Discourse and Power in a Multilingual World
Adrian Blackledge, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2005, 252 pages, € 110

The need for an expansion of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) beyond a mere theoretical interest in language disciplines has been recognized for some time and CDA has already been introduced as a procedure in social research with specifically rich potential for probing the political and ideological dimensions of language (Fairclough, 2003). Discourse and Power in a Multilingual World is an outcome of such an expansion and application of CDA as a practical research procedure. Adrian Blackledge, concerned with issues of education and bilingualism rather than theoretical details of discourse analysis per se, applies CDA as his research practice in an attempt to explore the political and social concerns raised in the multilingual context of Britain which witnesses ongoing challenges between several linguistic minority communities and a dominant majority.

Chapter 1 examines the details of theoretical considerations regarding the interwoven concerns of language, ideology, and power. Blackledge sets out with the view that the 2001 social unrests in England and the language policy legislations thereafter “are connected through complex chains of discourse” (p. 1). His intention is to explore the discursive atmosphere surrounding those events and their subsequent legislative trends as well as to extend and expand CDA “as a theory and method appropriate for understanding the relations between discourse and social practices in diverse societies” (p. 1). In his discussion of the theoretical background of his analyses in this book, he identifies five common features among various CDA approaches: a view of language as social practice; a particular interest in language and power; understanding language not as powerful on its own but by the use powerful people make of it; a belief in the presence of several social voices in a single text; and an interdisciplinary perspective. This highlights the very important but rarely raised consideration that CDA is a broad epistemological approach rather than a single unified theoretical and methodological trend. Although these common features seem to generally represent different CDA approaches, the third one (distinguishing between ‘language on its own’ and ‘language as used by powerful people’) may be questioned because of a possible underlying assumption that language in itself is a decontextual and purely cognitive phenomenon (perhaps in a Chomskyan sense) rather than an essentially socio-contextual phenomenon. In the rest of this chapter, a number of concepts including ‘discourse’, ‘genre’, ‘context’, and ‘voice’ are covered and some criticisms of CDA are also briefly discussed. The elaborate arguments presented in this opening discussion shape a fairly sound theoretical foundation on which the analyses in later chapters are based.

Within this general conceptual framework, Chapter 2 illustrates more specifically the theoretical and procedural context for an investigation of ‘language ideologies in multilingual
contexts’. This chapter includes an exploration of the ideological nature of language and a consideration of the ideological representations of identity in multilingual contexts. As the author interestingly puts it, the fact that “languages – and language ideologies – are anything but neutral is especially visible in multilingual societies” (p. 36). But this, in my opinion, seems to question the meaningfulness of a ‘language on its own’ as distinct from ‘language in use’ and renders it a Chomskyan illusion, as I would call it. Discussing the essential link between language and discourses on the one hand, and national identity on the other, Blackledge argues that language policies in the multilingual context of Britain shape a major underlying social structure that can explain much of the social turbulences under investigation. To further lay the foundation of his analyses in this volume, the author touches upon issues of “language planning, standardisation, educational policy, citizenship testing, and language instruction for immigrants” (p. 42) as the major sites of language and national identity interface and also discusses the discursive aspects of ‘hegemony’ and ‘symbolic racism’.

In Chapter 3, the author begins his analytic exploration of the social and discursive context of the 2001 unrests in England. To situate his CDA approach in its “social, cultural and historical context, and in the perspective and position of the researcher” (p. 59), he starts with his own personal background and also attempts to contextualize the discourses under examination “in relation to the recent history of immigration to Britain” (p. 61). A detailed portrayal of ‘contexts’ may need a more elaborate discussion of social situations than what Blackledge presents here. More importantly, contextual considerations and the researcher’s standpoint should, in my opinion, be flowing throughout the analyses rather than presented as a fragment. However, the very attempt of illustrating the context of the analyses (cf. e.g. Van Dijk, 2004) and especially the explicit consideration of researcher position, both being essential features of a critical stance, is a main strength of the book. The author goes on to analyze and discuss specific discourse fragments from two newspaper articles on the 2001 events. Following Van Dijk (2000), he presents 12 categories of topoi shaping the argumentative strategies in the two articles and analyzes details of the linguistic means employed to shape a certain social atmosphere. Despite admitting that “it is not possible to read off ideologies from two short newspaper articles” (p. 89), Blackledge concludes in the final section of the chapter that a detailed investigation of the linguistic features of texts can illustrate how discourses constitute ideologies which may be naturalized. The chapter may not present an all inclusive detailed analysis of linguistic micro-elements, the way an extreme interpretation of Fairclough’s (2003) CDA framework might suggest, but the author’s arguments do provide fairly coherent and elaborate considerations of the link between micro-linguistic features and macro-social interpretations.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of a political speech made by a parliament member following the 2001 incidents. After briefly portraying the context of British parliamentary debates, the author covers issues of intentions and assumptions in discourse, before an elaborate analysis of the particular speech to uncover the illiberal discourse in a supposedly liberal setting is presented. The author adopts from Reisigl and Wodak (2001) a three-dimensional analysis focusing on content and topic, discourse strategies, and linguistic means and realizations. The analysis involves a scrutiny of: the text producer’s self-positioning and her establishment of a discursive context, at the general topic level; the presupposed notions and assumed values embedded in the text, at the strategic level; and definite articles, deictic pronouns, and specific lexical items, at the level of linguistic realization. Such a multilevel analytic approach is the author’s major procedural practice in Chapters 3 through 7, the main body of the book, where his main analytic arguments are presented.
Entitled ‘Political discourse and the media’, Chapter 5 concentrates on recontextualization processes which Blackledge introduced in the first chapter as including “transformation of discourse [...] as discourse almost always attracts new meanings in new settings” (p. 12). Following Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), Blackledge touches upon the concepts of deletion, rearrangement, substitution, and addition, as features of recontextualization in his analysis of an interview published on a political website. Chapter 6, dealing with issues of “representing the voice of the people” in discourse, explores the discourse of four official reports on the 2001 unrests, in an attempt to examine the subtleties of how the views of different social actors are represented in those reports through ‘apparent direct discourse’, ‘verbatim quotation’, ‘indirect discourse’, and ‘quasi-direct discourse’. In Chapter 7 “the polyphonic discourse of the previous chapters is recontextualized and transformed in the law making processes” (p. 181).

In the final chapter of the volume, Blackledge revisits the nature of symbolic violence and linguistic capital in light of his detailed analyses presented in previous chapters. On this basis he discusses issues of symbolic domination and racism, citizenship, and what he names “the predominantly monolingual ideology” in the multilingual context of Britain. The author finally calls for “further studies, which investigate the production and reproduction of such ideologies in interactional as well as political and media discourses” (p. 231). Blackledge’s practical employment of CDA to tackle real social issues may be seen as a concrete instance of taking into account a point I raised earlier: “the generally neglected necessity that CDA is to be established as a social scientific research procedure applicable by nonlinguists as well” (Mirhosseini, 2006: 624). Generally, I found this book a source of insights for the application of critical discourse studies as potentially rich research approaches, on the one hand, and more importantly for understanding language as a vital social and political phenomenon with a crucial role in creating perceptions and constructing social practices, on the other hand.

References


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