse/semiotic aspect of a social order is what we can call an **order of discourse**. It is the way in which diverse genres and discourses and styles are networked together. An order of discourse is a social structuring of semiotic difference – a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning, ie different discourse and genres and styles. One aspect of this ordering is dominance: some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream in a particular order of discourse, others are marginal, or oppositional, or 'alternative'. For instance, there may be a dominant way to conduct a doctor-patient consultation in Britain, but there are also various other ways, which may be adopted or developed to a greater or lesser extent in opposition to the dominant way. The dominant way probably still maintains social distance between doctors and patients, and the authority of the doctor over the way interaction proceeds; but there are others ways which are more 'democratic', in which doctors play down their authority. The political concept of 'hegemony' can usefully be used in analyzing orders of discourse (Fairclough 1992, Laclau & Mouffe 1985) – a particular social structuring of semiotic difference may become hegemonic, become part of the legitimizing common sense which sustains relations of domination, but hegemony will always be contested to a greater or lesser extent, in hegemonic struggle. An order of discourse is not a closed or rigid system, but rather an open system, which is put at risk by what happens in actual interactions.

The dialectics of discourse

I said above that the relationship between discourse and other elements of social practices is a dialectical relationship – discourse internalises and is internalised by other elements without the different elements being reducible to each other. They are different, but not discrete. If we think of the dialectics of discourse in historical terms, in terms of processes of social change, the question that arises is the ways in which and the conditions under which processes of internalisation take place. Take the concept of a ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘knowledge society’. This suggests a qualitative change in economies and societies such that economic and social processes are knowledge-driven – change comes about, at an increasingly rapid pace, through the generation, circulation, and operationalisation of knowledges in economic and social processes. Of course knowledge (science, technology) have long been significant factors in economic and social change, but what is being pointed to is a dramatic increase in their significance. The relevance of these ideas here is that ‘knowledge-driven’ amounts to ‘discourse-driven’: knowledges are generated and circulate as discourses, and the process through which discourses become operationalised in economies and societies is precisely the dialectics of discourse.

Discourses include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be. The knowledges of the knowledge-economy and knowledge-society are imaginaries in this sense – projections of possible states of affairs, ‘possible worlds’. In terms of the concept of social practice, they imagine possible social practices and networks of social practices – possible syntheses of activities, subjects, social relations, instruments, objects, spacetimes (Harvey 1996), values, forms of consciousness. These imaginaries may be enacted as actual (networks of) practices – imagined activities, subjects, social relations etc can become real activities, subjects, social relations etc. Such enactments include materialisations of discourses – economic discourses become materialised for instance in the instruments of economic production, including the ‘hardware’ (plant, machinery, etc) and the ‘software’ (management systems, etc). Such enactments are also in part themselves discursual/semiotic: discourses become enacted as genres. Consider for instance new management discourses which imagine management systems based upon ‘teamwork’, relatively non-hierarchical, networked, ways of managing organisations. They become enacted discursively as new genres, for instance genres for team meetings. Such specifically discursual enactments are embedded within their enactment as new ways of acting and interacting in production processes, and possibly material enactments in new spaces (e.g. seminar rooms) for team activities.

Discourses as imaginaries may also come to be inculcated as new ways of being, new identities. It is a commonplace that new economic and social formations depend upon new subjects – for instance, ‘Taylorism’ as a production and management system depended upon changes in the ways of being, the identities, of workers (Gramsci 1971). The process of ‘changing the subject’ can be thought of in terms of the inculcation of new discourses – Taylorism would be an example. Inculcation is a matter of, in the current jargon, people coming to ‘own’ discourses, to position themselves inside them, to act and think and talk and see themselves in terms of new discourses. Inculcation is a complex process, and probably less secure than enactment. A stage towards inculcation is rhetorical deployment: people may learn new discourses and use them for certain purposes while at the same time self-consciously keeping a distance from them. One of the mysteries of the dialectics of discourse is the process in which what begins as self-conscious rhetorical deployment becomes ‘ownership’ – how people become

unconsciously positioned within a discourse. Inculcation also has its material aspects: discourses are dialectically inculcate not only in styles, ways of using language, they are also materialised in bodies, postures, gestures, ways of moving, and so forth.

The dialectical process does not end with enactment and inculcation. Social life is reflexive. That is, people not only act and interact within networks of social practices, they also interpret and represent to themselves and each other what they do, and these interpretations and representations shape and reshape what they do. Moreover, if we are thinking specifically of economic practices in contemporary societies, people's activities are constantly being interpreted and **represented** by others, including various categories of experts (e.g. management consultants) and academic social scientists (including discourse analysts). What this amounts to is that ways of (inter)acting and ways of being (including the discourse aspects, genres and styles) are represented in discourses, which may contribute the production of new imaginaries, which may in turn be enacted and inculcated. So it goes on, a dialectic which entails movements across diverse social elements, including movements between the material and the non-material, and movements within discourse between discourses, genres and styles.

There is nothing inevitable about the dialectics of discourse as I have described it. A new discourse may come into an institution or organisation without being enacted or inculcated. It may be enacted, yet never be fully inculcated. Examples abound. For instance, managerial discourses have been quite extensively enacted within British universities (for instance as procedures of staff appraisal, including a new genre of 'appraisal interview'), yet arguably the extent of inculcation is very limited – most academics do not 'own' these management discourses. We have to consider the conditions of possibility for, and the constraints upon, the dialectics of discourse in particular cases. This has a bearing on theories of 'social constructionism' (Sayer 2000). It is a commonplace in contemporary social science that social entities (institutions, organisations, social agents etc) are or have been constituted through social processes, and a common understanding of these processes highlights the effectivity of discourses, as I have done above: social entities are in some sense effects of discourses. Where social constructionism becomes problematic is where it disregards the relative solidity and permanence of social entities, and their resistance to change. Even powerful discourses such as the new discourses of management may **meet** levels of resistance which result in them being neither enacted nor inculcated to any degree. In using a dialectical theory of discourse in social research, one needs to take account, case by case, of the circumstances which condition whether and to what degree social entities are resistant to new discourses.

I shall now discuss this view of the dialectics of discourse with respect to language in new capitalism.

New Capitalism

The following summary description of new capitalism, written by Bob Jessop, is taken from the a website dedicated to researching language in the new capitalism (www.uoc.es/humfil/nlc/LNC-ENG/lnc-eng.html – see also Jessop 2000).

“The capitalist mode of production is historically distinctive not only for its crisis-tendencies but also for its capacities to periodically renew the bases of its economic expansion and, in so doing, to re-articulate and re-scale the relations between the economic, political, and social. Just such a renewal is occurring at present after the crisis of postwar accumulation based on the dominance of Atlantic Fordism. Capitalism is being restructured and re-scaled on the basis of important new technologies, new modes of

economic coordination, and the increasing subsumption of extra-economic relations under the logic of capital accumulation. Buzzwords in this regard include: the information economy, the knowledge-driven economy, globalization, the rise of regional economies, entrepreneurial cities, the network economy, strategic alliances, government without governance, turbo capitalism, space-time compression, flexibility, workfare, the learning economy, and the enterprise culture. Governments on different scales and of quite varied political complexions now take it as a mere fact of life (though a 'fact' produced in part by inter-governmental agreements) that all must bow to the emerging logic of a globalizing knowledge-driven economy. Responses to this emerging institutional and operational logic vary but their dominant, if not hegemonic, form in the anglophone world is neo-liberalism. This is a political project for the re-structuring and re-scaling of social relations in accord with the demands of an unrestrained global capitalism (Bourdieu 1998). The dominance of American multinationals and the US imperialist state - backed by international financial and industrial interests elsewhere and supported by the British state - has placed neo-liberalism at the top of the global agenda. Neo-liberalism has been imposed on the post-socialist economies as the (allegedly) best means of rapid system transformation, economic renewal, and re-integration into the global economy. It has been embraced in most anglophone societies to replace the discredited mixed economies and universal welfare states of postwar regimes based on an institutionalized compromise between capital and labour. And it is evident in neo-liberal policy adjustments in the more corporatist and **étatiste** regimes of Continental Europe, East Asia, and Latin America. In one or other form, it has been adopted in fact if not in theory by social democratic as well as conservative political parties throughout the world. With rare but important exceptions, neo-liberalism has come to dominate the political scene - and has resulted in the disorientation and disarming of economic, political, and social forces committed to radical alternatives. This in turn has contributed to a closure of public debate and a weakening of democracy.

States on different scales, from towns and cities through regional and national states to supranational blocs such as the European Union, have been enrolled in managing and promoting the insertion of their respective economic spaces into the emerging new world order. This has reinforced economic and extra-economic pressures to restructure and rescale on terms dictated by the allegedly impersonal forces of the market. It has led to radical attacks on universal social welfare as a cost of international production and the reduction of the protections that welfare states provided for people against the effects of markets. It has also led to an increasing division between rich and poor, increasing economic insecurity and stress even for the 'new middle' classes, and an intensification of the exploitation of labour. The unrestrained emphasis on growth also poses major threats to the environment. It has also produced a new imperialism, where international financial agencies under the tutelage of the USA and its rich allies indiscriminately impose restructuring on less fortunate countries, sometimes with disastrous consequences (e.g. Russia). It is not the impetus to increasing international economic integration that is the problem but the particular form in which this is being imposed, the particular consequences (e.g., in terms of unequal distribution of wealth) which are being made to follow."

Language in new capitalism

I suggested earlier that the idea of new capitalism as a 'knowledge-based' or 'knowledge-driven' socio-economic order implies that it is also 'discourse-driven',

suggesting that language may have a more significant role in contemporary socio-economic changes than it has had in the past. If this is so, discourse analysis has an important contribution to make to research on the transformations of capitalism. The significance of language in these transformations has not gone unnoticed by social researchers. Bourdieu & Wacquant (2001) for instance point to a ‘new planetary vulgate’, which they characterise as a vocabulary (‘globalization’, ‘flexibility’, ‘governance’, ‘employability’, ‘exclusion’ and so forth), which ‘is endowed with the performative power to bring into being the very realities it claims to describe’. That is, the neo-liberal political project of removing obstacles to the new economic order is discourse-driven.

But as well as indicating the significance of language in these socio-economic transformations, Bourdieu & Wacquant’s paper shows that social research needs the contribution of discourse analysts. It is not enough to characterise the ‘new planetary vulgate’ as a list of words, a vocabulary, we need to analyse texts and interactions to show how some of the effects which Bourdieu & Wacquant identify are brought off (eg making the socio-economic transformations of new capitalism and the policies of governments to facilitate them seem inevitable; representing desires as facts, representing the imaginaries of interested policies as the way the world actually is). Bourdieu & Wacquant’s account of the effectivity of neoliberal discourse exceeds the capacity of their sociological research methods.

But it is not only text and interactional analysis that discourse analysts can bring to social research on the new capitalism, it is also the sort of theorisation of the dialectics of discourse I have sketched out above. If we think of the restructuring and rescaling which Jessop refers to as changes in the networking of social practices, they are also a restructuring and rescaling of discourse, restructuring and rescaling of orders of discourse. Let us take these in turn. The restructuring of orders of discourse is a matter of shifting relations, changes in the networking, between the discourse elements of different (networks of) social practices. A prime example is the way in which the discourse of management has colonised public institutions and organisations such as universities – though we need to add at once that this process is a colonisation/appropriation dialectic, ie not only a matter of the entry of a discourse into new domains, but the diverse ways in which it is received, appropriated, recontextualised in different locales, and the ultimately unpredictable outcomes of this process. The rescaling of orders of discourse is a matter of changes in the networking of the discourse elements of social practices on different scales of social organisation – global, regional, national and local. For instance, the enhanced and accelerated permeability of local social practices (local government, small-scale industry, local media) in countries across the world to discourses which are globally disseminated through organisations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Incorporating Jessop’s account of the transformation of capitalism into a dialectical theory of discourse provides a theoretical framework for researching the global penetrative power of the ‘new planetary vulgate’ which Bourdieu & Wacquant allude to, as well as its limits.

It is also needed to research what Bourdieu & Wacquant call the ‘performative power’ of the ‘new planetary vulgate’, its power to ‘bring into being the very realities it describes’. How does this discourse come to enacted in ways of acting and interacting (including genres), and inculcated in ways of being (including styles)? Researching this crucial issue requires detailed investigation of organisational and institutional change on a comparative basis, such as the study by Salskov-Iversen et al (2000) of the contrasting colonisation/appropriation of the new ‘public management’ discourse by local authorities in Britain and Mexico, but working with the sort of dialectical theory of discourse I have sketched out above. See also Iedema 1999.

Conclusion

Let me summarise the argument. First, language has a significance in contemporary socio-economic changes which is perhaps qualitatively different from its significance in previous transformations. Second, although this has been recognised by social researchers, it has not been researched because their theories and methods do not equip them to research it. In short, they need discourse analysts. Third, if discourse analysts are to make this contribution, they need not only existing methods of text analysis (which perhaps themselves need radical rethinking), but also the sort of dialectical theory of discourse I have sketched out here.

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