ELSEVIER

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect

Language & Communication 27 (2007) 337–368

LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Why there is no such thing as "critical discourse analysis"

Peter E. Jones

Communication Studies, Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus, Sheffield, S1 1WB, United Kingdom

Abstract

The article argues that there is no such thing as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the sense of a method of political or ideological critique based on the application of conventional linguistic constructs. All of us, as language users and makers, are continuously engaged in the critical examination of and response to communication in our everyday lives. The article argues that this constant critical engagement with communication cannot be captured or accounted for by conventional linguistic methods and concepts. Such critical engagements involve the interrogation and evaluation, in moral, political and practical terms, of novel communicative acts in their unique, contextualised links with other aspects and dimensions of conduct. The abstract entities of conventional linguistics and pragmatics allow no critical purchase on this integration of communicative behaviour into the fabric of our social lives. The article argues that the attempts by Critical Discourse Analysts to build a method of political and ideological critique out of such entities is misguided and inevitably leads to a distorted view of the role of communication in society and of the workings of social processes more generally.
© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Discourse; Critical; Critique; Communication; Ideology; Linguistics; Relations of power

1. Introduction

With the recent appearance of the new journal of *Critical Discourse Studies*,[1] Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is clearly still in its ascendancy, having so far managed to brush aside, or at least ignore, its occasional (Hammersley, 1997; Stubbs, 1997) or persistent

[1] Published by Routledge; website at http://www.cds-web.net/CDS_main.html.

0271-5309/$ - see front matter © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.langcom.2006.08.001

(Widdowson, 1995; Widdowson, 1996; Widdowson, 1998) critics and having little to fear, therefore, from the present challenge to its raison d'être.

In any case, this is not my first tilt at CDA: Jones (2004); Jones and Collins (2006) and Collins and Jones (2006) have engaged critically with CDA, in the version due largely to the efforts of Norman Fairclough (e.g., Fairclough, 1989, 2001a). However, while the papers just cited have been concerned, in varying degrees, with the politics and social philosophy of CDA, the present paper will focus on the inadequacies of CDA as an approach to language and communication.

The main argument to be presented can be formulated quite simply: the basic problem with *critical* discourse analysis is *discourse analysis* itself. Putting it more clearly, the problem is that the categories, elements and procedures involved in the various forms of 'discourse analysis' based on conventional descriptive linguistics and pragmatics (see, for example, Schiffrin, 1994) do not and, indeed, cannot afford any *critical* purchase on communicative processes and actually get in the way of a proper appreciation of how we communicate in real life situations. The reason is that all such frameworks are based on a set of beliefs about language which Harris (1981, 1996) calls the 'language myth'. Essentially, the myth entails a refusal or inability to recognise the *integration* of communicative practices into social processes generally with the resulting theoretical and analytical constructs being derived by an artificial and arbitrary *segregation* of certain *contingent and contextually conditioned* aspects of the forms and results of communicative activity from the totality of human conduct. On this 'segregational' (Harris, 1996) view, 'language' is not a word we may use to refer to the creative communicative endeavours of particular individuals, but the term for an abstract, self-contained system of forms, meanings, and rules whose existence is the precondition for successful acts of linguistic communication, any such act being the mere realization or expression of elements or rules in the system. Moreover, as I shall argue, in order to justify using the theoretical constructs of this kind of 'discourse analysis' as critical tools, CDA practitioners have come up with a very peculiar picture of the workings of contemporary society and the role and power of discourse within it.

I should emphasise that I am not objecting to language theorists bringing an overtly political perspective to their work. Nor am I suggesting that linguistic practices can or must be accounted for in terms that appear to be free of partisan political or social value. My point is quite the reverse. Communicative practices, as we all know, can be as objectionable – as oppressive, as demeaning, as abusive and, in some cases, as deadly in their consequences or effects – as any other kind of practice. And this is, after all, why we constantly find ourselves discussing, arguing, criticising, countering, ignoring, complaining about or trying to put a stop to communications which we do not want, like or agree with. The plain fact is that communicating is, by virtue of being a form of human behaviour, a contentious and provocative endeavour for which the exercise of our critical faculties – in relation to our own and others' communicative efforts – is always required, or at least advisable, although we may exercise these faculties more or less carefully or negligently, courageously or irresponsibly (and in many cases, of course, we may simply ignore or suppress our own critical misgivings in the interests of politeness or professional advancement). Indeed, it is this fact, namely that ordinary, everyday communication already involves the critique of communication that is the starting point for this paper and will also be the main piece of evidence for the prosecution case against CDA.

The obvious starting point for the defence might well be Fairclough's claim that his version of CDA does not assume the existence of some autonomous linguistic system but is, rather, 'based upon a view of semiosis as an irreducible part of material social processes' with language as 'an integral element' of such processes (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 122). But the claim is belied by CDA's uncritical commitment to and application of the unambiguously segregational framework of analysis of lexical and grammatical properties of sentences and texts based on 'systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994)' (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 130–1) and by its drawing on the familiar linguistic notions of 'genres, discourses, and styles' (2001b, p. 128).[2]

I shall begin in Section 1 by outlining my case in what might seem to be a perversely untheoretical way. Rather than making a direct assault on the linguistic concepts underlying CDA, I will attempt to engage the reader in thinking about what all of us are actually doing when we are reacting to communications from various sources. In the process, I hope it will become clear that this critical activity is motivated, generated and performed in ways and by means that are simply beyond the purview of linguistic discourse analysis, 'critical' or otherwise. Like all conscious human behaviour, this everyday critical communicative activity is an unalloyed display of the full gamut of human vices and virtues; it is beset by the unavoidable constraints, niceties and necessities of circumstances as well as by the strengths, weaknesses, predilections, motivations, eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of particular relationships and personalities.

Section 2 turns its sights directly onto the perspective on language and communication offered by Fairclough's CDA. It attempts to demonstrate that the linguistic methods advocated by CDA in the critique of ideology are distinctly unreliable, and necessarily so. But it also argues, more fundamentally, that CDA's need to make the 'segregational' constructs of linguistics appear to be socially relevant comes at the cost of producing a confused and distorted picture of social activity more generally.

2. The critique of communication: communication as critique

2.1. Introduction

In everyday life we are continually both reacting critically to messages of all kinds from an unpredictable number of different sources and taking critical flak from others in response to our own:

- to the teenager's (too) polite request to borrow the car I reply that nothing has been said about the cost of petrol,
- to a friend's bright idea of taking a short cut through the back streets I point out that today is match day (implying that we'll get snared up in match traffic if we go that way),
- the shopping list left for me does not include beer so I add it to the list,

[2] Fairclough has occasionally expressed reservations about the linguistic frameworks on offer to the critical linguist for their failure to adequately conceptualise the links between discourse and social context. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 143), for example, argue that 'we have to be prepared to radically question the linguistic theories currently available' although they make an exception for Hallidayan systemic-functional linguistics ('SFL') which, they argue, has engaged in such a radical questioning itself. CDA also draws on Conversation Analysis , for a critique of which see Taylor and Cameron (1987).

- to my plan to put up a fence in the garden the neighbours come back with the objection that it will block their view of open countryside.

Our critical rejoinders may receive just as critical a response in return:

- the teenager may point out that I never repaid a previous debt so we'll be quits,
- the friend looks in his diary and informs me that I was wrong about the date of the match,
- when I get home with the shopping I'm told that there is already plenty of beer in the fridge and have to apologize,
- I go over my calculations on the fence again and try to persuade the neighbours that their objection was unfounded.

Sometimes, too, we can sense in advance that our proposals may be stupid or dangerous and have the good sense to solicit informed reaction before we go public with them or act on them. So, as a novice climber, I would be well advised to consult a seasoned mountaineer over my plans for an assault on Mont Blanc before I book the trip and hire all the gear and, more to the point, actually risk my neck on the face.

Furthermore, this constant critical give-and-take need not be prompted, responded to, or settled by words alone, or even by words at all:

- my query about the petrol may be elicited by the jangle of car keys in the hall or by my discovery that the car has been taken without my permission,
- as I'm unpacking the shopping I kick myself when I see that there's beer in the fridge already,
- I may just start digging a hole for the fence posts and leave the neighbours to react as they will,
- the mountaineer may respond just as witheringly to my proposed endeavour on seeing the gear that I've already bought, or might just take one look at my poor physical shape and warn me off altogether.

Such episodes, though mundane, are actually very instructive if we want to think about the business of critical response from the perspective of 'the language-user' (Harris, 1981) or 'language-maker' (Harris, 1980). The main lesson, for my purposes here, is that we have all been busily criticising (publicly or privately) everybody else's words and deeds quite happily from as long as we can remember without any help from the descriptive linguist or critical discourse analyst. And there's the rub: given that all of these carpings, counterings and contradictings require us not only to communicate linguistically, if only with ourselves, but to consciously work on and reflect on our communicative efforts, then why do we make no call on the linguist's services? Particularly as we are so willing to appeal to other experts when problems to do with communication come up: to the solicitor to interpret or draw up a contract, to the mediator to help us resolve a dispute over child custody, to the IT specialist to help us get the hang of a new e-mail system, to the financial advisor to point out the drawbacks of a cash-back mortgage deal, or to the expert climber to help us draw up a feasible expedition plan. Let us, then, consider more carefully what we can learn about being critical from everyday, and some not so everyday, communicational encounters.

2.2. Critical response as engagement[3]

The utterances exchanged during the daily cut-and-thrust are conscious acts of *engagement between particular individuals*, with all that implies for the relationships (personal, professional, political, etc.) between these individuals in view of who they are, deploying whatever intellectual, practical, emotional, and communicative aptitudes and skills they may have and whatever means or resources – material, moral or legal – they can muster in the circumstances, given their goals, interests, constraints and compulsions. And engagements are always *engagements over some matter* such as who is responsible for petrol costs or what route to take, or even why we are arguing about something in the first place, or about some combination of all of the above at the same time. In fact, given that we are dealing with the conscious behaviour of particular individuals, anything at all could be dragged into the argument. But in general terms, then, *it is their being the means by which particular engagements over particular matters are begun and conducted which makes communicative acts criticisable at all in the eyes of the parties involved and which offers immediate and specific grounds for their critical ripostes*:

- the teenager's request to borrow the car without offering to pay for petrol re-ignites a well-worn and constantly simmering conflict between us over financial responsibilities and gives me grounds for concluding that a fast one is being pulled,
- my friend's short-cut suggestion may be offered in a helpful spirit but, from where I'm sitting, will actually end in frustration and loss of time,
- the incomplete shopping list means no beer next week and implies that, as usual, nobody is taking my needs into account.

2.3. Critical response and responsibility

Words do not produce or interpret themselves; people, engaged over some matter, are responsible for that, and, under certain circumstances, answerable too. What is said and how it is taken are facts about the conscious conduct of particular individuals within particular engagements. If a child responds with a furious tantrum to a critical word from mum but then takes (as it seems to mum) 'the same thing' quietly and calmly from dad, this may mean that, if only in the child's eyes, there are different matters at stake in the conduct of the different parents towards her. *What 'the same thing' is in communicative terms is something that only the parties to the engagement can determine*, since it is *their* behaviour – the behaviour of particular personalities towards one another – that *is* communication.[4]

The point is valid for all communicative acts and processes. So, although we often talk about 'giving answers to questions' as if words, rather than people, were calling and responding to one another, we know that, no matter how routine the practices of interrogation may

[3] Like Widdowson (1998) I have found the term 'engagement' to be a useful one, although I do not follow his usage.

[4] Similarly, Mills (2003, p. 245) argues that 'only the participants in the interaction can really know whether they consider something polite or not'. However, she does not go on to draw the inevitable conclusion that such a position effectively torpedoes the entire field of so-called 'linguistic politeness' research (Brown and Levinson, 1987) which rests on the assumption that politeness ('negative' or 'positive') is an attribute of decontextualised utterance types or forms and that the 'politeness strategies' at work in communicative engagements can be detected, identified and classified by the analyst independently of what the actual participants make of what is going on. Cf. Taylor (1997, p. 116).

become, as in the classroom or courtroom, questions do not ask themselves and cannot bring forth answers. Asking and answering questions are human behaviours as diverse in execution, motivation, means and opportunity, as complex in their multi-dimensionality, as unpredictable and as ethically nuanced as any other. And that is why there is no method of linguistic analysis in the world that can tell us whether we should take a particular utterance as a question, what the question is about, what the answer might be, or whether and how we should answer it at all. For example, when I explain my fence plan to the neighbours they say: 'So this thing's going up pretty quickly then'. Taking this as a fairly casual comment, I might reply: 'That's right, well no sense in hanging on till the bad weather gets here'. But I realize my mistake when they come back: 'No, we were actually *asking*. When exactly is the work going to start and how long will it take?' Getting the point, I answer: 'OK, sorry, it's going to start on the 25th of this month and last for about a week'. At which point the conversation ends and the neighbours, stony-faced, retire. Now, if in fact it turns out that the work starts on the 27th and lasts for 9 days, have they got grounds to argue that I answered their question unsatisfactorily?

Similarly, when we rightly condemn and resist racist abuse we are responding to communicative behaviour and not words as the dictionary or linguist would see them; people can be racist, words cannot. We may well claim that in the mouths of racists words become racist language but we would thereby concede the point that 'the word' and 'the mouth' are not so easily separable from a practical communicative point of view. In different mouths, in different circumstances, the 'same' words may be taken to mean different things, although whose mouths and what circumstances are tricky matters to gauge, and ones which are certainly beyond the powers of conventional linguistic description to resolve. For example, a dispute arose between the film directors Quentin Tarantino and Spike Lee over the former's use of the word 'nigger' in his film *Jackie Brown*:

> 'The word "nigger" is used 38 times in Quentin Tarantino's "Jackie Brown," says Spike Lee – and he doesn't like it. And neither do I.'[5]

Although Tarantino had placed the word in the mouths of his black characters, Lee was uncomfortable with this practice by a white director. However, Lee was not accusing Tarantino of racism and his objection to the word was not absolute or unqualified:

> 'I'm not against the word, (though I am) and I use it, but not excessively. And some people speak that way. But, Quentin is infatuated with that word. What does he want to be made – an honorary black man?'

We must be careful to ensure, then, that the communicative buck, and with it the responsibility for objectionable or abhorrent behaviour, is not allowed to pass from the people engaged in particular forms of communicative conduct to abstracted and decontextualised aspects of this conduct.

2.4. Critical response as moral conduct

The third lesson, following directly from the second, is that to engage communicatively with someone is a form of conduct towards them, a way of treating them, and is, therefore,

[5] The passages cited are taken from Army Archerd's column on the following website: http://www.daveyd.com/spikepolitics.html

as is any form of human behaviour, an irreducibly *moral* act in the broad sense of the word, whether this is to do with the personal morality of rights and responsibilities between family members, the local politics of neighbour disputes, the ethics of institutional conduct and discipline, or the macro politics of national governments.[6] Consequently, communicative practices are as vulnerable to ethical scrutiny as any other human practice. If my response to the teenager over petrol costs was, for me, a matter of financial self-defence, to the teenager it was unfair and a sign of lack of trust. If I stand idly by while some drunken passenger is abusing my friend on the tram, my cowardly silence might spell the end of the friendship.

As with any form of behaviour, our critical appraisals of and reactions to communicative practices spring from our sense of the personal, institutional, or political rights and wrongs of particular engagements and our feelings about how such engagements should be conducted. That is why we can also, at least in principle, be held to account for the treatment we are dishing out when we speak up or remain silent, when we interpret or misinterpret what others say, when we ask questions and give answers, when we make requests or give orders, and when we comply or defy. But it is precisely such human judgements which 'segregational' (Harris, 1996) linguistic theory, confined to a mythical realm of relations between abstract verbal entities as opposed to real relations between people, can neither understand nor inform.

In somewhat closer connection to the topic of this paper, it is incontestable that communicative practices are in general (and, incidentally, always have been, as far as we know) as much a part of the exercise and establishment of power and authority as any other kind of practice. But then this simply means that we need to approach the business of interpreting and responding to such communicative engagements in the same way, with the same caution and care for the relevant facts of context and history, that we would approach the business of interpreting and responding to any conflict or dispute, including military engagements. Power, as they say, comes from the barrel of a gun, but since guns rarely go off by themselves then analysing the gun barrel or the firing mechanism is not going to help us decide how to interpret and respond to a particular use of, or threat of, armed force. Nothing less than a concrete analysis *of the entire engagement*, in whatever we take to be the relevant historical, political, economic, etc. terms, will do. We would certainly need to know what the conflict is about and whose power and whose interests are at stake, but we would also need to decide whether that power is legitimate, whether resort to arms is justified or condonable in the circumstances, and, therefore, whose side we should be on and what possible or reasonable forms of defence or retaliation we could recommend or participate in. The terms on which we come to a judgement or decision on these issues cannot be reduced to any kind of taxonomic or bean counting exercise. A tally of the number of dead and injured on each side will not settle the nature or justice of the conflict for us. Even knowledge of which party or parties fired the first shot cannot lead directly to a decision about whether their conduct was an unprovoked act of aggression or a legitimate act of self-defence. And we must also accept that all such decisions are fallible and ultimately revisable in the light of what may only be known or understood later on.

[6] Cf. Toolan (1996, p. 178) 'Moral judgement is directly involved in language use'. Also Taylor (1997, pp. 12–13) 'It is a moral and political matter – albeit with a small "p" – which linguistic phenomena are acceptable and which are not, which are "how we say it" and which are not, and how various linguistic phenomena should be performed, responded to, evaluated, and characterized'.

Our judgements about and critical responses to communicative acts, however justified we may feel in those judgements, are just as fallible and are made on terms which are just as un-formalisable and un-operationalisable. The interest amongst discourse analysts in conversational interruptions (cf. Mills, 2003, p. 169) gives us a case in point. Nobody is going to deny, for instance, that people interrupt one another in conversation and that, in certain circumstances, this can be about pulling rank or asserting some power or prerogative that the interrupters have, think they have, or think they deserve to have. But it is also true that such phenomena escape satisfactory description or accounting in terms of conventional linguistic methodology since what people take as an interruption, and whether the interruption is perceived as aggressive or supportive are complex issues of contextualised communicational ethics and not about matching up particular observable features of utterances with a pre-conceived functional classification (cf. Taylor, 1997, p. 116).

Furthermore, the contribution of particular communicative practices to the exercise of power and authority must not be oversimplified, something which can happen when we proceed on the assumption that there is a direct correlation between particular linguistic constructions and relations of power, and where power itself is seen so abstractly, so hazily, that questions are taken to have intrinsic, power-oriented semantic content.[7]

Furthermore, since the efficient exercise of power assumes and involves a manifest reciprocal act of obeisance, such as carrying out the order of a superior officer, this means that to comply with an order is just as complex and ethically problematic a social act as to issue one and that acts of compliance, even those which are commonplace, regular and routine, do not speak for themselves but require interpretation. If pupils give polite and prompt answers to the teacher's questions in class, for example, what are we to make of such apparently compliant behaviour? We could say that the pupils are well trained in playing the communicative game by the teacher's rules and that, in so doing, they bolster the rules, maintain the game, and, as a consequence, help to reproduce the teacher's authority over them. We might be tempted to see them, then, as 'dupes' of power, as accomplices in their own dis-empowerment. But if you asked a child why they behaved so politely in class, they might well say: 'Well, what do you want me to do? If I'm rude to the teacher I'll get told off or get detention or worse. So what's the point? In any case we don't choose to go to school, you parents make us go'. In other words, from this point of view the pupil's act of communicative compliance in class is no different from a billion other daily acts of compliance and conformity such as turning up to school on time, going into work, showing a passport, paying the TV licence, or shooting somebody on the order of a superior officer, all of which, being deliberate acts of will, can never be explained in terms of 'rules', 'structures' or 'patterns' since they involve deciding, judging or sensing the consequences or penalties, however personal or petty, for non-compliance as well as the pleasures or advantages of compliance itself.

Consequently, no observation, description or 'analysis' ('qualitative' or 'quantitative') of 'normal' compliant behaviour will allow us to predict with any certainty, let alone to account for, what people may go on to do in what seems like the same situation. Compliance, after all, also has its limits, although what those limits might be for different people

[7] As, for example, in Hodge and Kress (1983, pp. 95–96) 'Take as an example an interrogative used as a command: Can you get the meal ready? The surface form classifies the speaker as (− knowledge). In some situations (− knowledge) implies (− power), so that the asker of a question may be classifying himself as (− power). But a question requires an answer, so the questioner is also controlling the behaviour of the hearer. In this respect the questioner's classification is (+ power).'

and groups cannot be determined in advance. Indeed, it can come as a complete surprise or shock when particular individuals reach their breaking point. One recent example involves an email communication, an extract of which follows:[8]

> '**From**: FRANK KOZA, Def Chief of Staff (Regional Targets)
> CIV/NSA
> **Sent on Jan 31 2003 0:16**
> **Subject**: Reflections of Iraq Debate/Votes at UN-RT Actions + Potential for Related Contributions
> **Importance**: HIGH
> Top Secret//COMINT//X1
> All,
> As you've likely heard by now, the Agency is mounting a surge particularly directed at the UN Security Council (UNSC) members (minus US and GBR of course) for insights as to how to membership is reacting to the on-going debate RE: Iraq, plans to vote on any related resolutions, what related policies/ negotiating positions they may be considering, alliances/ dependencies, etc. – the whole gamut of information that could give US policymakers an edge in obtaining results favorable to US goals or to head off surprises.'

One of the recipients of this 'top secret' email was a GCHQ employee, Katherine Gunn. Although it was her job to provide information to the British security services, Gunn reacted with a sense of outrage to what she took to be a request to participate in illegal spying activity ('mounting a surge') on UN diplomatic personnel in the interests of US and British war aims over Iraq. Her 'critique' of the email discourse took the form of an illegal act on her own part: she made the email available to journalists, a violation of the Official Secrets Act. Gunn hoped, by exposing the covert actions of US intelligence agencies, to derail the US/UK preparations for invasion. She failed in this, although she caused serious political difficulties for the American and British governments. Gunn herself was arrested and charged but the case, apparently cut and dried, was later dropped by the prosecution after Iraq had been invaded, awarding a spectacular victory to Gunn and the anti-war movement and giving rise to speculation that the British government had less than complete confidence in the legality of its own actions.

2.5. Critical response as 'indispensable ingredient of all concerted human action'

The fourth lesson is that all human engagements are conducted through a complex simultaneous and sequential interweaving of words and all kinds of deeds, whether intellectual or practical. Any words we say or write, or any designs or sketches (as in the fence building example) we produce, cannot in principle, then, be hermetically sealed off, either in their creation or their interpretation, from any other part or aspect of the engagement, including, of course, from the so-called 'non-verbal' aspects of communication. Partly this has to do with the 'substitutivity' and 'co-temporality' (Harris, 1981, pp. 161–162) of verbal and non-verbal acts with respect to the pursuit of particular goals. If you ask me how high my new fence is going to be I could either say 'seven foot' or gesture with my hand in the air. But some goals ultimately require a practical resolution. If you ask me for a beer,

[8] The text of the email can be found at http://observer.guardian.co.uk/iraq/story/0,12239,905954,00.html.

the response 'bitter alcoholic drink' is going to leave your thirst unslaked. Nevertheless, even the most practical matters require in our conduct a creative, synergistic 'combination' of words and non-verbal phenomena of all kinds.

Malinowski's (1935) celebrated account, language is 'an indispensable ingredient of all concerted action' (1935, p. 7). Words 'are part of action and they are equivalents to action' (1935, p. 9) in his view since they 'connect work and correlate manual and bodily movements' (1935, p. 9). Whatever the limitations of his account overall, these observations have the great merit of emphasising that words and deeds are of the same social substance and of reminding us that the communicative practices of fashioning and interpreting utterances must be seen and understood in their place within the overall conduct – the 'concerted action' – of parties to an engagement. Language-users generally have no choice but to try to work out what the words are and what they mean from their contribution to the chain of action and behaviour being created in and through the conscious engagement of participants, that is from the concrete ways in which words combine with, connect to, and translate into the other links (real or imaginary) making up the chain. When my friend urges me to take a short cut down a back street, I take his utterance as a contribution to the business of driving home and evaluate and respond to it in this light. On a different note, if the neighbours lodge a polite, but firmly argued protest over my fence plan and then, the next morning, find that a deep trench has appeared on the edge of their property, this will be a pretty good indication to them that civilised discourse is not going to be a very important link in the fence-building chain of behaviour.

This combining and inter-linking of words and deeds follows from the fact that the interests or positions of the engaged parties over the matters at stake may, in principle, be furthered or thwarted, won or lost, on different fronts (intellectual, moral, emotional, practical, etc.) and by different means (persuasion, threat, force, etc.) simultaneously and/or sequentially. In practice, the proportions and manner in which the parties will endeavour to coordinate and integrate these means into a mode of conduct for a particular engagement will be an issue for tactical and strategic judgement, or personal taste, in the light of what is at stake. If the neighbours think me honest and likeable they may offer constructive criticism of my rather sketchy plans for the fence and even offer to help with some of the digging. On the other hand, if they consider me an arrogant and selfish so-and-so they may well be obstructive even if my plan is a faultless masterpiece. If a child is refusing to get into the car we might try a cuddle and soothing words but if we are pressed for time and at the end of our tether we might just bundle the child in and pay the price of a screaming fit en route. Words may not speak quite so loudly as deeds but at least they are speaking the same language.

As even such trivial examples show, then, real engagements have a fluidity and plasticity to them which makes each engagement a unique challenge to our critical faculties and communicative skills, something which rules out the possibility of finding or reliably imposing fixed correlations between bits of observable behaviour, communicative or otherwise, and particular meanings or social functions. On the contrary, any bit of behaviour of whatever kind on our part will be taken and understood by others only in its unique, circumstantially combined links with whatever else is going on that they happen to notice, know about, or care about. This is also another reason for being cautious in attributing power, or any other property, to words in themselves. If somebody is going to steal my cash on the street then they had better come up with some seriously threatening words and demeanour. But if they are pointing a gun at me they can go as easy as they like on the verbals given that any issue about who is the boss has been settled at the start.

This last scenario raises a further point. Let us imagine that a passer-by overheard the following bit of conversation between me and the robber without seeing what was going on:

'Could I possibly trouble you for a spot of small change?'
'Ugly bastard, I hope you rot in hell'.

The passer-by might think that I am refusing, in gratuitously offensive fashion, a polite request from someone begging on the street, whereas I am actually giving impotent vent to my feelings as I hand over my wallet. The request, with all its 'negative politeness' accoutrements (Brown and Levinson, 1987), is really the sound of an armed robbery in progress. As is well known (e.g. Levinson, 1992), abstracting aspects of communicative conduct from the context of the relevant engagement deprives us of any way of knowing what the utterance is about, what its function is, or even what counts as an utterance in the first place; to understand, indeed to identify, the link requires dealing with the chain.

However, although communication is a business we engage in consciously, this does not mean that it is always clear to us what kind of links in what kinds of chain our communicative acts are creating or contributing to:

- one further clash over paying for petrol could make the teenager decide to leave home,
- my attempt to save *me* time by taking the backstreets will inconvenience the local residents,
- my innocent-sounding question to the neighbours about whether they are going away for the weekend will seem a lot less innocent to them when they get back home after their break to the fait accompli of a brand new fence.

By the same token, what the immediate participants to the drama do and say, even in furtherance of what they consider to be purely private interests, will, sooner or later, run up against other engagements already joined at family, local, national or even international level and either get caught up in their powerful undertow or founder on social realities beyond their control and influence. My argument with the neighbours, for example, may feed into or re-ignite a wider dispute in the neighbourhood over the noise and disruption caused by continuous building work or be rendered irrelevant by new legislation about planning permission.

On a less trivial scale, in the political sphere, as we all know only too well, the words of ministers and officials on a particular matter often have a tenuous relationship, to say the least, to what is actually going on and are carefully crafted to obfuscate, camouflage or 'spin' the related actions and facts or even to help cover them up altogether. Understanding how governments conduct themselves towards us and developing effective critical responses requires a lot of dedicated detective work over a long time.

A real life case in point was that of the 'Skye Bridge mystery', as recounted by George Monbiot (2001). The bone of contention here was an all too palpable object, namely the Skye Bridge, completed in 1995 as a road link between the Isle of Skye and mainland Scotland. In this case the people of Skye had to dig very deep to understand and expose the doings of successive British governments (Conservative followed by Labour). The whole affair started when the islanders, partly in response to an unsatisfactory ferry service, lobbied for the construction of a road bridge. The Scottish Office acceded to the request but declared that, as they had no money, the bridge would be built by a private company (under the 'Private Finance Initiative') and the company would charge a toll to recoup their invest-

ment. The islanders were distrustful but 'the government assured them the bridge would offer excellent value, and the islanders would be able to take pride in participating in an original and exciting new venture' (Monbiot, 2001, p. 20–1), and so they decided to take the government at its word. However, things did not turn out quite as they expected:

> 'In the week the bridge opened, the government-run ferry service across the kyle was stopped: thenceforward the only efficient means of getting to Skye was the bridge. This might have been uncontroversial, had the toll the private companies levied not been the highest, per metre of road, in the world' (2001, p. 21).

Outraged at this outcome, the islanders launched a many-pronged critical counter-offensive – political, intellectual, legal, and practical – on the bridge itself and on those who planned it, built it, financed it, owned it, ran it, defended it, justified it and (in the case of the Labour government) used it as a pilot for wider implementation of the Private Finance Initiative. At the heart of the islanders' campaign was their own investigation into the politico-financial genesis and evolution of the whole bridge project. By a variety of imaginative means, they managed to get their hands on relevant documentary evidence, much of it confidential, from which they were able to establish the central facts of the case: the amounts of public money that had gone into a 'private' project, the secret deals, the contracts of dubious legality, and the political fixes, all of which lay hidden behind the spin and PR surrounding the bridge. 'The story they uncovered', as Monbiot puts it, 'is one of the murkiest and most disturbing tales of official collusion, mendacity and incompetence ever disclosed in Britain' (2001, p. 21) and a striking demonstration of the political priorities of New Labour. At the same time, the islanders' acts of protest and civil disobedience delayed or disrupted the plans of the corporate and political actors, attracting media attention to the campaign and provoking the authorities to behave in ways that revealed more of their hand than they would have wished and which discredited their political agenda, allowing the people of Skye to pile the pressure on still further. An exceptional case, perhaps, but one which nicely illustrates the mixture of insight, inference, knowledge, experience, and dogged detective work that is always involved, to some extent, in any communicative engagement.

2.6. Critical response and reflexivity

The fifth lesson is that critical responses to what people say and write are, by definition, *reflexive* acts (Taylor, 1997) in which we communicate about communication itself. To critically respond to what somebody says is to take a position on what they say – to agree or disagree, to support or object, to appreciate or take offence. Spike Lee, we have seen, was explicitly contesting Tarantino's use of the 'n-word'. But any aspect or feature of the communicative act can be named and shamed. If the shopping list left for me says 'beer?', I ask myself: 'Why the question mark? Does it mean: "Check in the fridge to see if you need beer", or "Do you want to get beer on this trip or leave it till tomorrow?", or "Are you really sure you should be drinking this much beer? Why not go without next week?"' In many cases, too, the rules of communicative conduct themselves are explicitly articulated as the reason or pretext for the critical response: 'That's no way to talk to grandma'; 'Your bibliography is not organised according to the Harvard system'; 'Don't shout out, put your hand up'.

However, the most important thing for our purposes is what this reflexivity reveals about the critical process itself. We can see this most clearly in the meta-linguistic quality labels

that we attach to others' communications to show what we are objecting to and why:

- to me, the teenager's behaviour in requesting to borrow the car is 'devious' because it will end up with me out of pocket;
- my friend's short-cut suggestion is 'well intentioned' but 'mistaken' because he has got his facts wrong;
- to the mountaineer, my expedition plan is 'barmy' and 'suicidal' because I don't have a clue about climbing.

When we apply these and thousands of other labels – such as (expletives deleted) 'good, bad, incorrect, right, unfair inappropriate, thoughtless, effective, tricky, frank, secretive, and so on' (Taylor, 1997, p. 117) – we are responding to and commenting on what we see, in context, as *the value of a particular instance of communicative behaviour as a contribution to the relevant engagement*, as *a particular kind of integrated link in whatever chain or chains of action we take it to be involved in*. If we do not know, cannot tell or do not care whether a particular claim is true or false, exaggerated or underplayed, incisive or irrelevant, etc. then we simply have no argument with it at all apart from the fact that it is breaking a peaceful silence. Furthermore, these value judgements are, with varying degrees of implicitness, bound up with verdicts on the character, morals and motives of our interlocutors and adversaries (Taylor, 1997, p. 117). If you call a statement of mine a lie, for example, you are calling me a liar, something I may object to whatever the facts of the case turn out to be. The issue, of course, is not whether we are right or wrong in our challenges over the truthfulness, morality, or appropriateness of communicative acts but simply that *to critically respond is necessarily to make a reflexive value judgement of this kind and in these terms*. And since conventional linguistic description ends well before the point at which such judgements begin then the critiquing business is strictly beyond its purview and outside its competence.

2.7. Critique as intellectual engagement

The sixth lesson is that all acts of engagement invite us to exercise our intellectual faculties. To express an opinion on what somebody says obviously means having an opinion in the first place or thinking one up off the cuff. To hit the right note – to be clear and firm but not patronizing or rude – when we respond to a suggestion, proposal or complaint requires a highly developed practical communicative intelligence. Even drawing up a shopping list involves making decisions over practical matters ('Shall we take the car or get them to deliver?') or negotiating ethical dilemmas ('Are we still boycotting Nestlé products?'). On a less mundane scale, considerable intellectual work was required of the Skye Bridge campaigners in order to uncover and analyse the murky and tangled goings-on and to reveal the sleazy logic of the covert chains of political action leading to the bridge.

Our engagements, then, in all their unpredictable twists and turns, necessarily exhibit a kind of logic, a degree of coherence, due to their being over some specific *matter or matters*: getting a fence built is a different kettle of fish from doing the shopping, climbing a mountain, extracting exorbitant tolls from a small island community, or secretly organising a war. Indeed, it is the fact that there is some logic to our engagements that makes it possible, and often necessary, to *think* at all since in *enquiring into* the relevant facts and events and in *thinking through* their causes, reasons, meanings and implications we can create an oppor-

tunity, if the flesh is strong and the spirit willing, to act strategically in furtherance of our interests and alter the course of events in our favour. Thus, the process of informed critical interrogation and analysis of the specific logic of the particular matter, whether in our own heads or in some committee, may form a distinctive link or system of links within the chain of concerted action constituting an engagement.

Let us consider some aspects of this critical intellectual process a little more carefully. Let us say that I decide to commit myself to an assault on Mont Blanc. I do a bit of homework on what such a climb will involve and jot down a rough plan for an expedition which I show to my friendly expert mountaineer. My first problem is to get him to take the proposal seriously at all, given that I've never done any climbing in my life. But finally, grudgingly, he takes a look.[9]

Things get off to a rocky start when he pounces on the first sentence:

> '"Mont Blanc is in the 4000–5000 metre range". You mean you don't even know how high the summit is?'

He continues:

> 'Mont Blanc is actually 4807 metres high. You've got to be spot on about the basic facts before you can start planning anything seriously. And you can't take the altitude lightly because you can get altitude sickness even at 3500 metres and, believe me, it's not pleasant'.

He skips to the description of the route and immediately finds fault:

> 'You're planning to stop at the Aiguille du Midi camp site but you can't. It's not legal to stop there any more, for "ecological reasons" so the authorities tell us. So you'll have to use the Cosmiques hut. It's actually owned by the Guiding Company and is bloody expensive. Plus, they make you have a meal there, which isn't legal under French law but the French police won't intervene'.

Then he picks up on a more fundamental issue to do with climbing practices:

> 'It says here "Aiming to tackle the Brenva Spur route (crampons, ice axe) in the afternoon and bivouac at Col du Midi". This is no good. For this route, in this season you need to have an Alpine start'.

On seeing my puzzled expression he wearily elaborates: 'An alpine start is where you hit a suitable gîte in the evening and then get a very early start in the morning so you can do the main climb before the day warms up. Crampons don't work well on steep warm snow so you're likely to slip, and I mean to your death'.

As well as generally mauling my route planning and knowledge of practical climbing techniques, the expert cuts through the clumsy and embarrassing coda I have stupidly attached:

> '"I want my memories of my first ever climbing expedition to be as monumental as the mountain I'm going to climb". Ha ha. Let's just make sure your first is not your last. Did you know that 37 people were killed on the slopes last year?'

---

[9] The information on Mont Blanc is cobbled together from information presented on the following website: http://www.terragalleria.com/mountain/info/chamonix/chamonix-info.html#3. My special thanks to my climbing colleague, Simeon Yates, for help and advice with this section.

Finally, my friend delivers his verdict:

> 'This is a complete non-starter. I can see you're enthusiastic but you obviously haven't got a clue what it's all about. Look, I beg you as a friend to get in touch with the professional guides (I'll give you some names and numbers) and get them to plan a do-able little climb for you. Stress you're a complete novice'.

In critiquing my plan, the expert is engaged in a creative act of *thinking*. That is, drawing on his knowledge of and experienced feel for all aspects of climbing, he interrogates the text I have given him, conjuring up a rigorous analysis and critique of the concrete sequence of specific activities and actions implied, in his view, by the words. For the expert, to treat the text seriously as a *plan of action* means to treat with the *action planned* in all its technical, financial, legal, ethical, and communicative dimensions. Thus, the analytical elements and ingredients of the expert's critical appraisal of the *planning discourse* include all the relevant facts, factors and principles of the *planned action* – the temperature, the weather conditions, the altitude, the duration of the climb, the degree of difficulty of the slopes, the skills of the climbers, the number of people roped together, the cost of equipment and facilities, not to mention the gumption of the planner himself.

This might be a suitable opportunity to compare the expert climber's approach to the text with that of an expert in descriptive or theoretical linguistics. It is a fair bet that no theoretical linguist has ever been asked for critical help, in his or her professional capacity, with planning a climb, but it is interesting to think about why. After all, Halliday, for example, describes his own brand of descriptive linguistics as 'the study of how language works' (2002, p. 16). But why is that you would go to a car mechanic to tell you what is wrong with your car but you would go to a mountaineer, and not a linguist, to tell you what is wrong with your expedition plan?

Let us imagine that I ask a Hallidayan linguist for advice on the plan. Our linguist replies, 'Sorry, that's mountaineering not linguistics; I can't help you'. I then goad her a little by saying, 'Well, this is language after all, and you're supposed to know about how language works, aren't you?' To which she might respond: 'Yes, I can certainly tell you something about mountaineering language – the 'discourse of mountaineering', if you will, although I can't tell you anything about mountaineering'. Intrigued by the distinction, I press a little harder: 'Well, I am actually asking you about mountaineering discourse, in this case a plan for a climb. So even if you can't tell me how to climb, surely you can tell me whether this works as mountaineering discourse?' She replies, a little impatiently: 'Look, planning a climb has to do with climbing not linguistics, OK? Yes, I could tell you things about the climbing discourse but nothing that would help you'. I decide to take up the offer and say: 'OK, what kind of thing can you tell me?' And the rest of the conversation goes something like this:

> 'I can tell what register your text belongs to, for example, by comparing it with other texts. The register has to do with the social function that the text has – what Halliday calls the "variety according to use" (Halliday, 2002, p. 17). So a typical mountaineering plan should differ linguistically from a typical sermon or news bulletin or legal contract. One parameter is the choice of words like "mountain", "rope", and so on. This choice of words tells you something about the meanings that the text encodes and these meanings will differ according to the kind of activity that the text relates to'.

> 'But would a "typical mountaineering plan" in register terms be the same as a good plan in climbing terms?'
>
> 'No, definitely not. You could show me what my analysis would identify as a typical climbing text but I would have no idea whether it was actually sound or completely bonkers'.
>
> 'OK. Give me another example of what you could say'.
>
> 'Well, we could look at cohesion, which is about how the text hangs together. One aspect of this is lexical collocation involving "pairs or sets of items that have a strong tendency in the system to co-occurrence" (Halliday, 2002, p. 42).[10] Examples would be sets of items like "rope" – "secure", "rope" – "50 m coil", "crampon" – "snow"'.
>
> 'But this sounds like it has something to do with the actual climbing activity. Couldn't we use these kinds of typical collocation to help us evaluate the plan?'
>
> 'No, not really. I might find that the word "crampon" regularly occurs in collocation with the word "snow" but I personally do not know exactly what crampons are or how or when to use them, so whether it would be advisable or even feasible to use them in the circumstances referred to or implied by the discourse is another question entirely'.

We seem to have got a definite answer to our question about the usefulness of linguistic expertise. From the linguist's point of view, the problem seems to be about a professional division of labour: the mountaineer is engaged with mountaineering and the linguist with words; while the mountaineer is dealing with the *action* of *crampons* on *snow*, the linguist is dealing with the *collocation* of the *words* 'crampons' and 'snow'.

So far, so clear. But this answer, which we knew already, itself begs quite a big question in turn. After all, the mountaineer, too, is engaged with words in this case; he is reading and commenting on a written document in the comfortable surroundings of a local pub, not hauling some novice up a rope in driving snow. The big question, then, is: what precisely is the difference between the mountaineer's 'analysis' of the discourse of the plan and that of the linguist?

We have seen that the register of a text is identified by comparing it with other texts and, as Halliday claims, 'it is impossible to compare one text with another *unless both have been described in the same way*' (2002, pp. 17–18, my emphasis). So the presence of phrases like 'coil of 50 m rope' and 'crampons on snow' in my text can be evidence for a register classification of this text if we can find the same or similar phrases in other texts. And this procedure rests on the assumption that the same or similar-looking phrases encode the same or similar meanings within the 'system of meanings' or 'semantic field' that is taken to correspond to (or constitute) the relevant activity (in this case, mountaineering). The seasoned climber, on the other hand, may baulk at a word or phrase in one plan ('That's the wrong rope for that job') while giving a thumbs-up when coming to what the linguist would describe as 'the same' word or phrase in a different plan or at a different point in the same plan.

This tells us that the process by which the mountaineer interprets words like 'rope' or phrases like 'coil of 50 m rope' in my plan does not involve the linguist's procedure but is just the process that we have already examined, namely *the process of critical intellectual engagement, informed by practice, knowledge and insight, with the action planned*. If he takes the phrase 'coil of 50 m rope' in my plan to mean the same as 'coil of 50 m rope'

[10] In fact, Halliday claims that cohesion, along with other phenomena making up the 'textual component' of the language system, has the specific function of 'making the difference between language in the abstract and language in use' (2002, p. 29).

in somebody else's plan, it is either because the precise kind and quantity of rope doesn't matter at this stage or because, when all the relevant circumstances are taken into account, the two climbs require the same kind and quantity of rope.[11]

On the one hand, then, the linguist's identification of a word 'rope' across different texts, and her description of its meaning and connections with other words, are achieved by procedures which are, in principle, indifferent to the problem of how to identify what kind of rope is meant, and how to choose the right kind of rope and use it appropriately in climbing. The climber's identification and interpretation of words, on the other hand, is achieved in tackling just this problem, by imagining and considering the interaction between bodies and materials in the climbing situation, thereby creating, in and through the words, a unique, task-specific system of concrete senses that could only be apprehended, critically evaluated and refuted in turn by an equally engaged and equally proficient intellectual act.

Similarly, for the linguist, it is the collocation, or regular text-internal co-occurrence, of words such as 'crampon' and 'snow' which produces 'a cohesive effect' (Halliday, 2002). But since this collocation is as much in evidence in a passage where 'the use of crampons on snow' is being advised as in one where 'the use of crampons on snow' is being warned against, this means that the collocation is identified in the absence of any understanding of the skilled action and is indifferent to the factual possibility, advisability or appropriateness in particular circumstances of any climbing action involving crampons and snow. The mountaineer, on the other hand, is considering things from the standpoint of the matter of the planned climb. His evaluation of the proposal to 'use crampons on snow' takes account of the effect of particular temperatures on the consistency and firmness of water crystal and the implications of this for the efficacy and load-bearing potential of metal spikes of a certain size and shape, factors and principles which could never be reached or discovered by a linguist looking at the distribution of words in texts although they are vital for any serious critical engagement with the discourse of the plan. The vague and tenuous connection between the words that is involved in the linguist's phenomenon of collocation, therefore, does not and could not afford any critical purchase on the relevant climbing action or its ingredients. Furthermore, since the climbing expert's concern is with the coherence and viability of *the action planned*, the written English words are only one source of information for his appraisal and are thoroughly 'permeable' at all points with respect to other relevant sources of information, such as passages in different languages, mathematical calculations, calendrical information, weather charts, drawings, photographs of the mountain, or even samples of material.

The linguist, then, restricts her analysis of discourse to procedures for identifying and classifying similar distributional patterns and relations of words between texts and is, therefore, consciously working with a conception of the text as something whose constitutive forms and meanings can be identified and accounted for independently of its relationship to the relevant practical field of action. The expert climber, on the other hand, is concerned with the text in its relation to the proposed climb, taking the words only as a link in the chain of the relevant action, and then only 'in combination' with his knowledge, skills, experience, and any other relevant facts or information, in order to arrive at a critical appraisal of the relevant matter in terms of its factual grounds, feasibility, assumptions, implications and likely consequences. As Harris (1981, p. 180–1) argues:

[11] Cf. Harris (1981, p. 55) 'the contextualisation provided by circumstances is what establishes the kind of determinacy required in language, and it is fruitless to expect or look for determinacy beyond that point'.

> 'Even the use of ordinary grading words, like *heavy*, *good*, *unusual*, typically involves a simultaneous assessment of facts and terminological appropriateness, correlated in such a way that when doubts arise it often makes little sense to ask whether they are factual doubts or linguistic doubts. They may in one sense be a mixture of both, but not necessarily a mixture that could even in principle by sorted out into two separate components'.

The linguist, however, claims to be able to tell us 'how the language works' in terms of the patterns and distribution of 'terminology' without the bother of trying to 'assess the facts' at all. The linguist is looking for systematicity and coherence in the plan of action when seen as 'language'; the climber is looking for systematicity and coherence in the language when seen as a plan of action.

When we look at the expert's analysis of the climbing discourse, we do not see, then, anything that corresponds to the 'analysis of discourse' in the linguist's sense. For the expert, there is simply no 'analysis of discourse' going on in addition to, prior to, as opposed to, or alongside the business of intelligently and responsibly (i.e. critically) evaluating and responding to the plan as a plan for a particular climb; there is no critical response to the plan *as language* which is not a response to it *as climbing*.[12] And conversely: the mountaineer's critical and reflexive demolition of my expedition plan is *not linguistics* (in the conventional sense) *but mountaineering*. The same point will, of course, apply to the business of critiquing communicative practices or discourse in any sphere of life:[13] a political tract invites political analysis and commentary, a proposed change to council house ownership invites criticism from experts in the political and social impact of public housing policy,[14] a theoretical account of the origins of galaxies invites critical scrutiny from those who understand the maths and physics behind the equations. This is not to say that people who are not recognised as 'experts' in the relevant fields have nothing useful or meaningful to say about these things. But it does mean that useful and informed critique presupposes some degree of knowledge of or insight into the relevant matter, some aptitude for the 'simultaneous assessment of facts and terminological appropriateness' that the case warrants. Most of us, however basic our maths and physics, could point out what is wrong with the proposition that the milky way started off as a giant spinning banana, whatever the complexity of the scientific arguments or equations used to support it. But this does not mean that our critique is 'linguistic' rather than 'scientific'; it simply means that we know enough about the relevant phenomena or principles to question the credibility of the proposal. Making sense of, not to mention evaluating, competing claims about the existence of gravitons would involve knowing a lot more.

2.8. *Critical response as skilled communicative practice*

The seventh and final lesson is that our critical duckings and divings require us to develop and exercise skills of a specifically communicative nature which we could even describe, albeit

[12] Of course, the climber may criticise the expedition plan, or may refuse to look at it at all, because the font is too small or because the text has got wet and smeared. But such communicatively significant aspects of the text no more lend themselves to 'critical discourse analysis' than what the text is proposing.

[13] I am grateful to my colleague Simeon Yates for suggesting that this point should be emphasised.

[14] See Collins and Jones (2006) on the 'socialist case for community ownership' of public housing in Glasgow in the 1980s.

loosely, as 'verbal skills'. Certainly, selling my fence plan to the neighbours is an art of a different kind from that of actually putting up the fence, which I intend to leave to the contractors. Similarly, offering constructive criticism of a mountaineering plan is not quite the same as making one's way up Mont Blanc in driving snow. But such cases also teach us that we must not theorise these special 'verbal skills' in such a way as to lose sight of their integration by particular individuals within the relevant chains of action and courses of events at particular times and places. The skilled acquisition and creative handling of the relevant 'terminology' involves, we should always remember, a 'simultaneous assessment of facts' in addition to all other moral, practical and social considerations. Consequently, placating the neighbours and deconstructing an expedition plan are just as different in terms of the communicative artistry called for as putting up a fence and climbing a mountain are in practical terms.

Furthermore, each new engagement also places fresh and unexpected demands on our critical faculties and, therefore, also on our communicational resources and skills. The tasks that face us in connection with a new building project, a new climb, or a new case are not at all some mere 'background' or 'context' against which we can roll out an established set of linguistic structures but are challenges to us as people, challenges to develop and adapt our overall conduct so as to exploit the possibilities and opportunities that the interactional dynamic of the particular engagement progressively opens up for us. In rising to this challenge, in designing (in advance or on the hoof) our communicative contributions to mesh with our actions and other relevant factors in these fresh circumstances, we break new communicative ground. And so, while we must make the most of our accumulated linguistic 'capital', the exercise of our communicative skills in any situation is, as Harris (1981, 1996) has stressed, an intelligent act of creative innovation rather than the mechanical application of rules or the selection amongst pre-given options in some 'language system'. Indeed, the 'language system' – the abstract network of forms and meanings that the linguist takes to be the precondition for all linguistic communication and of which concrete utterances are merely the instantiation – is, as Harris (1981, 1996, 2003, 2004) has relentlessly argued, a myth which prevents us from appreciating, not to mention celebrating, the constant creation of linguistic means in our everyday acts of communication.

Of course, such creative acts do not come from nowhere: however radical the *discontinuity* with past communicative experience they represent there are also *continuities* with previous practice since these acts are inevitably built on or prompted by acquired communicative know-how and habits gained in situations that are alike at least in some respects. Indeed, to fully appreciate the *novelty* – the uniqueness and originality – of a communicative contribution in any sphere we must understand what was said and done before.

Conventional 'segregational' linguistics, however, seals itself off from this generative process and the innovative qualities of its products. In the realm of abstraction, continuity not only prevails over discontinuity but completely effaces it; replication trumps novelty, and identity usurps originality. The discontinuities in communicative activity resulting from our (sometimes) inspired and (sometimes) imaginative invention of new communicative resources in new circumstances are either overlooked or simply assimilated to the already established and fixed inventories of form-meaning correspondences which are held to make up the 'language system' 'shared code', 'register', 'discourse type', 'genre', or whatever. But that also means that the creative, intelligent, critical, moral and contextually responsive conduct that we refer to as 'language', 'discourse' or 'verbal communication' remains forever beyond the reach of such constructs and beyond the horizons of those whose methods consist in establishing, describing and applying them.

All of which takes us back to the reasons why this kind of linguistics is of little practical help in our daily critical dealings. As all the examples and cases considered above suggest, our critical responses to communicative contributions are a means of engaging – intellectually, morally and practically – with particular people in particular circumstances over particular matters. Language, as it appears in conventional linguistic description, is simply not the communicative activity whose exercise and continuous development and innovation is integral to all our social endeavours. And that, in a nutshell, is the reason why there is not and could never be a 'critical discourse analysis' on segregational linguistic lines.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis: 'language myth' as social reality

3.1. Introduction

Norman Fairclough's brand of Critical Discourse Analysis is presented as 'a method which can be used in social scientific research' (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 121). What puts the 'C' in CDA is its explicit political agenda. CDA is 'engaged and committed' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). It 'intervenes on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups' and 'openly declares the emancipatory interests that motivate it' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 259). This intervention involves exposing what it sees as the ideological functions and effects that discourse has, notably in helping to 'produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 259).

The issue here is not with the aims themselves but, rather, whether the means which CDA has chosen are compatible with these aims. Putting it another way, can the CDA conception of 'discourse' actually be of any help to us in understanding and critiquing real-life communicative practices? For, true to its roots in the tradition of 'critical linguistics' (e.g., Fowler and Kress, 1979; Hodge and Kress, 1983), CDA attempts to press the methods of conventional linguistic description into critical service, something that would invalidate the whole project from the start if the arguments of the previous section had any weight.

Let us firstly examine the general role that CDA attributes to discourse in society today and then look at an example of CDA's critique of political discourse.

3.2. Discourse and social change in CDA

CDA justifies its existence as a novel social scientific research method by appeal to 'important shifts in the function of language in social life' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, ref).[15] In modern times, or 'late modernity', discourse has become 'perhaps the primary medium of social control and power' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 3) to such an extent that the social transformations now underway 'are to a significant degree (though certainly not exclusively) transformations in language and discourse' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 4).[16] It is this novel situation which opens up 'a space for critical analysis of discourse as a fundamental

[15] For the record, the grandiose claims CDA practitioners have made about the augmented or pre-eminent role of language in society have never been substantiated or even coherently explained (cf. Jones, 2004).

[16] Paradoxically, from my perspective, this view of the role of discourse in today's world is expressed most clearly and pithily by Michael Toolan, a notable contributor to integrationist linguistics (e.g., Toolan, 1996): 'Increasingly, discourse makes and sustains the worlds we live in', Toolan (1997, p. 83) argues. Hence: 'If [CDA] didn't exist we would have to invent it.'

element in the critical theorisation and analysis of late modernity' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 4). And since other social scientific theories 'are not specifically oriented to language' and 'do not properly fill that space', then this 'is where CDA has a contribution to make' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 4).

Thus, while we might traditionally take politics and government as political matters, as objects of political analysis (and political action), CDA approaches them 'as language' (Fairclough, 2000, p. 5), employing a toolkit of techniques borrowed from descriptive linguistics and pragmatics which can be packaged and presented 'as a resource for people who are struggling against domination and oppression in its linguistic forms' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1).

Now, this is quite a clever sales pitch and so we had better be on our guard for the predictable piece of sleight-of-hand. Discourse is a legitimate object of critical attention, whatever the value of CDA's vague pronouncements about 'shifts in the function of language', but the trick is to imply that this makes conventional linguistics into an appropriate and indispensable tool of critical analysis. Let us examine the arguments and their ramifications in a little more detail.

It has become one of the central tenets of CDA that discourse has acquired a 'constitutive' role with respect to social structures and processes (e.g., Fairclough, 1989, 2001a). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 4), for example, put it this way:

> 'It is an important characteristic of the economic, social and cultural changes of late modernity that they exist as *discourses* as well as processes that are taking place outside discourse, and that the processes that are taking place outside discourse are substantively shaped by these discourses'.

The authors expand on and illustrate their point by taking up an argument they are having with David Harvey to do with 'flexible accumulation':[17]

> '"flexible accumulation" as a new economic form has been "talked into being" in the substantial literature on the new capitalism – including the works of management "gurus" which fill the shelves of airport and railway bookshops internationally – as well as being put into practice through practical changes in organisations. Harvey (1990) disputes the claim that "flexibility" is just a discourse – and an ideology. But although, as he argues, flexibility is an organisational reality, and so the discourse of the new capitalism is in that sense extra-discursively grounded, nevertheless the discourse shapes and reshapes the organisational reality and is thus socially constitutive (as Harvey 1996 recognises)' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 4).

Now, what I take the authors to be saying here in their very obscure way amounts to the following:

(a) flexible accumulation is an organisational reality on the ground,
(b) it has come about through practical changes in organisations, and
(c) these changes have come about, at least partly, as a result of management gurus and other theorists latching on to the idea of flexible accumulation and pushing it at every opportunity in their published works.

[17] Chouliaraki and Fairclough do not trouble their readers with an explanation of what is meant by 'flexible accumulation'.

But if this reading is plausible, what is happening in 'late modernity' seems pretty unexceptional. A similar story could be told for any project (past, present or future) for which communication is integral to its planning, preparation, and execution, and this would include the garden fence project, the climbing expedition or even the weekly shopping trip. The authors have, admittedly, quite an original way of *talking about* the role of discourse in such cases. The idea that social changes '*exist* as discourses *as well as* processes that are taking place outside discourse' (my emphasis) seems to imply a rather peculiar and radical de-coupling of discourse from its relevant chains of action. It would certainly be very strange to talk about our more everyday activities in this way. When I am trundling round the supermarket with my list, for example, could I say that the shopping '*exists* as a discourse *as well as* the process of choosing and buying the goods I want'? Or could I say that the activity of building my fence '*exists* as a sketch *as well as* the real labour going on in the garden'? I don't think so. Once we translate their example into these mundane terms we see what is wrong with the general picture Fairclough and Chouliaraki offer. If the fence, for example, ever gets built, then it exists *once*, not *twice.* Now, of course, the original plans for the fence may still be around once the fence is completed. But the fence does not then exist as a fence *as well as* a plan.

On the other hand, it is true that we can attribute some kind of existence to the fence before the building work actually starts. We can say, for example that it exists 'on paper' or 'in my mind's eye'. I might even say, as Chouliaraki and Fairclough do about 'flexible accumulation', that I am 'talking it into being' in my obsessive sketching and charm offensive with the neighbours. Indeed, my neighbours may well see it this way as well and prefer to get their oar in during the preliminary negotiations so as to nip the project in the bud. Similarly, if somebody asked me what the fence was going to be like once the building work had actually started, I could show them the sketch and say (with fingers crossed) 'this is it'. However, this does not mean that the fence exists twice, or has two forms of existence, but simply that the work of building a fence is a complex process in which the plan – the sketch or verbal description – has its own special and necessary part to play. Moreover, as with the expedition plan discussed earlier, there is no way of getting a critical handle on the fence plan without taking it in relation to *what is planned in the relevant circumstances*, including the objects, processes and activities required to make that a reality. It is not easy to see how a critical approach to the discourse of 'flexible accumulation' or any other organisational innovation could be any different in this respect.

In that light, the authors' claim that the discourse of 'flexible accumulation' 'shapes and reshapes the organisational reality and is thus socially constitutive' is equally strange, particularly when pointedly counterposed (their 'nevertheless') to the concession that this discourse is 'extra-discursively grounded' (whatever they mean by that). Once again, in the absence of any additional explanation from the authors, let us go back to our fence.

Let us say that the detailed sketch I pass on to the builders represents exactly what I want. Nevertheless, as we are all aware, this sketch is very far from 'constituting' the real object out there. To start with, given my lack of ability in the fence-building department, the plan may not make any sense at all to anybody else, or may be hopelessly unrealistic on the most basic practical grounds. But even if the plan is judged workable, it will fail to 'constitute' anything other than an embarrassing bone of contention if the builders drop out or if I have to cancel the project for some other reason. Alternatively, the work may start according to plan but stop half way through due to a hidden design fault or any number of other problems. On the other hand, if money is no object, deadlines are flexible, and I can browbeat the neighbours into silent submission, I might succeed in the end in getting a perfect realisation

of my plan. But even in this last case it would be wrong to talk about the process of 'constituting' the fence as if it were an action, property or effect *of discourse* (the plan and/or all my associated propaganda) as opposed to a process of concerted action on the part of me and all the other people I have managed to bribe, persuade, or coerce into accepting and implementing the plan; the translation of the plan into reality is not a sign of the power of discourse to bring forth real things but of my power to get people to do what I ask.

The point is, then, that the process of bringing something into being, as in the implementation of a plan, is not a magical process in which discourses are formed and exist in some other-worldly domain and are endowed with a power to embody themselves in real things, but is a real work of real people engaged in a task. The communicative acts involved in planning something, or persuading people to carry out a plan, are simply an integral part of the whole chain of action and are, therefore, factually inseparable in their creation and interpretation and in their consequences and effects from all the other links which, jointly, in their combination, actually 'constitute' the relevant matter (or fail to do so, as the case may be). Communicative acts necessarily have this integrated, circumstantially specific character since their own role, in general terms, is that of integrating and coordinating the other relevant actions required to get the job done (Harris, 1996, 2004). This principle applies no matter how distant the phases of planning have become from the phases of implementation within the social division of labour (i.e. whatever the extent of 'displacement' of communicative processes, cf Harris, 1981).

Indeed, even the briefest examination of different kinds of activity in different social spheres, or even in a single sphere, shows that there is, in principle, no limit to the variability in relations between the phases and practices of inception and planning on the one hand and those of implementation on the other. The way in which the latest bit of fashionable management theory might (or might not) get 'constituted' in actual organisational changes in one case may be very different from the way it happens in others and very different from the way that a new law might get 'constituted' in the appropriate changes in personal or corporate behaviour, from the way a tram schedule is 'constituted' in actual departure and arrival times, from the way a shopping list is 'constituted' in the contents of a fridge, or from the way a climbing plan is 'constituted' in a successful assault on the summit of Mont Blanc. All in all, the fact that communicative acts are consciously integrated by particular individuals in circumstantially unique ways within particular social practices means that it is impossible to ascribe any general, invariable function, value or effects to these acts, contrary to CDA assumptions.

The corollary is that the soundness of our critical appraisal of a particular communicative act will depend on the soundness of our critical take on the engagement to which the act makes its integral contribution. In the Skye Bridge case, for example, it was only when the islanders could see what actions lay behind the official discourse and began to build up a picture of the overall flow of overt and covert events that they could see that they had been on the business end of a communicative strategy worthy of the purveyors of snake oil in the old wild west. On this basis they could then work out some effective counter-moves. It is precisely the way in which *the matter* of particular engagements is dynamically furthered through the concrete *integration* of actions and events of disparate character and provenance which makes the business of critically analysing and responding to, say, political discourse a matter of skilled and informed *political analysis of events* and not of 'discourse analysis' (in the linguistic sense) of texts.

Perhaps what Chouliariaki and Fairclough, in the impersonal terminology of CDA, are actually addressing, then, is the freedom that today's global corporations have to set and push their own agendas, whether through official political channels (which may also include military means), or by bribing and corrupting elected bodies or supposedly independent political or trade organisations, and by covering their tracks by favourable spin or obliging cover-up in compliant mainstream media outlets. There is certainly plenty to investigate and criticise in the communicational practices involved in these kinds of processes. But to shift the responsibility for these very human acts to the 'constitutive' power of discourse involves a fantastic reification of discourse and, with it, a serious mystification of society's workings.

While CDA's view of the constitutive role of discourse is implausible on semiotic grounds, it is possible to understand why they need this particular piece of the mythological jigsaw. After all, CDA, as a form of linguistic analysis, can analyse neither events nor the concrete integration between communicative and other practices within events. Contrary to its own claims, the linguistic methodology it draws on in fact precludes actually examining language 'as an integral element' within the process of social change at all, something which would make CDA a monumental irrelevance in social scientific terms unless there were some way in which the social import of its analyses of discourse could be *guaranteed*...

Now we begin to see why the idea that discourse 'constitutes' social reality and social change is so important to CDA: it is this idea that provides such a guarantee, serving as a kind of rubber stamp which validates and confirms in advance, as it were, the consequences for social reality of whatever the analyst turns up. In other words, the conventional linguistic picture of language as a reified, impersonal and decontextualised abstraction is just what we need if discourse is somehow endowed by the social structure of 'late modernity' with the power to act autonomously and thereby to incorporate and constitute itself in the minds, bodies and behaviour of individuals through their acts of communication; for discourse to *constitute* social reality, for social transformations to *be* 'transformations in language and discourse' ('to a significant degree') (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 4) it must be the case that *language* exists as an independent realm of determinate forms and meanings from which particular discourses are constructed. In effect, Fairclough and other CDA theorists are arguing that, in 'late modernity', Harris's (1981)'language myth' has become a social reality. However, a myth is a myth, and the price we pay for accommodating this particular myth within our social philosophy is the mystification of social processes in general and communicative practices in particular. The segregational linguistic assumptions and methodology and the social philosophy of CDA are, then, all of a piece.

Let us now look at Fairclough's CDA in action.

3.3. CDA in action: the discourse of neo-liberalism

On the assumption that language must be a specific object of investigation in ideological critique, Fairclough feels it necessary to address a 'problem facing people who are not specialists in linguistics' which is that 'there are many different aspects of the language of an interaction which may be relevant to critical analysis' (2001b, p. 126). Consequently, he wishes to supply those who are interested in using the CDA approach with 'checklists of linguistic features which tend to be particularly worth attending to in critical analysis' (2001b, p. 126).

However, to begin with, Fairclough's approach requires the analyst to 'focus upon a social problem which has a semiotic aspect' (2001b, p. 125). Fairclough illustrates the approach with a discussion of a text attributed to Tony Blair, chosen specifically because it contains 'dominant', i.e., neo-liberal 'representations of change in the "global economy"' (2001b, p. 127). One 'social problem manifested in the text' (2001b, p. 129) is that

> 'feasible alternative ways of organizing international economic relations which might not have the detrimental effects of the current way (for instance, in increasing the gap between rich and poor within and between states) are excluded from the political agenda by these representations' (2001b, p. 129).
>
> Fairclough justifies the application of his linguistic procedures to the text on the grounds that
>
> '[d]ominant representations of "the new global order" have *certain predictable linguistic characteristics*' (2001b, p. 131, my emphasis). One such characteristic is that 'processes in the new economy are represented without responsible social agents' (2001b, p. 131). In support of this claim, Fairclough subjects the text to analysis using some of the constructs of Hallidayan systemic-functional grammar. In relation to the following passage (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 137).
>
> 'The modern world is swept by change. New technologies emerge constantly; new markets are opening up. There are new competitors but also great new opportunities.'

he comments:

> 'Agents of material processes are abstract or inanimate ... "change" is the agent in the first (passive) sentence, and "new technologies" and "new markets" are agents in the second – agents, notice, of intransitive processes ("emerge", "open up") which represent change as happenings, processes without agents. The third sentence is existential – "new competitors" and "new opportunities" are merely claimed to exist, not located within processes of change' (2001b, p. 131).

In relation to another passage which begins, 'This new world challenges business to be innovative and creative', Fairclough comments that 'it is the inanimate "this new world" that is the agent of "challenges"' (2001b, p. 131).

Let us accept Fairclough's helping hand and try to apply this kind of checklist to a new text. Imagine, for example, we are on the look-out for the tell-tale absence of 'responsible social agents' (2001b, p. 131), one of the 'predictable linguistic characteristics' of neo-liberal ideology as we have seen. Our analytical antennae suddenly go all a-quiver when we stumble across the following passages in our selected text:

(a) 'The past two decades or so have been a period of profound economic and social transformation on a global scale. Economically, there has been a relative shift from "Fordist" mass production and consumption of goods to "flexible accumulation"'.
(b) 'Advances in information technology, mainly communications media, underlie both economic and cultural transformations, opening up new forms of experience and

knowledge and new possibilities of relationships with faraway others via television or the internet'.

(c) 'These social changes create new possibilities and opportunities for many people'.

We have undoubtedly discovered a close and possibly exciting parallel here with the Blair text. To use Fairclough's own terminology, in (a) economic and social changes are presented as 'happenings, processes without agents'. In (b) the 'advances in information technology' referred to are 'agent-less' and these agent-less processes are themselves the 'agent' of 'opening up'. In (c) it is the impersonal and agent-less 'social changes' which are the 'agent' responsible for 'creating' possibilities and opportunities. A classic neo-liberal discourse, perhaps? Our excited anticipation turns to disappointment, and not a little confusion, however when we read on:

> 'The global scale and sheer complexity of contemporary economic and social processes increase the sense of helplessness and incomprehension. A pervasive postmodernist claim is that there is little that practical action can do to change this condition ... Yet these changes are at least in part the outcome of particular strategies pursued by particular people for particular interests within a particular system – all of which might be different'.

This final passage, as well as those of (a)–(c), is from Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, pp. 3–4). A piece of mischief on my part, no doubt, but one which helps to make a serious point: questions about the existence and role of 'responsible agents of social change' in historical processes are *political questions*, not *linguistic questions*. According to Fairclough, he and Blair differ politically over whether there is an alternative to capitalist globalization. Unfortunately for CDA methodology, however, this fundamental political difference does not show up in the so-called 'linguistic characteristics' of their discourse. Putting it bluntly, applying the type of 'grammatical analysis' advocated by Fairclough to a text *cannot tell us anything at all about the political perspectives of its author*. 'Checklists of linguistic features' are not, then, going to provide us with a reliable method of doing political analysis of texts.

I should emphasise that I am not suggesting that there is no relationship between somebody's politics (or 'ideology') and what they say or write. On the contrary, political texts or speeches (as we all know) are crafted, more or less skilfully, to push a particular line or agenda. The problem with CDA is not its assumption that discourse is political but with its *conception of discourse*. In particular, as here, the problem is caused by the crude and simplistic identification of the category of 'agent'in Hallidayan grammar with 'agent of social change' in the historical sense.[18] Indeed, use of the grammatical category as a 'critical' tool

[18] The confusion of 'grammatical' and 'ideological' is in fact the very cornerstone of the tradition of 'critical linguistics' from which CDA has emerged. Hodge and Kress, for example, claim that 'the grammar of a language is its theory of reality' (1983, p. 7). Language is regarded 'as consisting of a related set of categories and processes' and these categories 'are a set of "models" which describe the interrelation of objects and events' (1983, p. 8). Simpson (1993) discusses the consequences of this confusion, which he calls 'interpretative positivism', and which is 'shown by stylisticians who simply invoke linguistic descriptions as a way of confirming the decisions they have already taken about a text's meaning' (1993, p. 111). Simpson nevertheless argues that the problems involved in using grammatical analysis of this kind as a method of ideological critique can be overcome with 'no more than a modicum of caution' (1993, p. 113). See Harris (1981, pp. 15–31) for a thorough critical discussion of the underlying confusion.

simply obscures the creative communicative process that is in play in the production and interpretation of political discourse although, and perhaps this is its attraction, it relieves us of the need to do any serious historical and political research and analysis in relation to the relevant engagements.

But any interesting or useful critique of or response to political discourse requires a feel for the relevant political sphere (of both words and deeds) which is just as informed (theoretically and practically), intuitive, and insightful as the feel for mountaineering that the expert climber brings to bear in taking apart an expedition plan. The linguist, with her abstract 'collocations' and 'cohesion', had nothing to offer in the latter case. And, for exactly the same reasons, it would be unwise to deduce the politics of a text from the linguist's conception of the grammatical form of particular clauses. What we might take a phrase like 'the modern world is swept by change' to mean will depend on how we understand what else is being said by whom, for what purpose in what context, given what we know already or are led to discover about the politics of its author and the circumstances surrounding the text, and, of course, what we know of and make of the relevant facts. The absence of an explicit reference to named human actors – and, after all, this is what the whole fuss above boils down to in the end – may be simply that, i.e., the absence of an explicit reference to named human actors. But whether we then take the passage as an opening expository move to be followed by an account of the mechanisms of change, as a wistful evocation of the fragility of communal bonds, as a celebration of the impersonal march of historical inevitability, or simply as a piece of clichéd, semantically wishy-washy New Labour-speak is something that grammatical description cannot decide for us. In other words, while Fairclough's CDA methodology is wholly dependent on there being systematic correlations between the ideological orientation of particular instances of discourse and abstract features of 'grammar' – since without such correlations it makes no sense to draw up 'checklists' of linguistic features to watch out for – no such correlations can be reliably expected.

If CDA is flawed on the linguistic side, however, it is no less flawed on the ideological side. As we have seen, Fairclough takes the absence of 'responsible social agents' to be a tell-tale ingredient of neo-liberal representations of global change. The ideological function of these representations is due to their being 'misrepresentations which clearly contribute to sustaining unequal relations of power' (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 134). Fairclough's evaluative comment implies that neo-liberal ideologists have got a faulty conception of processes in the global economy. However, he qualifies this evaluation with the observation, made in passing, that 'on one level markets do have an impersonal logic to which all involved in them are subject' (2001b, p. 134). What he does not seem to appreciate is that his concession undermines, if not completely subverts, his whole analytical approach, this time from the political, rather than the linguistic, side, because it allows a depth, subtlety, and complexity to the economic and political arguments over globalization that 'grammatical' description, of whatever kind, could never do justice to.

In sum, looking for 'predictable linguistic characteristics' of a particular political position or ideology is like looking for 'predictable linguistic characteristics'of a successful mountaineering plan. Of course, ultimately, there is nothing stopping anyone from attempting ideological critique, or expedition planning, on the basis of grammatical criteria if they wish to. If they see neo-liberal ideology every time they come across a sentence dealing with social change that has an 'abstract or inanimate agent' that is up to them. But that does not mean that they are in possession of a novel method of 'discourse analysis'

capable of supplying unique political and ideological insights; it simply means that they are the owners of a very bad method of arriving at political judgements.

It is on precisely these grounds that I would insist that there is no such thing as 'critical discourse analysis' separate from or over and above the political interpretation and analysis of discourse. Any political evaluation of a communicative act comes down in the end to a process of political interpretation and judgement, a process which incorporates decisions about what tools and methods to employ and about what counts as relevant evidence. Now, CDA wants to give the impression that the ideological orientation of a text can be 'analysed' independently of or separately from the process of political interpretation on the grounds that the mere existence of certain abstract grammatical and semantic features in a text automatically supplies a conclusive ideological fingerprint. But the impression is a misleading one. In reality, the 'method of analysis' in question is simply a way of cloaking particular interpretative preferences – including particular assumptions and opinions about politics, ideology and the role and functions of discourse in society – with a spurious objectivity stemming from an appeal to the (segregationist's) 'facts' of linguistic structure and function. It would be a similar situation if I decided to judge the ideological worthiness of politicians by the clothes they wear. If I establish correlations between clothing and ideological orientation (and draw up corresponding 'checklists' for the uninitiated to use) this does not mean that I have invented a new social science method – 'critical fashion analysis' – but that I have made a deliberate decision to give automatic priority and significance to certain, very particular, phenomena in my political assessments, in effect thereby tying my interpretative hands behind my back. And so if my 'analysis' proves to be wrong – if, say, the cloth-capped socialist turns out to be a pro-capitalist union basher – I won't, in all conscience, be able to blame it on the headgear or its wearer; the problem will lie with me and my deliberate dumbing down of the complicated process of political analysis.

Finally, we may note that the neo-liberals who Fairclough accuses of airbrushing out 'responsible social agents' could learn a thing or two from CDA itself. Fairclough's diagnosis of the 'social problem manifested in the text' of Blair's is that 'alternative ways of organizing international economic relations *are excluded from the political agenda by these representations*' (2001b, p. 129, my emphasis). What is interesting is that it is the (neo-liberal) 'representations' that are doing the 'excluding', a perspective that makes sense on the CDA assumption that an abstracted and reified 'discourse' has taken up residence in the socio-historical driving seat. On the other hand, we may prefer to see all the excluding, distorting and marginalizing of alternative political and economic views as being done by very *irresponsible people,* and, therefore as a moral and political issue to do with such things as media ownership, the political allegiances and the editorial and management practices of those responsible for media coverage, and the corruption and servility of the political establishment.

3.4. CDA and reflexivity

CDA's attempt to do social and political criticism by linguistic means has peculiar consequences on other fronts too. We have seen, for example, how, for the ordinary language user, critical responses to a communicative act always convey reflexive, meta-linguistic judgements about such things as its relationship to the facts of the relevant matter ('true' or 'false') or to aspects of the attitude or conduct of the engaged parties ('sincere' or

'dishonest'). The point is not that our judgements about the truth or otherwise of political discourse are unchallengeable, unrevisable, still less infallible, but that our critical responses to and attitudes towards this discourse are always influenced and often very largely dependent on whether we think the truth or the whole truth is being told. Indeed, in some cases, we have to set out deliberately and methodically, as the people of Skye did, to try to establish where the truth lies amidst all the guff and spin in order to ensure that our opinions and actions have a firm factual grounding. In short, there can be no critical response to discourse which does not at least involve 'a simultaneous assessment of facts and terminological appropriateness' (Harris, 1981, pp. 180–181).

We have already noted that the involvement of factual assessments in critical responses to discourse places the latter beyond the scope of the linguistic tools at CDA's disposal. Fairclough concedes as much:

> 'Of course, discourse analysis cannot *per se* judge the truth or well-groundedness of a proposition, but then critical discourse analysis is just one method to be used within wider critical projects' (1995, p. 18).[19]

Consequently, CDA per se has nothing to say on the subject of whether some politician's claim is 'a load of lies', 'self-serving propaganda', 'outrageous nonsense', 'distortions and half truths', or just 'spin'. And yet, according to Fairclough, CDA can still help us to decide whether discourse is 'ideological' without bringing factual considerations into it:

> 'In claiming that a discursive event works ideologically, one is not in the first instance claiming that it is false, or claiming a privileged position from which judgements of truth or falsity can be made. One is claiming that it contributes to the reproduction of relations of power' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 18).

However, this attempt to bracket off issues of fact and questions of truth from political and social critique is quite futile and rebounds on CDA. If it was true, for example, or if we thought it was true, that there was no viable alternative to capitalism and that there would always be capitalists and workers, rich and poor, then the fact that a particular discourse worked 'ideologically', in the sense of contributing to the reproduction of these particular 'relations of power', would be more a cause for celebration than grounds for criticism. The only point in criticising the message that 'capitalism is the best and only form of social organization' is if we think that that claim is *false*, or at least *questionable*. Indeed, Fairclough himself, for example, describes neo-liberal representations of change as '*misrepresentations* which clearly contribute to sustaining unequal relations of power' (my emphasis) (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 134), implying that they are false. But, more fundamentally, if 'relations of power' are taken to be themselves *matters of fact*, i.e. real, empirically verifiable relations between actually existing people, then any argument about the impact that communicative practices have on such relations must involve an empirical claim and thereby constitute an issue for empirical investigation rather than something that can be determined *a priori*. In other words, all claims about the ideological functioning of discourse make implicit appeal to or presuppose a particular position on the facts of the matter.

[19] Fairclough goes on to say that 'critical (discourse) analysis cannot remain indifferent to questions of truth' (1995, p. 18) but he does not discuss the problem of how to reconcile the use of linguistic methods and constructs with 'extra-linguistic' considerations of truth.

4. Conclusion

In Section 1 I argued, firstly, that ordinary language-users (in other words, all of us) approach communicative practices and products in a critical spirit and, secondly, that the conscious actions of critically apprehending and responding to discourse fall well outside the scope of the orthodox linguist's conception of what language is and how it works and, consequently, beyond the reach of linguistic methodology. In Section 2, I argued that, for exactly these reasons, the linguistic methods of CDA are wholly unsuitable tools for the critique of political discourse and certainly do not do justice to the skills that informed political writers and activists employ in the course of their own critical investigations and analyses. This is not because critically minded people are not interested in or not 'specifically oriented to' discourse but because they are not oriented to 'discourse' as orthodox linguistics, and therefore CDA, understands it. While CDA purports to treat discourse as an 'integral dimension of social processes', the segregational linguistic methodology it adopts reduces linguistic communication to a system of reified abstractions which provide no critical purchase on the creative activities of producing and interpreting utterances and texts in the course of our everyday lives. Consequently, in justification of its specifically linguistic orientation, CDA has had to invent a corresponding mythology of 'late modernity' in which the abstract constructs of discourse linguistically-conceived are endowed with the power of self-transubstantiation into flesh and blood actions and relations. Thus we see that the adoption of a distorted view of communication leads necessarily to a distorted view of the workings of society more generally.

CDA, then, despite the good intentions and radical social agenda of its practitioners, is simply further proof of the theoretical bankruptcy of the ideologically conservative 'language myth' on which conventional linguistics is founded. The success of CDA in academic circles along with its intellectual respectability and influence within the social sciences more generally are, I submit, due to this same myth, which, 'like all important myths', as Harris (1981, preface) puts it, 'flatters and reflects the type of culture which sponsors it'. The idea that language is now 'where it's at' is certainly a very convenient, not to say self-serving, perspective for those with a command of the esoteric tools of linguistic description that are necessary to 'analyse' it. But there is, of course, more to it than a severe case of a narrow, professionally motivated intellectual narcissism. The CDA project has clearly caught on because it chimes with the more general postmodern conceit according to which the combined semiotic outpourings of mass media organizations, advertising and PR agencies, the internet and digital media, and political spin doctors and publicists have become a more important factor of influence in contemporary society than economic processes or the relations and conflicts of social classes. And against that general background CDA's unique selling proposition is that the dry-as-dust taxonomies of descriptive linguistics which it wields are indispensable to the critique of these outpourings.

To which it must be said that there is, of course, scope – enormous scope – for concrete, critical analysis of the communicative practices of governance and persuasion, of the politics and ideologies of parties and movements, of the political role of media institutions and corporations and their interconnections with and influence on the political establishments and elites, and so on. Indeed, there are many interesting insights on such matters to be found in the works of Fairclough and other CDA practitioners. But to make sense of

the role and meaning of communicative practices within this tangled realm of action and reaction, and, ultimately, to understand what scope exists for alternative forms of political thinking and action, requires that we struggle against the influence of the decontextualised fictions of orthodox linguistics on our theorising of communication and society. There simply is no such thing as a 'critical discourse analysis' of the ideology or politics of a text separate from, or over and above, an ideological or political interpretation and analysis of it, whatever methodological paraphernalia or terminology we try to dress this interpretation up in.

The point here, then, is not to look for a new 'model' or 'framework' of description of 'grammatical structure' or 'lexical networks' or some such which could be 'applied' as a critical tool. On the contrary, when we actually try to account for the way people try, and often succeed to some degree, in critically getting to grips with communication then this whole way of thinking about language in terms of 'codes', 'models', 'frameworks' of rules, rule systems, or choices within inventories or networks is not part of the solution but part of the problem.[20] The way out of the mess that the language myth in all its forms has got us into is to try to see communication not as a process in which individuals are merely the mouthpiece or embodiment of forms and meanings set up in advance (in 'the genre' or 'register' or 'language system') but to place it 'on a par with all other forms of voluntary human action' (Harris, 1981, p. 167), to see it as a form of conscious conduct on the part of particular individuals, of real personalities, conduct which consists in their actual creation of communicative means and interpretations in the course of their engaging with others in particular circumstances, however difficult those circumstances may be.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Chik Collins, Roy Harris, and Simeon Yates for reading drafts of the paper and offering useful criticism, advice and encouragement. I would also like to thank Nigel Love, Stephen Cowley, Anna Stetsenko, and Gill Boag-Munroe for their comments on particular issues.

References

Army Archerd's column. Available from: <http://www.daveyd.com/spikepolitics.html>.

Brown, P., Levinson, S., 1987. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Chouliaraki, L., Fairclough, N., 1999. Discourse in Late Modernity Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Collins, C., Jones, P.E., 2006. Analysis of discourse as "a form of history writing: a critique of Critical Discourse Analysis and an illustration of a cultural–historical alternative. Atlantic Journal of Communication 14 (1–2), 51–69.

Fairclough, N., 1989. Language and Power. Longman, London.

Fairclough, N., 1995. Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language. Longman, London.

Fairclough, N., 2000. New Labour, New Language?. Routledge London.

Fairclough, N., 2001a. Language and Power, Second ed. Longman/Pearson, London.

[20] The 'codes' and 'systems' of orthodox linguistics 'are cultural fictions *to be explained;* not "given" as the basis for explaining communication' (Harris, 2004, p. 170).

Fairclough, N., 2001b. Critical Discourse Analysis as a method in social scientific research. In: Wodak, R & Meyer, M. (Eds.), pp. 121–138.
Fairclough, N., Wodak, R., 1997. Critical Discourse Analysis. In: van Dijk, T. (Ed.), Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Discourse as Social Interaction. Sage, Newbury Park.
Fowler, Kress, 1979. Critical linguistics. In: Fowler, R. et al. (Eds.), Language and Control. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
Halliday, M.A.K., 2002. Linguistic studies of text and discourse. In: Halliday, M.A.K., Webster, J. (Eds.), The Collected Works, vol. 2. Continuum, London.
Hammersley, M., 1997. On the foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis. Language and Communication 17 (3), 237–248.
Harris, R., 1980. The Language-Makers. Duckworth, London.
Harris, R., 1981. The Language Myth. Duckworth, London.
Harris, R., 1996. Signs, Language and Communication. Routledge, London.
Harris, R., 2003. On redefining linguistics. In: Davis, H.G., Taylor, T.J. (Eds.), Rethinking Linguistics. RoutledgeCurzon, London, pp. 17–68.
Harris, R., 2004. The Linguistics of History. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
Hodge, R., Kress, G., 1983. Language as Ideology. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
Jones, P.E., 2004. Discourse and the materialist conception of history: critical comments on Critical Discourse Analysis. Historical Materialism 12 (1), 97–125.
Jones, P.E., Collins, C., 2006. Political analysis versus Critical Discourse Analysis in the treatment of ideology: some implications for the study of communication. Atlantic Journal of Communication 14 (1–2), 28–50.
Koza email: <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/iraq/story/0,12239,905954,00.html>.
Levinson, S.C., 1992. Activity types and language. In: Drew, P., Heritage, J. (Eds.), Talk at Work. CUP, Cambridge, pp. 66–100.
Malinowski, B., 1935Coral Gardens and Their Magic, vol. 2. Allen & Unwin, London.
Mills, S., 2003. Gender and Politeness. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
Monbiot, G., 2001. Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain. Pan Macmillan, London.
Mont Blanc information. Available from: <http://www.terragalleria.com/mountain/info/chamonix/chamonix-info.html#3>.
Schiffrin, D., 1994. Approaches to Discourse. Blackwell, Oxford.
Simpson, P., 1993. Language, Ideology and Point of View. Routledge, London.
Stubbs, M., 1997. Whorf's children: critical comments on Critical Discourse Analysis. In: Wray, A., Ryan, A. (Eds.), Evolving Models of Language. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, pp. 100–116.
Taylor, T.J., 1997. Theorizing Language: Analysis, Normativity, Rhetoric, History. Pergamon, Amsterdam.
Taylor, T.J., Cameron, C., 1987. Analysing Conversation: Rules and Units in the Structure of Talk. Pergamon, Oxford.
Toolan, M., 1996. Total Speech Durham. Duke University Press, NC and London.
Toolan, M., 1997. What is Critical Discourse Analysis and why are people saying such terrible things about it?. Language and Literature 6 (2) 83–103.
Widdowson, H.G., 1995. Discourse Analysis: a critical view. Language and Literature 4 (3), 157–172.
Widdowson, H.G., 1996. Reply to Fairclough: Discourse and interpretation: conjectures and refutations. Language and Literature 5 (1), 57–69.
Widdowson, H.G., 1998. The theory and practice of Critical Discourse Analysis. Applied Linguistics 19 (1), 136–151.