

CRITICAL DISCOURSE RESEARCH

Educational researchers active in the critical study of language as 'discourse' are interested in language as a social practice. In other words, they investigate the way language constructs and is constructed by a wide variety of social relationships. These relationships might be as varied as those between writer and reader; teacher and student; test maker and test taker; school and state. What makes the researchers 'critical' is the shared assumption that social relationships are seldom constituted on equal terms. Social relationships may reflect and constitute inequitable relations of power in the wider society, on terms that may be defined, amongst others, by gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. For this reason, critical discourse research is centrally concerned with the way language is implicated in the reproduction of and resistance to inequitable relations of power in educational settings. It is important to note, however, that there is no coherent 'field' of critical discourse research. Although critical discourse researchers share a common interest in language, power, and social justice, they are associated with a wide variety of fields, including linguistics, education, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. The purpose of this review is to identify some of the important themes associated with critical discourse research in education, in particular (see reviews by May in this volume; by Janks in Volume 1; and by Clark and Ivanić, and by Wallace in Volume 6).

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

There is a dramatic irony in tracing the origins of critical discourse research in education. What is evident in this genealogical search is that critical discourse research itself reflects a discursive relationship among established scholars and their students and supporters. Some of these students have themselves become energetic scholars who, in turn, have influenced yet another generation of critical scholars. These relationships have not been static ones. New generations of scholars have brought different perspectives and theories to their work, and in doing so, have contributed to the evolution of critical discourse research.

Contemporary critical discourse researchers in education have tended to draw, in particular, on the work of one or more of the following scholars: Bakhtin (1981), Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1980), Freire (1970), Gumperz

(1982), Halliday (1978), Hymes (1974), Saussure (1959), and Weedon (1987). Not all of these scholars frame their work with reference to educational settings or address questions of power and inequality; nevertheless, their supporters have extended their work to critical discourse research in education.

The above scholars have influenced a second generation of scholars who are interested in the relationship between language, power, and education. These scholars include Corson (1993), Cummins (1996), Edelsky (1996), Giroux (1992), Gee (1990), Heller (1994), Kress (1989), Lemke (1995), Luke (1988), and Simon (1992). Other influential scholars, such as Fairclough (1992a) and Wodak (1996), whose work has not necessarily focussed on educational practice, have nevertheless had an important influence on contemporary critical discourse research in education. There is, in addition, an emerging group of critical discourse researchers who have benefitted from the work of the more established researchers cited above. These researchers are associated with work in feminist pedagogy, anti-racist education, critical pedagogy, and cultural studies. Their work will be discussed in greater detail below.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Two important contributions of critical discourse research in language and education have been in extending and redefining theories of language and in reconceptualizing theories of identity.

With reference to theories of language, many critical discourse researchers have framed their work with reference to poststructuralist theories of language. In doing so, they have extended and reconceptualized the structuralist theories of language associated with the work of Saussure (1959). Saussure argued that language is an arbitrary system of differences in which elements gain their meaning only from their relation to all other elements. For structuralists, the building blocks of language structure are signs that comprise the signifier (or sound-image) and the signified (the concept or meaning). For structuralists, it is the linguistic system itself that guarantees the meaning of signs, and Saussure asserts that each linguistic community has its own set of signifying practices that give value to the signs in a language. Critical discourse researchers, in contrast, argue that structuralist theories of language cannot account for the conflicting struggle over the meanings that can be attributed to signs. Poststructuralists argue that linguistic communities are not homogeneous, consensual spaces in which language use is predictable and conventional. For poststructuralists, linguistic communities are perceived to be heterogeneous arenas in which language is implicated in struggles over meaning, access and power.

Thus the theory of 'discourse' that is central to critical discourse research represents a departure from notions of discourse (units of language larger than the sentence) associated with much traditional sociolinguistic research. In critical discourse research, discourses are the complexes of signs and practices that organize social existence and social reproduction. The discourses of the family, the school, the church, the corporation are constituted in and by language and other sign systems. Discourses delimit the range of possible practices under their authority and organize how these practices are realized in time and space. A discourse is thus a particular way of organizing meaning-making practices. However, because the social meanings of any given discourse are open to contestation, language itself becomes a site of struggle.

The following critical discourse researchers are amongst a growing number of researchers who conceptualize language as a site of struggle. In the 1970's, Fowler, Hodge, Kress & True (1979), in extending the work of Halliday, argued that theories of discourse must be understood with respect to larger, frequently inequitable, social and economic processes. In the 1980's and 1990's, the work of Bakhtin, Bourdieu, and Foucault became particularly influential in redefining theories of language in the field of language and education: Bakhtin has helped to reconceptualize notions of 'voice' in language and education (Morgan, 1996; Sola & Bennett, 1985; Walsh, 1987); Bourdieu's conception of 'legitimate language' has been used to frame innovative sociolinguistic research (Martin-Jones & Heller, 1996; May, 1994); and Foucault has become influential in research in language arts (Gilbert, 1991; Hardcastle, 1985; Luke, 1988), textual analysis (Kress, 1989; Lemke, 1995), and second language teaching (Bourne, 1988; Peirce, 1989; Pennycook, 1994a). The common thread in the work of Bakhtin, Bourdieu, and Foucault is that language is not only an abstract structure; it is a practice that constitutes and is constituted by complex and unequal sets of social relationships.

Given the centrality of poststructuralist theories of language to critical discourse research, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been a concomitant interest in investigating and redefining theories of identity in language and education. As Weedon (1987, p. 21) argues, 'Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed.' While critical discourse researchers draw on diverse theorists in investigating identity in their research studies (see for example Heller, 1987; Willinsky & Hunniford, 1986), feminist poststructuralism offers a particularly articulate conception of the relationship between the individual and the social world. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Kriteva and Althusser, feminist poststructuralists (Henriques et al., 1984;

Weedon, 1987) link individual experience and social power in a theory of subjectivity.

The terms 'subject' and 'subjectivity' signify a different conception of the individual from that associated with humanist conceptions of the individual dominant in Western philosophy. Three defining characteristics of subjectivity are as follows: First, whereas humanist conceptions of the individual presuppose that every person has an essential, unique and coherent core, feminist poststructuralism depicts the individual as diverse, contradictory and dynamic; multiple rather than unitary; decentered rather than centred. Second, subjectivity is produced in a variety of social sites, all of which are structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different 'subject positions' – teacher, mother, friend, critic – some positions of which may be in conflict with others. For this reason, subjectivity is conceptualized as a site of struggle. Third, a logical extension of the assumption that subjectivity is multiple and conflicted is that it is subject to change. This is a crucial point for educators as it opens up possibilities for educational intervention.

Feminist poststructuralism has been particularly powerful in recent studies of the way in which children – and girls in particular – engage with texts. For example, both Davies (1989) and Harper (1995) draw on feminist poststructuralism to demonstrate how girls of different age groups are invested in a particular vision of themselves and the future that must be understood in relation to powerful discourses on gender – discourses that often produce disruptive and contradictory responses to texts. In a different context, Peirce (1995) draws on feminist poststructuralism to understand the extent to which the immigrant women in her research created, responded to, and sometimes resisted opportunities to speak English. McKay & Wong (1996) draw on feminist poststructuralism to theorize their research on the second language learning experiences of adolescent Chinese immigrant students in the USA. Feminist poststructuralism offers great theoretical promise to research on language, identity, and learning.

WORK IN PROGRESS

It is difficult to do justice to the quantity and quality of educational research in progress that is investigating the relationship between language, power and education. In some contexts, this research is collaborative and interdisciplinary, and is represented by collected works with a particular theoretical focus. In other contexts, the research is topic specific, and attempts to grapple with the particularities of language and power in a given educational setting. What follows is a partial representation of some of this work.

With reference to collected works, van Dijk's new journal, *Discourse*

& Society, established in 1990, and published in Amsterdam, has as its central mandate 'to bridge the well-known gap between micro- and macro-analyses of social phenomena' (van Dijk, 1990, p. 8). Van Dijk argues that because discourse and communication have both micro and macro dimensions, their analysis offers new ways of analysing complex social and political processes. Janks (1993) edits a series on critical language awareness which explores language practices in a changing South Africa, while Cope & Kalantzis (1993) have edited a collection that addresses the innovative research on genre and the teaching of writing in the Australian context. Mitchell & Weiler (1991) have edited a collection of articles that problematizes traditional conceptions of literacy and seeks to link fields as diverse as linguistics, anthropology, education, and reading and writing theory. Green's book series, 'Language and Educational Processes', published by Ablex, seeks to investigate language and learning across a variety of educational sites, while Luke's book series, 'Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education' published by Falmer Press, focuses on approaches to literacy education that directly address issues of access and equity. This series includes Gee's (1990) innovative sociolinguistic research, which draws on interdisciplinary perspectives on language and literacy.

Special journal editions on critical discourse research have increased in number. Martin-Jones & Heller (1996) have edited two special editions of *Linguistics and Education* titled, 'Education in Multilingual Settings: Discourse, Identities and Power'. The impetus for this special edition is the growing international research on the relationship between structures of power and bilingual discourse practices, both inside and outside classrooms. In a similar spirit, Sarangi & Baynham have edited a double special issue of *Language and Education* (1996) on 'Discursive Construction of Educational Identities.' In the field of English second language teaching, Norton (1997) has edited a special edition of *TESOL Quarterly* on 'Language and Identity', which incorporates innovative research in the international community on language, identity, and learning.

With reference to critical discourse research in given educational settings, the following work is indicative of the range of research in progress: In *higher education*: Pennycook (1996) draws on research on writing with undergraduate Chinese students in Hong Kong to argue that Western understandings of plagiarism and text ownership need to be problematized; Starfield (1995) draws on her ethnographic research on the development of academic literacy in a South African university to raise important questions about whose knowledge counts in tertiary education. In *multilingual education*: Goldstein (1997) draws on her research with immigrant women in Canada to argue that language choice in multilingual workplaces must be understood with reference to questions of power and access; Schenke (1991) brings insights from feminist pedagogy to bear

on her classroom research. In *language arts*: Delpit (1988) contributes to the debate on process-oriented versus skills-oriented writing instruction, arguing that teachers must teach all students the implicit and explicit rules of power in order to address the educational needs of black students; Fairclough (1992b) edits a collection that addresses ways in which critical language awareness can be applied in diverse educational contexts.

In the field of *assessment*: Holland, Bloome & Solsken (1994) offer critical perspectives on the assessment of children's language and literacy by drawing on diverse research in anthropology, sociopsycholinguistics and reader response theory; Morgan (1996) explores the intersection between assessment, critical language awareness, and subjectivity; Peirce & Stein (1995) draw on Kress's theory of genre to understand students' contradictory responses to a reading test. In the field of *second language acquisition* (SLA): Rampton (1991) draws on his research with Panjabi adolescents to argue that SLA research needs greater social and ethnographic contextualization; Peirce (1995) draws on her research with immigrant women in Canada to propose a theory of 'investment' that frames motivation with respect to the complex and changing identities of language learners. In *applied linguistics*: Corson (1997) stresses the need for a critically real ontology/epistemology that underpins research, while Lantolf (1996) celebrates diversity of research and theory.

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

While critical discourse researchers have great interest in rapidly evolving theories of language and identity, this is not always shared by an equally passionate commitment to the complexities of classroom practice. Students' voices are sometimes little more than a backdrop to discussions on the development of theory and teachers sometimes feel disempowered by abstract notions that appear unrelated to the challenges they face on a daily basis (see for example, Ellsworth, 1989). Furthermore, research that addresses complex questions of language and power with respect to inequities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation raises many difficult questions regarding the relationship between the researcher and the researched. What methodology is appropriate for exploring these questions? How can conclusions be validated? How can research ethics be maintained?

With reference to the researchers themselves, the gendered division of labour in mainstream educational research, in which theory construction is often associated with male scholars and application is associated with female scholars, has not escaped critical discourse research. By way of example, in Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard (1996), all the contributors to the theory section of the collection, 'critical discourse theory,' are males (Fowler, Kress, van Leeuwen, Fairclough, van Dijk) while the women

in the collection (Wodak, Ribeiro, Gough, Talbot, Caldas-Coulthard) are concentrated in the 'applications' section. Similarly, critical discourse researchers need to take up Wright's (1996) challenge to cultural studies that it not become Eurocentric and hegemonic, but a transnational, democratic field of study. This is a reminder that researchers need to be constantly on the alert for complicity in the perpetuation of unequal relations of power between the center and the periphery of academic power.

Finally – and this is ironical given my second point – critical discourse research has been unable to shake the hegemony of the English language in educational research internationally. While many of the leading theorists and researchers in this field are not anglophones (Bourdieu, Foucault, Wodak), their work has reached a wider audience only after being translated into English. In this respect, there is dramatic irony that the work of critical discourse researchers concerned with the hegemony of English internationally is published exclusively in English (see Peirce, 1989; Pennycook, 1994b; Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 1991). Critical discourse researchers cannot be complacent about complicity in the perpetuation of unequal relations of power in a variety of academic, social, and political relationships.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Because it is difficult to anticipate the future directions of critical discourse research in education, I conclude with a wish-list rather than a series of predictions. This wish-list must be understood in relation to the problems discussed in the previous section. First, I hope that critical discourse research will focus more directly on the interests, needs, and investments of learners and teachers, working collaboratively to address challenges and construct possibilities. As Connell et al. (1982, p. 29) found in their educational research in Australia, it was only when the researchers got close to the situations people found themselves in, and talked to them at length about their experiences, that they were able to make substantial progress in refining their research questions and in contributing to the development of theory. In a similar spirit, we need to be more explicit about the assumptions we bring to our research, the problems we have encountered, and the process whereby we have drawn conclusions. This will be invaluable to new generations of scholars and researchers.

Second, I hope that critical discourse researchers will continue to be responsive to broader developments in the humanities and social sciences. In this regard, we have much to learn from the innovative work of post-modern researchers grappling with questions of difference and marginalization. The work of Dei on anti-racist education (1997) is particularly noteworthy, and the collection edited by Bannerji (1993) is an important

contribution to debates on racism, feminism and politics. In a similar spirit, the collection of articles edited by Ferguson, Gever, Minh-ha & West (1994) constitutes an insightful analysis of the way certain people and ideas are privileged over others at any given time. By entering into a dialogue with researchers in other disciplines, we can not only learn from them, but contribute to interdisciplinary debates on language, power, and social justice.

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