THE ROLE OF THE WRITTEN MEDIA IN COVERING NEWS AND EVENTS – A CDA PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Media coverage of news or major events is almost always controversial and subject to debates. In the attempt to grasp the meaning, the causes and effects of the respective 'events' related in and by the media, one finds himself/herself in the difficulty to perceive what is written between lines, what lies behind words, what the media is actually trying to 'cover'. For analysts, it is even harder. CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) proves a helpful tool in analysing media discourse in relation to shedding light upon social, cultural or political events of major interest. It is what the following article undertakes to bring forth by showing how CDA manages to play a basic, theoretical role in a study that proceeds to discourse analysis of a certain type.*

Key-Words: *media discourse, political discourse, CDA, discursive practices*

In the introduction to his book, *Analysing Newspapers. An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*, John E. Richardson looks into newspaper discourse by referring to his views of *society*, *journalism* and *language*. In his view, 'Journalistic discourse has some very specific textual characteristics, some very specific methods of text production and consumption, and is defined by a particular set of relationships between itself and other agencies of symbolic and material power' (Richardson 2007: 1) which sets of characteristics 'that is, the language of journalism, its production and consumption and the relations of journalism to social ideas and institutions – are clearly inter-related and sometimes difficult to disentangle. In other words, 'they are different elements but not discrete, fully separate elements' (Fairclough, 2000, cited in Richardson, 2007: 1). In his opinion, news are in close connection to the actions and opinions of powerful social groups and, while it is evident that they have to be understood in connection to the target and intended audiences, it is wrong to consider that important issues such as 'contemporary democratic politics, social values and the continuing existence of prejudice and social inequalities' should be looked into outside the influence of journalism. They are key themes that are also the result of the 'structures, functions and power of journalism' (2007: 1). He argues from the beginning that his analysis of newspapers is from a CDA perspective, because CDA starts by identifying a

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social problem, then takes the side of those who suffer most and critically analyse 'those in power, those who are responsible and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems' (van Dijk, 1996: 85), and because 'in response to social inequality and the abuse of power, CDA demands 'politically involved research with an emancipatory requirement' (Tischer et al., 2000, cited in Richardson 2007: 2).

When discussing his view of language in the book, Richardson declares that his book is based on 'five fundamental assumptions about language', of which the first one is that 'language is *social*': it is 'central to human activity', 'it is through the use of language that we grant meaning to our actions; equally, it is through our use of language that we can attempt to remove meaning from our actions. As Blommaert (2005: 10-11) puts it:

> […] there is no such thing as 'non-social' language […] Any utterance produced by people will be, for instance, an instance of oral speech, spoken with a particular accent, gendered and reflective of age and social position, tied to a particular situation or domain, and produced in a certain stylistically or generically identifiable format.' (cited in Richardson 2007: 10)

Richardson then refers to the the 'kind of dialogue' language has with society, in which 'language is produced by society and … goes on to help to recreate it' (mind the dialectical relationship), and when he says that, he does not just refer to 'the way things are done'; language use 'goes on to recreate these social and sometimes institutional expectations – expectations that we all have when we pick up a newspaper or a magazine, that it will be written in a particular way' (2007: 10). The same 'recreation' of expectations is available when we listen to a *certain* political figure/leader preparing to make a statement on a *certain* subject in reference to which we have *certain* expectations. Also, depending on the political figure in question, we may have different expectations that depend on the speaker's political background and views, on his/her educational background, but ours as well, on the context in which the discourse was created, on the general statement which is aimed at by making the respective statement. All these factors and aspects come to contribute to the use of language. To give an example, when, immediately after the London bombings from July 7 2005, the Prime Minister was announced to make a statement, there were definite expectations about the way in which language was going to contribute to expressing, explaining and accounting for *certain* events, the specific events that had just occurred. The expectations of people referred first to the amount of information they were going to receive from the statement (*who* was responsible, *when* did the events exactly take place, and most importantly, *how* it happened), then to the way authorities were doing everything possible to care for the injured and diminish the number of casualties, to

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what the authorities were planning to do next: whether any measures were going to be taken as a result of the attacks, whether they were going to try to counteract the event in any way. All these are expectations given by the 'context' in which the event occurred and by the people's understanding of the events, their political views, their involvement in the events, direct or indirect (whether they personally were part of the events or someone in their family, or someone they knew), and even, why not, the place where they were when the events took place or when they found out about them. All these contribute to the use of language and to what Richardson calls the 'social-ness' of language, in that 'language *first* represents social realities and *second* contributes to the production and *re*production of social reality or social life.' (Richardson 2007: 10)

The second assumption about language that Richardson takes into consideration when analysing newspapers is that 'language use enacts *identity*'. 'What this means is that people project themselves as a certain type of person, and that the identity that a person projects relates, in part, to the activities that they're attempting to accomplish.' (Richardson 2007: 11) In the case of political leaders this is an obvious situation, as, by the type of identity they construct for themselves, they seek to project a certain image of themselves and to impose certain assumptions about what they aim at. Even more, because the aspects of communication are open to a certain degree of interpretation, listeners may interpret the meaning of an utterance in relation to the speaker's identity and to the context as well. But, 'in order to fully appreciate communication you have to recognise the identities and the activities that are being acted out. Put another way, our understanding of the communicative act is shaped, in part, by who is speaking/writing and the context in which this occurs.' (2007: 11) This entails that the listener/reader has to have a certain knowledge of the speaker's identity and of the area in which the speaker acts, in our case, this implies that the listener has knowledge about the events the speaker talks about and also about politics or political aspects involving the issue under debate.

Richardson's third assumption about language and 'perhaps the most important one to grasp' is that 'language use is always *active*; it is always directed at *doing* something; and the way in which language achieves this activity is always related to the context in which it is being used' (2007: 12) He makes his point by relating to certain verbs expressing the *active* nature of communication that he uses to describe journalists' activity: 'journalists may use language to *inform* us of an event, or to *expose* wrongdoing, or to *argue* for or against something. Each of these verbs – inform, expose and argue for – demonstrates the active nature of communication in these cases.' (2007: 12) This same assumption, we would add, is valid in political speeches and statements when the speaker uses language to *announce* something, or to *debate* upon something or *argue* for something, with the aim of *convincing* of something. All these verbs denote the active nature of the communicative act.

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The fourth assumption, the one according to which 'language use has *power*', refers to the way in which some people's opinion is 'more credible and authoritative than the opinion of others' and how this is of great interest and worth taking into account when analysing discourse. In our opinion, as far as media discourse is concerned, this is language's most important aspect, as, when it comes to shaping opinions, the media's role is probably the most important one and the language used by the media and the way in which that language is used may act as a trigger for a whole manner of thinking, may create *trends* of thought, and this is, we think, a great responsibility.

> The power *of* journalistic language to *do* things and the way that social power is indexed and represented *in* journalistic language are particularly important to bear in mind when studying the discourse of journalism. Journalism has social effects: through its power to shape issue agendas and public discourse, it can reinforce beliefs; it can shape people's opinions not only of the world but also of their *place* and *role* in the world; or, if not shape your opinions on a particular matter, it can at the very least influence *what* you have opinions on; in sum, it can help shape social reality by shaping our *views* of social reality. For these reasons, and many more, the language of the news media needs to be taken very seriously. (Richardson 2007: 13)

The fifth assumption about language is that it is *political*, which comes, in Richardson's opinion as the natural outcome of the fact that language is social and has power. These two aspects of language combined inevitably produce a third one, which is that language is political. The assumption according to which 'language is 'clear' and acts as a neutral window on the world' needs to be contested, according to Richardson, because it can even be a dangerous assumption and, in order to sustain his argument, he quotes George Orwell and his essay on 'Politics and the English Language' (1946) where 'he argues two basic points: first, that ugly or offensive thoughts corrupt language; and second, that language can corrupt thought.' (2007: 13) As a socialist, Orwell suggests that 'the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely.'[2] 'Thus, language is a medium of power that can be used to sediment inequalities of power and legitimate iniquitous social relations.' (Richardson 2007: 14) Then, Richardson quotes a larger part of Orwell's essay that we shall render in what follows for the sake of its relevance for contemporary politics:

[2] George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit

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> In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. […] All issues are political issues, and […] When the general [political] atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. (Orwell cited in Richardson 2007: 14)

The same thing happens to language nowadays. In current political discourse, terms like 'democracy' and 'liberation' 'have become transformed to mean open markets and military occupation' (Cox 2004: 312).

Discourse analysis is inevitably always subject to 'change'. This makes it a complex and diverse field if we think of it in methodological, theoretical and analytical terms (see Wodak and Meyer, 2001; van Dijk, 1996; Brown and Yule, 1983; Fairclough, 1992). Discourse has become a concept because it is largely used today in academia and because of its different interpretations by different authors. According to Schiffrin (1994), there are two general approaches to discourse: the *formalist* or *structuralist* definition, the one that sees it as a particular unit of language (specifically, a unit 'above' the sentence), and the *functionalist* definition, according to which, language should be studied as 'language in use': '[…] the analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs.' (Brown and Yule 1983: 1). For functionalists, language is active, and discourse analysis is the analysis of what people *do* with language. (Richardson 2007: 24) Those theorists who take to this definition of discourse are preoccupied about '*what* and *how* language communicates when it is used *purposefully* in particular instances and contexts' (Cameron 2001: 13) What this kind of research does, and our present work evidently goes for this type of research, is to assume that 'language is used to *mean* something and to *do* something and that this 'meaning' and 'doing' are linked to the context of its usage'. 'In other words, in order to properly understand discourse we need to do more than analyse the inter-relations of sentences and how they hang together as a cohesive and coherent text. To properly interpret, for example, a press release, or a newspaper report or an advert,

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we need to work out what the speaker or writer is *doing* through discourse and how this 'doing' is linked to wider inter-personal, institutional, socio-cultural and material contexts.' (Richardson 2007: 24)

CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) represents one of the bodies of work that take up the functionalist definition of discourse. Critical discourse analysts go further than accepting that discourse is 'language in use' and promote the aim 'of linking linguistic analysis to social analysis' (Woods and Kroger, 2000: 206). Responding to the idea that discourse must play a part in producing and reproducing social inequalities (as a result of accepting that language use contributes to the (re)production of social life), CDA 'seeks to have an effect on social practice and social relationships' (Tischer *et al*., 2000: 147) – of disempowerment, dominance, prejudice and/or discrimination – and that such critical analysis may take place 'at different levels of abstraction from the particular event: it may involve its more immediate situational context, the wider context of institutional practices the event is embedded within, or the yet wider frame of the society and the culture' (Fairclough, 1995b: 62). Out of the general principles of CDA established by Wodak (1996) and cited by Richardson, there are four key themes that require more profound discussion as they apply both to political discourse and media (newspapers) discourse: 'the constituted and (re)creative character of discourse; power and social relations in discourse; ideology; and hegemony.' (Richardson 2007: 27)

Discursive practices in critical media studies

Richardson discusses discourse in relation to 'idealism' and 'materialism', to reach the conclusion that CDA 'appears to adopt elements of both Materialist and Idealist perspectives on social structure: language use is shaped by society and goes on to (re)produce it.' (2007: 28), as CDA views discourse 'as a form of social practice. Describing discourse as social practice implies a *dialectical* or a two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them.' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, cited in Richardson 2007: 28, his emphasis). However, Richardson argues that there is a tendency in CDA to regard discourse independently, 'as a thing that *in itself* can include or exclude, reproduce social inequalities or effect social change' and that, for instance, Fairclough's going as far as suggesting that contemporary social changes are 'constituted to a significant extent by changes to language in practice' may come close to 'an Idealistic conception of social reality' which contradicts 'Fairclough's commitment to Marxist social theory.' To his support, he brings Fairclough's critique of Tony Blair's representation of the global economy, analysed by Jones and Collins who, in response to Fairclough's arguing that, in Blair's speech, 'alternative ways of organising international economic relations are

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excluded from the political agenda by these representations' (1992: 129), point out that '[…] all the excluding and marginalizing, within mainstream politics and media, not just of forthright anti-capitalist critique but even sustained and honest factual examination of political events and their history, is being done not by 'these representations' but by people.' (Jones and Collins cited in Richardson 2007: 29) It would seem that, 'idealizing' discourse, Fairclough omits that the 'agents' are always the 'people', except that, we would add, maybe Jones and Collins do not understand by 'representations' what Fairclough understands, which is 'relations, identities ad institutions which lie behind them' (i.e., behind 'the norms and conventions' of discourse), and by that we understand 'people' as well. 'Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.' (Fairclough 1992: 64)

Richardson considers that CDA may sometimes run the risk of 'abstracting' issues under discussion to such an extent as to 'isolate' them from the real subjects, the *people.* A materialist perspective would hold that language use 'cannot *in itself* alter the course of society. Racism, for instance, is not something that can be isolated as a 'thing' in a text, but exists as a relationship between the text, its producers and inequalities in society. To be clear, social change is only possible through people acting upon the world. Therefore, the approach to CDA that we adopt 'conceives at once of a *subject* who is produces by society, and of a *subject* who acts to support or change that society. […] this human subject is constituted in ideology, and at the same time acts to make history and change society' (Coward and Ellis, 1997, cited in Richardson 2007: 29). Because, Richardson argues, 'language use is one way in which subjects – people – may act upon society.' (2007: 29).

Discourse, power and social relations

The fact that questions of power are of central interest to CDA may be interpreted in two different ways: on the one hand, critical analysts interpret a piece of text or talk looking at the relations of power that are given by the *context* in which the text or talk occurs: either *local* (setting, time, participants) or *global* (as part of organizational, institutional actions) (see van Dijk, 1996); and on the other hand, the piece of text or talk is regarded as empowering language use, that is, discourse that contributes, by content, context, purpose, rhetoric, to social change. (see Fairclough, 1992) It is commonly agreed upon that power bears upon the production, consumption as well as the understanding of discourse. Admitting that CDA 'engages with, analyses and critiques social power and how this is represented and, both explicitly and implicitly, reproduces in the news', Richardson formulates the question 'what *is* social power?'. Although power is 'another incredibly slippery concept', one that has been endlessly dealt with in academic discussion about what

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is *is* or what it *means*, Richardson chooses to take one more perspective and expand it, that of Steven Lukes (1974) who distinguishes three *faces* of power: 'the view of the pluralist' (that Richardson calls the 'one-dimensional view'), the view of their critics (which he calls the two-dimensional view) and a third one which he will call the three-dimensional view of power. According to Richardson, the one-dimensional view 'focuses on behaviour, on outcomes and in the making of decisions on which there is observable conflict. This one-dimensional view of power is simplistic because it emphasises the importance of *conscious* initiation and explicit decision-making. It therefore takes 'no account of the fact that power may be, and often is, exercised by confining the scope of decision-making to relatively "safe" issues' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970 cited in Richardson, 2007: 30).

The second 'face' power 'brings in the notion of the 'mobilisation of bias' into the definition of power, and critiques those who benefit from the 'rules of the game' 'are placed in a preferred position to defend and promote their vested interests' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970 cited in Richardson, 2007: 31). This is important, in his opinion, if we want to understand how journalists and the news media 'are *used* by social groups with power' and how 'power is instrumental in making 'non-decisions'': for instance, releasing *certain* stories or foregrounding certain policy decisions over others, thus challenging the values and interests of the decision-maker. (2007: 31) As a conclusion, the 'two-dimensional view of power retains the behaviourist focus of the one-dimensional view, but expands its analysis to allow 'considerations of the ways in which decisions are prevented from being taken on potential issues over which there is an observable conflict of (subjective) interests' (Lukes, 1974, cited in Richardson 2007:31).

The third view of power suggests that 'power should be viewed as a more *systemic* phenomenon.', because the second 'face' of power makes it possible for groups and institutions to succeed in 'excluding potential issues from the political process', allowing individuals and groups to gain power 'from their social relations to others and their position in a hierarchical social system.' To 'logically' better explain it, he cites Lukes: the structural biases of the system are 'not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups and practices of institutions'.

> A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his attitudes, beliefs, and very wants. (Lukes cited in Richardson, 2007:31)

As a conclusion, Richardson suggests that all this 'occurs *through discourse* and, specifically, in the ability of language to act ideologically.' (2007: 32, emphasis added).

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Discourse and ideology

In an attempt to trace the history of the concept of 'ideology' and how it is used, out of an 'incapacity' to define what it 'really' means which, according to Terry Eagleton is not due to the 'low intelligence' of workers in the field, but to 'its whole range of useful meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other' (Eagleton, 1991: 1), Richardson informs that it 'was originally coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracey in the years after the French Revolution to refer to 'a new science of ideas, an idea-logy, which would be the ground of all other sciences' (McLellan, 1986, cited in Richardson 2007: 32). Eagleton also considers tracing the term through histories a better option than trying to 'theorize' it: "The word 'ideology', one might say, is a *text*, woven of a whole tissue of different conceptual strands; it is traced through by divergent histories, and it is probably more important to assess what is valuable or can be discarded in each of these lineages than to merge them forcibly into some Grand Global Theory." (1991: 1). He does, however, draw a list of definitions for the word, not only to show that some of them are incompatible with one another, but also that the lines of thought they bear upon are different, in that some of them follow the epistemological tradition, while others follow the sociological one. For the same reason Eagleton enumerates the definitions, 'to indicate the variety of meanings', we shall render his list as well:

"*(a)* the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life;
(b) a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class;
(c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
(d) false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
(e) systematically distorted communication;
(f) that which offers a position for a subject;
(g) forms of thought motivated by social interests;
(h) identity thinking;
(i) socially necessary illusion;
(j) the conjuncture of discourse and power;
(k) the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;
(l) action-oriented sets of beliefs;
(m) the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality;
(n) semiotic closure;
(o) the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure;
(p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality[3]"

[3] I will cite here Eagleton's endnote to the list of definition: "For a useful summary of the various meanings of ideology, see A. Naess et al., *Democracy, Ideology and Objectivity*, Oslo 1956, pp. 143 ff. See also Norman Birnbaum, 'The Sociological Study of Ideology 1940-1960', *Current Sociology*, vol. 9, 1960, for a survey of theories of ideology from Marx to the modern day and an excellent bibliography."

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In asking himself 'What is ideology', Eagleton concludes that there are roughly six different ways in which we can identify ideology. First, 'the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life', which is a definition that is 'both politically and epistemologically neutral, and is close to the broader meaning of the term 'culture'. (1991: 28). By this perspective, we would understand 'the whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes in a particular society; it would allude to the the way individuals 'lived' their social practices, rather than to those practices themselves, which would be the preserve of politics, economics, kinship theory and so on.', and this sense is wider than the sense of 'culture' ('artistic and intellectual work of agreed value'), but narrower than the anthropological definition of culture ('all of the practices and institutions of a form of life'). The problem with this meaning of ideology is that it seems 'unworkably broad and suspiciously silent on the question of political conflict'.

The second meaning of ideology, which, according to Eagleton, is slightly less general, 'turns on ideas and beliefs (whether true or false) which symbolize the conditions and life-experiences of a specific, socially significant group or class' (1991: 29). With this second interpretation, 'ideology' is related to the idea of a 'world view', though whereas 'world views are usually preoccupied with fundamental matters such as the meaning of death or humanity's place in the universe', 'ideology might extend to such issues as which colour to paint the mail-boxes.' (1991: 29).

A third definition of the term 'attends to the *promotion* and *legitimation* of the interests of such social groups in the face of opposing interests.', which interests 'must have some relevance to the sustaining or challenging of a whole political form of life. Ideology can here be seen as a discursive field in which self-promoting social powers conflict and collide over questions central to the reproduction of social power as a whole. This definition may entail the assumption that ideology is a peculiarly 'action-oriented' discourse, in which contemplative cognition is generally subordinated to the furtherance of 'arational' interests and desires. It is doubtless for this reason that to speak 'ideologically' has sometimes in the popular mind a ring of distasteful opportunism about it, suggesting a readiness to sacrifice truth to less reputable goals.' (1991: 29) In this case, ideology is regarded rather like a 'rhetorical' than 'a veridical kind of speech', being less concerned with the situation in itself and more with 'the production of certain useful effects for political purposes.' (ibid.)

The fourth meaning of ideology concentrates on the activities of a 'dominant social power' whose 'dominant ideologies help to *unify* a social formation in ways convenient for its rulers', and this meaning is regarded by Eagleton as 'still epistemologically neutral' and it can be improved in the fifth definition according to which 'ideology signifies ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation.' At the same

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time, he notices that on this definition 'it is hard to know what to call a politically oppositional discourse which promotes and seeks to legitimate the interests of a subordinate group or class by such devices as the 'naturalizing', universalizing and cloaking of its real interest.' (1991: 30)

And finally, the sixth meaning of ideology, in Eagleton's perspective, 'retains an emphasis on false or deceptive beliefs but regards such beliefs as arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole. The term ideology remains pejorative, but a class-genetic account of it is avoided.' (ibid.)

As far as the question of ideology 'as 'lived relations' rather than empirical representations' is concerned, Eagleton argues that, if this conception is true, it gives rise to important political consequences.

In written media, social events are almost always tackled from an ideological position whether the author is doing this in a conscientious manner or not. Regardless of the different meanings of ideology, it is a fact that dominant social powers will always use 'ideology' and ideological beliefs to legitimate actions, to redirect interests, to call for measures, to proceed to social changes. A better understanding of the ideological discourse helps to unveil truths and strategies, thus getting closer to the 'circles of interests' and, by that, gaining perspective and looking at *a* bigger picture. Which is always profitable when analysing media discourse.

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