Donald Matheson

Media
Discourses

Analysing Media Texts

MEDIA DISCOURSES:
Analysing Media Texts

Donald Matheson

First published 2005

SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

To declare that 'we live in a media-saturated world' is to acknowledge the seemingly all-encompassing array of media discourses that lend shape to so many of our everyday experiences. Our very sense of ourselves as people – our cultural values, beliefs, identities and the like – is actively fashioned anew by our daily engagement with these discourses in a manner at once banal and profound. And yet so intimately embedded are we in this process that we seldom pause to recognize its pull or purchase, let alone call into question the typically subtle ways it works to define the nature of the realities around us.

Donald Matheson's *Media Discourses* boldly addresses this challenge to deconstruct the discursive mediation of our social world. In focusing on the key issues demanding our attention, two primary objectives inform the ensuing critique. The first is to clarify what can be understood by the elusive term 'discourse' by exploring the common ground among a variety of theoretical approaches to examining media language, images and symbolic forms. The second is to introduce readers to the extensive range of ideas, concepts and frameworks available to conduct specific investigations in practical ways. Accordingly, with these objectives in mind, Matheson proceeds to interrogate a diverse selection of media forms and practices, including advertisements, newspaper accounts, crime drama, television interviews, radio phone-in shows, sports reporting, popular magazines, and weblogs. In the course of the discussion, *Media Discourses* opens up discourse analysis as a methodology to readers new to the field, as well as to those seeking further depth or updates on recent developments. In so doing, it demonstrates how discourse analysis can further our understanding of the media in relation to debates about consumerism, the

construction of celebrity, ethnic prejudice and participatory journalism, among other topical concerns.

The *Issues in Cultural and Media Studies* series aims to facilitate a diverse range of critical investigations into pressing questions considered to be central to current thinking and research. In light of the remarkable speed at which the conceptual agendas of cultural and media studies are changing, the series is committed to contributing to what is an ongoing process of re-evaluation and critique. Each of the books is intended to provide a lively, innovative and comprehensive introduction to a specific topical issue from a fresh perspective. The reader is offered a thorough grounding in the most salient debates indicative of the book's subject, as well as important insights into how new modes of enquiry may be established for future explorations. Taken as a whole, then, the series is designed to cover the core components of cultural and media studies courses in an imaginatively distinctive and engaging manner.

Stuart Allan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: THE BIG IDEAS ABOUT LANGUAGE, SOCIETY AND THE MEDIA

> Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change.
>
> (Williams 1961: 55)

We study the media – indeed, call that study 'media studies' or 'communication studies' – because of an assumption that television, newspapers, texting and other widely available communication forms play an important role in mediating society to itself. We assume that the shared world of a culture – what its members think is real, interesting, beautiful, moral and all the other meanings they attach to the world – is partly constructed by each member and partly by institutions such as newspapers or radio stations, and prevailing ideas. To use Raymond Williams' words quoted above, the ways of seeing each other which people find in a soap opera such as *EastEnders* are part of their ways of living, part of the shared meanings and purposes that make a particular culture.

Discourse analysis of the media allows us to describe and assess this sharing of meaning in close detail. It analyses which representations of the social world predominate. It analyses what kinds of interactions media texts set up between people and the world and between the powerful and the rest. And it analyses how meaning is made differently in different media texts, and therefore what different ways of seeing and thinking tend to be found there.

At the heart of the book is a concern with the power of media institutions

that is established through their ways of using language. Bourdieu (1991) calls this the oracular power of dominant institutions in society:

> If I, Pierre Bourdieu, a single and isolated individual, speak only for myself, say 'you must do this or that, overthrow the government or refuse Pershing missiles', who will follow me? But if I am placed in statutory conditions such that I may appear as speaking 'in the name of the masses' . . . that changes everything.
>
> (cited in Webb et al. 2002: 14)

Thus, while on one level the meanings that are found in the media are shared, the power to make those shared meanings is not shared. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for example, has in 80 years established itself in the role of addressing the British as a nation together, something newspapers with their narrower demographics could never do. It is through that discursive power that the BBC is a site of national culture (Scannell 1992). Media professionals in general are able to write or speak in authoritative ways about the world, making claims to know what other people feel or what is really happening which few others in society could get away with. They do so to the extent that they draw on the authoritative discourses of journalism and other media practices.

Discourse analysts also propose that these kinds of powerful ideas do not precede particular media texts, but are made and renewed through each instance of language use. Each text is potentially important and valuable to study.

Media discourse analysis is not alone in making claims about the centrality of language in social life. There is a large and rapidly expanding body of research on discourse across the academic disciplines, which is drawn upon throughout the book. Discourse analysis is often an interdisciplinary activity, so that we find important analyses of media language tucked inside arguments about quite different problems. For example, van Dijk's (1988a) persuasive model of how the news works by calling up mental models arises partly out of a project on racism in society. This is both discourse analysis's strength – it allows us to study media discourse in ways that show the media's connection to other parts of social and cultural life – but it also makes discourse analysis sometimes appear a 'large and rather messy' hotchpotch (Cook 1992: 2). It's a common complaint from students that there isn't a straightforward and definitive textbook on media discourse that tells them what to do. Because of the diversity of approaches to discourse, such a book would be very hard to write, but this book does set out to guide media students and academics through some of those approaches, bringing together key arguments on different kinds of media text and showing how each is valuable in different ways in unpicking the workings of media discourse.

The structure of the rest of the book will be discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter, but let us look briefly at what discourse analysts have established as their theoretical common ground, by way of an introduction to this kind of study. The chapter will discuss in turn:

- how language is interconnected with thought and action
- the importance of studying language as something people do rather than as deep, immanent structure.

Language and social life

Uniting the diverse studies of discourse is the conviction that analysts cannot separate out people's thoughts and actions from the communicative means that they use to perform them. Language and human society are inextricable. The violence of war, the discursive psychologist, Michael Billig (2001) argues, is not what happens when talk has been exhausted, but is the direct result of language: 'It is no coincidence that the only species which possesses the ability of language (or what Pinker 1994, has called "the language instinct") is a species which engages in organized warfare. Utterance is necessary to kill and die for the honour of the group' (Billig 2001: 217). Almost all, if not all, discourse analysts would agree that there is no war without talk about war. Organized violence depends on language to organize it at every level, from conceiving of state-sanctioned violence to planning to giving orders, and it depends on language to justify it through philosophy, heroic stories and the construction of notions such as national honour and the dishonourable enemy.

This interest in language's central role in social life is what sets discourse analysis apart from formal linguistics. Once we've described the rules of phonology, grammar, syntax and the other systems that form the nuts and bolts of a language, we are still a long way from analysing it. As pioneers of **sociolinguistics** found when they began tape-recording people's conversations, these only rarely formed complete grammatical sentences but they could not be dismissed as disorganized. Language use is surrounded by many more rules or conventions and does much more than simply denote objects and actions. Once we extend language analysis beyond simple sentences, we are in a realm that linguistics is not well equipped to explain, and which involves sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and further disciplines besides. The term 'discourse analysis' is used by researchers in this tradition rather than terms such as 'linguistic analysis' or 'textual analysis' to signal that language is being situated within these wider frameworks on the nature of thought, experience and society.

But how language fits into the human world, and therefore how we theorize discourse analysis, are the subject of a fair amount of dispute among these scholars. To take Billig's example, some discourse analysts would want to argue that much of our shared lives happens *through* language, and discourse analysis can therefore help us understand social practice – including anti-social practice such as war. Language for these scholars is part of social practice. Others argue that war can only happen because it is surrounded by and *structured* by statements of justification and glorification. Language, in this view, is a store of values and ideas about war, the site therefore of ideology. It has been studied by structuralist and poststructuralists not so much as part of everyday lived activity but more as a structure which shapes the way people can experience the world. The idea of language as a structure has tended to lead to an interest in how far language determines what they can think and experience, and we turn to that next, as it has been a key issue in media discourse analysis.

Does language determine thought?

There are many questions here, such as whether it is possible to think outside the bounds of language, or how babies think before they come into language, or how people can ever know what is outside of language when their knowledge happens inside language which, while fascinating, are beyond the book's scope. What is important here is that we acknowledge the range of theories about how far languages shape people and where these theories take us in thinking about the media. The strongest versions of 'linguistic determinism' are often structuralist, that is, they seek to map structures of language onto the structures by which our experiences are organized.

If French has one word, *mouton*, for the two English words *mutton* and *sheep*, if its system of language divides up the world differently to that of English, what does that mean for the two languages' speakers? This is often called the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, after two linguistic anthropologists. They observed differences in the basic structures of North American languages, such as Hopi, to European languages and postulated that grammar, syntax, vocabulary and other structural features of a language might cause us to think in certain ways. They argued that Hopi speakers, for example, might see the world differently because their language does not have the distinction of past and present that a language such as English has. Fitch (2001) gives the example of the Japanese word, *amae*, which she translates roughly as 'the bittersweet love between a mother and her child': 'The fact that there is no direct translation into English would suggest, from the strong version of the Sapir/Whorf Hypothesis, that conceptions of relationships between mothers and their

children are vastly different in Japan than in English-speaking countries' (Fitch 2001: 59). It's a fascinating scenario that people might live within different worlds, literally talking past each other. However, the theory in its strong form does not hold much water. We can, for instance, translate *amae* using more than one word, so it is not an idea unavailable to English speakers just because we don't have a single word for it. Moreover, as is discussed shortly, a language is not a simple, homogenous structure: it contains many ways of talking and many competing meanings; it borrows words from other languages or invents them; and it is always changing. **Ideology** – in the sense of fixed patterns of thought – isn't hard-wired into language.

But it's harder to refute the notion that certain patterns that we find in a language *shape* rather than determine what speakers can experience or think. Montgomery (1995: 223) suggests speakers can think outside conventional ways of using language but, when not consciously doing so, they tend to follow them. They will use gendered vocabulary such as 'waiter' and 'waitress', 'actor' and 'actress', unless they stop to think about the gender hierarchies that this vocabulary or **lexis** implies – that the male version is somehow the standard from which the female version differs. So analysis of structures of language such as its vocabulary is often used to gather evidence about relations of power or ideologies at the heart of the culture to which the language belongs. This thinking leads, in the influential **critical linguistics** school of analysis (Chapter 1), to the argument that journalists and other media workers can never evade the power structures which shape the vocabulary and other aspects of the way the language makes sense. Particularly in relation to the news, it has sought to show that there is a systematic ideological bias to the media that is traceable to the kind of language we find there. This is not analysis of the basic building blocks of language, but of the 'ruts in the road' that have been formed over time in language use because of the dominance of certain social interests.

So language is ideological, in this view, to the extent that it causes us to think in ways that support the interests of powerful groups. This tradition centres on Marx and Engel's statement in *The German Ideology* (1997–8; first published 1846) that, 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.' So language can be analysed in order to identify the limited set of representations of the world which surround members of a society, and thereby show the limits placed on consciousness by the unequal society they live in. Thus, it may cause women to speak in patriarchal terms or DJs to define good music as the latest releases from the big labels.

But how do dominant groups such as patriarchal males and capitalists pull this off, in order to maintain their unequal share of resources in society? And what happens when different dominant power structures, such as the patriarchy

and capitalism just mentioned, collide? Debate over such questions has tended to lead to a more complex view of ideology, which takes us away from seeing culture as a product of social power structures, from which we can 'read off' an image of the power of the ruling classes, and towards seeing culture as a place where power is struggled over and a place with many corners, in each of which different groups are dominant. Thus, Gramsci talks of 'hegemonic' power as the ability of various groups to convince the rest of us in society that ways of thinking that are in their interests – that keep their unequal share of resources in a particular part of society – are right and proper.

Hegemony is about meaning, about struggles over whose ways of making sense of things dominate within an area of social life. Therefore language and other **symbolic systems** are central to power. As Fiske (1991: 347) puts it, 'the textual struggle for meaning is the precise equivalent of the social struggle for power'. When people speak, they want to be understood and want to understand when they produce or consume language. People therefore draw upon ways of making sense which they know are shared and have some force within the community in which they are talking. People align ourselves, then, with dominant structures of meaning, often with those which have become so firmly established that they have the status of common sense. This is a common observation about the media. Journalists, talkshow hosts, soap opera scriptwriters, among others, all seek to construe the world in ways that will make sense to the wider public, mixing together specialist voices and translating them into common knowledge. This is what gives the media their power as 'cultural workers' (Ericson et al. 1987: 17–18), but it is also what draws them into ideological structures. The seemingly apolitical, no-nonsense, common-sense view of 'everyone' (Brunsdon and Morley 1978) is more often than not the view of those with most power in society to impose their perspectives, and to make them appear natural and beyond dispute. Thus, things make most sense – they fit together most easily in language – if we tap into well-established ideological structures. It is thus important to think of ideologically loaded language not just as words spoken by dominant groups but as words we all use if we want to get on in society.

Take the example of a criminal court case about an alleged theft. We see the power of property holders in the language used – in the accusation that someone stole something, the defence to that charge and the sentencing – and in other symbols of power such as the judge's raised bench and the flag or coat of arms behind the bench, much more than in the physical force of the police or guards around the accused. The real power lies in the power to decide what makes sense here, what is normal, what is right. And when justice is *seen and heard* to be done it reminds not just the accused of its power to enforce certain ideas of right and wrong but also everyone else who is present at that use of

language as well. It works to reassure those threatened by those who commit crime and it works to convince those who were unsure. This, as we will see in Chapter 1, is a form of power in which news media reporting of crime plays a major role.

Language speaks us

But where do these ideological structures come from, and precisely how is that power to define how things make sense reinforced in each court case or news story? The structuralist or semiotic tradition within media and cultural studies has been effective in critiquing the ideological work done in a culture's shared texts, but has been less successful in identifying the processes by which this happens. Barker and Galasiński argue that this is where contemporary critical discourse analysis is particularly useful:

> Though cultural studies has convincingly argued the philosophical case for the significance of language and has produced a large body of textual analysis, it is rarely able to show how, in a small-scale technical sense, the discursive construction of cultural forms is actually achieved . . . [C]ritical discourse analysis (CDA) is able to provide the understanding, skills and tools by which we can demonstrate the place of language in the construction, constitution and regulation of the social world.
>
> (2001: 1)

The point here is two-fold. Close analysis of language seeks to show precisely how a group of words carries a particular meaning, which we can then identify as performing a political role in reinforcing or challenging power. This is the analysis of representations. But it also seeks to show how language is located in human relationships, and therefore how it places us in relationship to hegemonic meanings. This is the analysis of language as social action. Hodge and Kress write:

> In order to sustain these structures of domination the dominant groups attempt to represent the world in forms that reflect their own interests, the interests of their power. But they also need to sustain the bonds of solidarity that are the condition of their dominance.
>
> (1988: 3)

Discourse analysis thus builds most successfully on the tradition of textual analysis when it draws upon its sociological, anthropological and philosophical heritage by looking at how people use language to make sense of things and get things done in daily interaction. These fields' emphases on language as the

process rather than the product of society and culture take them beyond the question of whether language determines thought and experience. For in this **phenomenological** view, language doesn't determine experience: it is a kind of experience. In the philosopher Martin Heidegger's terms (1971: 192), we take shape as people living in a particular world when we use language: 'it is language that first brings man about, brings him into existence' (cited in Robinson 1997). When we speak, language speaks, and when it speaks us, we become who we are. What does this mean, and how does it take us in a different direction to the structuralist thinking discussed above?

The first point to make is that consciousness and human experience are better regarded not as attributes of individuals, but as socially shared. We think of ourselves as individuals, because we live within an individualistic culture which values how we differ from each other. But as the sociologist Karl Mannheim (1936) has said, 'strictly speaking, it is incorrect to say that the single individual thinks. Rather it is more correct to insist that the individual participates in thinking further what others have thought before' (cited in Shoemaker and Reese 1996: 105). If this is true of thought, it is most certainly true of language. We participate in language sometimes as individuals and sometimes as representatives of groups, but we participate in historically evolved and sedimented processes of communication through language.

There are two important ideas here. The first is that language depends on people actively doing something, that is, actively participating in it. **Ethnomethodologists** and other sociologists of everyday activity regard people as agents in their own destiny, and hence see the world, particularly today's information-rich environment, as 'vastly meaningful, providing seemingly endless resources and sites for constructing agency' (Gubrium and Holstein 1995: 565). But at the same time, language isn't ours in a personal sense, but belongs on the same level as our identities, relationships and activities in the outside world. We enter the social world by drawing on the resources of language. This is partly what Heidegger means. Wittgenstein (1953: #257) makes a similar point: a private language would make no sense, because naming something is an act we need a listener for, who accepts the act, in order for us to accomplish it.

Bakhtin and Vološinov[1] describe this participation in social life through language as a 'dialogic' process. That is, by talking, people enter into dialogue with past writers or speakers, whose words they are borrowing or disagreeing with, into dialogue with potential readers and into dialogue with many others who have some claim to the kind of ideas and language they are drawing on. That makes a word a crowded space, and Bakhtin (1981) speaks of the struggle people engage in to make their own meanings out of these already spoken and spoken-for words and styles and intonations: