

SELF-FASHIONING IN AND THROUGH LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract¹

Critical Discourse Analysis, the way I see it, is predicated upon the premise that discourse is not merely *about* a language-external reality, but is a means of critically *intervening* in that very reality.

A major challenge to the interventionist thesis is the idea of “self-fashioning”, enthusiastically endorsed by contemporary neo-progmatists for whom all talk of language impinging on reality is useless philosophical golbbledygook. The pragmatist rejection of language as representation leaves no room for any critical intervention. The question I would like to pose is: Is there anything in the notion of self-fashioning that can still be salvaged and grafted on to the project of CDA?

Key words

Critical discourse analysis; self-fashioning.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the way I see it, is predicated upon the key premise that discourse is not merely *about* a language-external reality, but is a means of critically *intervening* in that very reality. What makes it critical is, in other words, the conviction on the part of those who subscribe to its basic tenets that there is no reason why the analysis of discourse should be confined to merely describing how things are, or for that matter, to speculating as to how things could be but unfortunately are not. Critical discourse analysts proceed on the assumption that language matters on its own and is not, as a certain time-honoured tradition would have it, the next best thing to the unrealisable dream of telepathy, the coveted faculty whereby language-independent meanings (intentions) are teletransported to other minds without the need of language functioning

as an intermediary (the dream that has, through the ages, impelled most attempts at theorising about language which, as a result, turn out to be, in the final analysis, elaborate exercises in self-pity – as if they were all saying in effect: “How sad that we humans are not endowed with the faculty of telepathy”).

An important question that inevitably crops up is: how can our discursive practices be viewed as actually impinging on the reality “out there,” if that reality is admitted in the first place to be totally external to (i.e. not in actual contact with) language? That is to say, so long as language and reality are seen as made up of completely different material, all talk of the two ever coming into direct contact with each other (let alone the idea of one actually intervening in and influencing the other) must *eo ipso* be considered suspect. The question is perfectly in order as far as it goes. What may not withstand incisive probing is the standard assumption that the only reality that we are entitled to talk about here is the one manifested (represented?) by the putatively existent world of alethic truth. It seems to me that postmodernists and neo-pragmatists are not alone among contemporary theorists in their complete disillusionment with such philosophical mare’s nests. As Pierre Bourdieu (1988: 774-5) wrote a decade ago:

“Social science must break with the preconstructions of common sense, that is, with “reality” as it presents itself, in order to construct its proper objects, even at the risk of appearing to do violence to that reality, to tailor the ‘data’ to meet the requirements of scientific construction ...”

The full significance of Bourdieu’s insightful remark can only be appreciated, I would argue, if we bear in mind that the so-called “preconstructions of the common sense” are themselves the product of past theorisations. Common sense, as well as the ordinary language in which we standardly conduct our routine communicative transactions, typically carries vestigial traces of past and often outmoded theories - as evidenced by the continuing use of such expressions as ‘sunrise’ and ‘sunset’ although

we have for long known that it is no longer fashionable to subscribe to the theory of geocentric universe that once validated those uses before Copernicus appeared on the scene. (*cf.* Rajagopalan, 1998b).

What is urgently needed if we still want to insist on the possibility of discourse analysis ever becoming genuinely critical in the relevant sense is to lay bare the ideological agenda that silently and surreptitiously informs the standard assumption that words are a far cry from deeds and can simply not be expected to make a difference the way deeds are deemed to. This standard assumption is what has prompted most of the summary dismissals of CDA as a viable research project. In a recent paper, Martyn Hammersley sums up his scepticism concerning CDA's pretensions in the following words: " ... what is promised [by CDA] is some sort of comprehensive theory that will provide the basis for political action to bring about radical and emancipatory social change. Above all, 'critical' approaches claim to unify theory and practice." (Hammersley, 1997: 238). Similar objections have also been brought forward by Henry Widdowson (1995a, 1995b, 1996), for whom the very term "Critical Discourse Analysis" is a contradiction in terms because, in his view, nothing can be both critical and analytical simultaneously. If Hammersley is saying that it is foolhardy to expect scientific theories to bring about social reforms on their own, Widdowson is saying that no scientific analysis can foreclose possible interpretation (or, rather, help us choose amongst the multiplicity of interpretations) of its results and, by implication, offer us useful and reliable tips for concrete action. For both Hammersley and Widdowson, theories and analyses are what we do with words, so that they can at best make a difference in the realm of words. If, on the other hand, we want to make a difference in the world of reality "out there," we had better come out of the ivory tower of theories and analyses and actually act upon the basis of those findings. Both Hammersley and Widdowson are thus convinced that CDA's fundamental claims and hence its very *raison d'être* are suspect right from the start. In this paper, I do not intend to defend the central claims of CDA against those of its detractors who argue on the basis of their conviction that words can never affect the world of deeds, as I have already undertaken such a task elsewhere (*cf.* Rajagopalan, 1995). Now, the claims of CDA are also highly suspect from the perspective of

contemporary neo-pragmatists who insist that the whole issue has been rendered hopelessly muddled because of our having got used to talking about such matters in certain characteristic ways.

A major challenge to the interventionist thesis (the idea, that is, that by speaking a language one is not merely describing a reality etc. but actually intervening in that very reality) that I have been advocating is the idea of “self-fashioning,” enthusiastically bandied about by the neo-pragmatists for whom all talk of language impinging on reality is useless philosophical gobbledygook. For pragmatists, especially those who follow the lead of Rorty, the very idea that language *represents* a reality has only stood in the way of a clearer appreciation of what human language is all about. The important thing, they say, is to find alternative ways of conceptualising language, so that we will not find ourselves for ever having to solve vexed questions and intractable problems of our own making. On the face of it, then, the pragmatist rejection of language as representation leaves no room for any critical intervention whatsoever. Quite on the contrary, pragmatists seem to be advocating that the way we have got used to conceptualising language has been part of the very problem. Instead of hoping to set the reality right by “tinkering” with language, we should rather be attempting to change ourselves from within, bringing about the right changes in ourselves, so as to cope with that reality better. To quote Rorty (1982: xix):

“One can use language to criticize and enlarge itself, as one can exercise one’s body to develop and strengthen and enlarge itself, *but one cannot see language-as-a-whole in relation to something else to which it applies, or for which it is a means to an end.*” (Emphasis added)

The question I would like to pose is: Is there anything in the notion of self-fashioning that can still be salvaged and grafted on to the project of CDA? In what follows, I shall attempt to make case for incorporating the notion of self-fashioning into the framework of CDA.

Perhaps the best way to approach the issue at hand is to start by considering what kind of arguments there might be that would make someone doubt that the whole attempt is doomed right from the very

beginning. In its strongest version, neo-pragmatism holds that the whole idea of regarding language as a “*tertium quid*” over and above the world of external reality and the human mind that seeks to comprehend it is a complete mistake. It is a mistake, the advocates of this doctrine would hasten to add, not because such a view fails to correspond to an actually existing state of affairs (for, if they did so argue, they would in effect be appealing to the very notion of correspondence which they are concerned to discredit). It is a mistake in the sense that it only creates more problems, more “headaches”, than alternative ways of visualising the picture. In other words, it is a crucial step in the pragmatist reasoning that new ideas are to be welcomed or rejected not because they are more or less accurate than the ones that we already operate with but because they either help us find our way about and make our lives better or, contrariwise, stand in the way of our “coping with” the reality.

If enabling us to cope with the reality better is what should count in choosing between alternative conceptual schemes, there might appear to be an excellent argument in the best pragmatist spirit in favour of not turning our backs on the notion of correspondence altogether. It is that the notion of correspondence and the idea that language represents a reality external to it may also hold the key to a better understanding of how linguistic interaction among speakers is, besides being a communicative activity, an activity shot through with political connotations. To begin with, it might help to notice that there is more than mere coincidence in the fact that the same word *representation* is also characteristically used in discussions of whether or to what extent a given form of government reflects the aspirations of the people on whose behalf it speaks and acts. In other words, it is my claim that representation is just as much a political matter as it is claimed to be a linguistic matter. Or, if you will, linguistic representation is also a matter of political representation. And *simultaneously* so.

It might be of some help detaining ourselves a little over the question of how the question of linguistic representation has an inalienable political dimension to it. Recall that ancient Greece, to which we usually trace back Man’s earliest ruminations about language in the western civilisation, was also – and, in fact, is in general more widely recognised to be so –

the cradle of democracy – the form of government considered the best and the most advanced. There is a clear parallel between the familiar theme (referred to at the outset of this paper) of electing transparency as the ideal of linguistic communication and the equally familiar idea that the Athenian model of democracy was the purest form of that form of government. What is seldom recalled in this connection is that both cases are at bottom symptomatic of a certain ambivalent attitude towards the very notion of representation that has long marked our discussions. On the one hand, we wish (although this wish is hardly ever expressed in explicit terms) that we could do without representation. In the case of language, this could be achieved, if meanings could literally shuttle across human minds without the aid of language acting as a medium. At the level of political representation, the matter would be solved once and for all if the citizens could represent themselves, rather than having to elect someone else to represent them – as it is believed to have been the case in the ancient city-state of Athens. (This is the reason why there is generally the sub-text that says that, after the great Athenian experience where every citizen could –in principle – be physically present at the assembly meetings, further experiments in democracy elsewhere in the world have all been rather poor approximations to the putative perfection achieved by the original). After an early, inaugural stage of perfection – the Adamic language of total one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified and the Athenian democracy marked by perfect identity between the representatives and those they represented – there has only been, alas, steady deterioration!

What is important to recognise is that both cases attest to the impossibility of ever attaining perfect representation – in the case of language, because humans are not endowed with the faculty of telepathy; in the case of political representation, because even in the Athens of the days yore, not everyone was represented in the legislative assembly –women and slaves, for instance, were simply not eligible to participate. It seems possible therefore to affirm that our theories of representation, whether linguistic or political, are equally predicated on the key idea (or, if you like, lamentation) that there is no such thing as perfect representation (*cf.*

Rajagopalan, 1998a). Now, in one sense this should not come as a matter of surprise. There would seem to be something *semantically* odd about the very idea of perfect representation, because insofar as representation can only be conceived of as involving two entities, one representing the other, perfect representation would require that we imagine an entity representing itself. But it so happens that we have a special word for that viz., “to present oneself” (As in a soldier’s “Aye, aye, Sir!” in response to a routine roll-call). In other words, you don’t represent yourself; all you do is be simply present to look after your interests. (The apparent counter-example of a defendant representing herself in a law suit fizzles out as soon as we consider that it is not the defendant herself who represents her, but the defendant *qua* her legally empowered attorney – who, under special circumstances may be allowed to be herself).

To go back to the neo-pragmatists’ recommendation that we abandon the notion of representation altogether, it should by now be fairly clear that an immediate consequence of adopting such a radical stance would be to de-politicise language. As a matter of fact, this is just what Rorty and other neo-pragmatists have been exhorting that we undertake. Their plea is however based on their suspicion, unexceptionable in itself, that the whole idea of language representing an independent reality has only wrought confusion and led us into unnecessary intellectual quagmires at the level of metaphysics. There is no justification, they say, why we should cling to a metaphysics that has so far only bred endless confusion. Furthermore, if jettisoning the useless metaphysics inherited from our forefathers also involves foregoing an equally cumbersome ethic, then so be it.

If, as the pragmatists insist time and time again, the ultimate criterion for retaining some form of thinking or trading it for another is how such a decision is going to affect our lives, or how the move is likely to help us “cope with” the world at large, there may indeed be some perfectly pragmatic reasons for not entirely sacrificing the notion of representation. After all, the idea of representation encapsulates an aesthetic (artistic, theatrical etc.) metaphor just as much as an ethical/political one. By retaining the metaphor, we may hope to salvage and improve upon what is still worth preserving from the long tradition of Western philosophy dating

back to the ancient Greeks: that the ethical and the aesthetical can only be fully understood in conjunction with the epistemological. It is worth recalling at this stage that, in every one of these branches of philosophy, distinct conceptual spaces were carved out by having systematic recourse to well-rehearsed strategies of exclusion. In the words of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1990: 297):

“It is known that Plato constructed the political (and, with the same gesture, delimited the philosophic as such) through the exclusion of myths – of the major art forms linked to them – from the pedagogy of the citizen and more generally from the symbolic space of the city.”

The new picture of language that will thus emerge by paying attention to the excess of metaphorical meaning present in the notion of representation may, I think, have important implications for CDA.

The importance of the concept of “self-fashioning” for CDA begins to become apparent as soon as we recognise that ours is an age of crumbling identities. Concepts such as selfhood, nationhood, statehood, language, culture and so on are increasingly becoming fluid in a world-order marked by disappearing trade barriers and the free flow of information along satellite TVs and computer networks. Taylor (1992: 25ff) has argued that contemporary lived reality is a far cry from, say, that of the 18th century, thanks to the fact that the idea of a socially ascribed status based on a strict and pre-established hierarchy has yielded its place to that of selves that are uniquely constituted through self-awareness and self-reflection. The concept of individual – etymologically ‘a being that is undivided and indivisible’ – is no longer serviceable in our world populated by what Gloria Anzaldúa has called “mestiza identities” (Anzaldúa, 1987; see also Rajagopalan, forthcoming). In *lieu* of the old individuals, what we have today are selves that are constantly re-fashioning themselves in response to changing circumstances. Contingency rather than permanence and essence is the hall-mark of the selves in our post-industrial world-order (Rorty, 1989).

Consequently, the opposition ‘the individual vs. the state’ stands in urgent need of re-theorisation. Perhaps one way of reconceptualizing the self in contemporary world scenario is to invoke the old Greek notion of *oikos* (oikos) – often translated as ‘home’ but perhaps better glossed as ‘hearth’. The difference between *oikos* and *ἡ πόλις* (polis) was thus fundamentally a difference between the private and the public spheres. And the line of demarcation between the two was always a matter to be negotiated and indeed fought for, often against formidable odds (as dramatically brought out by Sophocles’ play *Antigone*) (cf Rajagopalan, Ms).

In making the last claim, I am of course distancing myself from both the pragmatist recommendation that we keep the distinction between the private and the public intact and sacrosanct and the metaphysical tradition stretching back to Plato that consistently sought to subsume the two under some broader category. Here is how Rorty makes the point (Rorty, 1989: 120):

“Metaphysicians like Plato and Marx thought they could show that once philosophical theory has led us from appearance to reality we would be in a better position to be useful to our fellow human beings. They both hoped that the public-private split, the distinction between duty to self and duty to others, could be overcome.”

While agreeing with Rorty’s criticism of earlier philosophers he dismissively limns as ‘metaphysicians’, I want nevertheless to resist the suggestion that we treat the distinction between the private and the public spheres as alone among the multitude of binary oppositions inherited from traditional philosophy fully immune to deconstruction. I want to pursue the third possibility that the two may turn out to be conceptually locked in an uneasy partnership, even dialectically opposed to each other, thus generating constant tensions, leading to renegotiations, and indeed creating the need for continually re-fashioning oneself so as to enable oneself to better ‘cope with’ new challenges as they keep cropping up. This need to be constantly on

the alert is, it seems to me, part of what Giddens has in mind when he introduces the term ‘life politics’. In his view,

“Life politics is a largely new domain of ethical debate, in which the old issue of classical philosophy “How shall I live?” becomes itself open to discourse, against the backdrop of transformations affecting nature, the self and the global community.” (Giddens, 1993: 292)

The utmost importance of the notion of “self-fashioning” for CDA can hardly be overestimated for the simple reason that it has to do with what may turn out to be the most distinguishing and salient trait of our times and one that is absolutely crucial if we wish to make sense of the new world order that seems to be emerging.

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Note

- * This paper was prepared from notes used for a plenary lecture delivered at the *III Encontro Nacional de Interação em Linguagem Verbal e Não-Verbal, Universidade de Brasília* (May 26-28, 1998). I wish to thank the CNPq for financing my research (Process no. 306151/88-0).

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