

LANGUAGE

AND

Power



NORMAN FAIRCLOUGH

Language and power

Norman Fairclough



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General Editor's Preface

It is appropriate with the publication of its first book to indicate the intentions and scope of the new Language in Social Life Series, both to show how Norman Fairclough's *Language and Power* admirably provides its corner-stone and to encourage readers and other potential authors to join us in this imaginative enterprise.

Our objective is to focus on language in social life but with a particular agenda in mind. To highlight how language, in its everyday as well as professional usages enables us to understand issues of social concern. More specifically, to examine how the ways in which we communicate are constrained by the structures and forces of those social institutions within which we live and function. To display, too, how these institutions and our roles within them are in frequent measure defined by such particular language use. Such an agenda suggests three points of reference for books within the Series: on the one hand that of language, on the other that of social theory, and thirdly, that of the particular professional context providing as it were a location for critical linguistic exploration.

Each of these reference points, however, is necessarily defined in relation to each of the others. Language, in this Series, is no autonomous construct, simply a system of sentences, but language as discourse, as action; similarly, society is no mosaic of individual existences looked in some stratified structure but a dynamic formation of relationships and practices constituted in large measure by struggles for power; professions not as guilds but as institutions whose conventions are ideologically shaped by such social relationships and realised through such particular discourses.

Characteristic of books in the Series will be their attitude to the relationship between theory and practice. It is expected that they will make a theoretical contribution to our understanding of

language and society, exploring especially how they interconnect, but this contribution will arise from the description and interpretation of practice, accounting for what takes place. The intimacy of theory and practice is not by chance; it is crucial if we are to relate actions that are specific and local to the social institutions that give rise to them and if we are to explain what transpires in terms of theories of modern society.

To achieve this lays a responsibility upon the writer; he or she seeks after all a triple respectability, in relation to language and linguistics, to society and sociology and, most importantly, to those professional groups whose actions provide the data and the motivation for the descriptions, interpretations and explanations of the books which the Series will publish. We have, then, by necessity a multiple audience, which, while we hope it is a supportive and not adversarial one, is unlikely to be equally conversant in these three worlds. The books will have to make the connections, show the interdependence and display the relevance of the design.

To achieve this we are constructing books which reflect a general pattern, aimed at the engagement of the reader. One which emphasises problem-sensing (what are the linguistic, social and professional dimensions of the topic in question), problem-identifying (how the topic can be illuminated through the procedures of critical discourse analysis), problem-solving (what action may be undertaken in respect of the issues explored through the analysis in question). We are in no doubt that of these the third is the most problematic. Necessarily so, since it lies outside any book and is not in our hands. To ignore it, however, would rob the Series of its engagement with social action and its *raison d'être*. We hope that the various measures undertaken in the composition of the books in the Series, and their style, will make this commitment to action plain.

I referred earlier to how this book provided the cornerstone to the Language in Social Life Series. Let me expand on the reasons for saying so. Norman Fairclough begins by defining the characteristics of Critical Language Study, distinguishing it from those other orientations within Linguistics which have sought to connect language with society. Central here are two assertions; that language is social practice and not a phenomenon external to society to be adventitiously correlated with it, and that language seen as discourse rather than as accomplished text

compels us to take account not only of the artefacts of language, the products that we hear and see, but also the conditions of production and interpretation of texts, in sum the process of communicating of which the text is only a part. This emphasis is of central importance for Linguistics. It marks a movement away from the merely descriptive towards the interpretative, to an inclusion of the participants in the linguistic process, to a reconciliation of the psychological and the social with the textual, which radically alters the map of conventional linguistic study.

As importantly for Sociology as for Linguistics, he constructs a theory in which the connections between the orders of discourse (in Foucault's terms) the motivated and conventionalised selections from available linguistic options, and the orders of society are shown to be co-determined. To explore the one is to begin the explanation of the other. Such an explanatory process is most conveniently and most tellingly undertaken through the analysis of communication in particular social institutions, thus tying the macro analysis of society with the micro analysis of particular social exchanges. The arguments adduced here are important for students of social theory. They tie the abstractions of Bourdieu, Foucault and Habermas to the actualities of encounters, linking the work of British and Australian "critical linguists" (Fowler, Kress, Martin and others) to the mainstream of European social theory.

In other ways, too, this book exemplifies the Series of which it is the initiator. Throughout, Norman Fairclough offers his readers a carefully illustrated guide to the practice of the theory, selecting key texts for analysis and exploration, offering his own interpretations and explanations to be challenged by the reader with a different social history to his own. In sum, providing a discrete working out of the principles of Critical Language Study announced in his introductory Chapter.

From this analysis and exploration two salient principles emerge. The first, that of the primacy of particular research sites, is one already identified in distinct circumstances by Gumperz. On this view, research sites are not of equivalent salience and value to critical linguists. Rather than expending analysis on linguistic objets trouvés (in Jakob Mey's telling phrase) the texts that so to speak fall off the back of trucks and bear no special social significance, we should address our talents as explorers and explainers to those texts which evidence crucial moments in

discourse where participants may be placed at social risk during the communication, suffering disadvantage in consequence of the inequalities of communication. Occasions spring to mind easily: in medical, legal, educational, caring encounters, instances of interethnic miscommunication where life chances are at stake, migrant learners in an alien society, children at school, the speech and the hearing disadvantaged.

The second principle refers to the selection from the structures and modes of language itself. Critical language study identifies particular areas of language as having the greatest meaning potential for the understanding of the social process, privileging certain options from the whole array of features which are present for analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 within the book carefully outline these features and demonstrate how such an explanatory analysis can be carried out on the chosen texts. Here Norman Fairclough's distinctions between the experiential, relational and expressive values of linguistic features are of considerable significance for discourse analysts and linguists more generally, especially those in the Hallidayan tradition. Notable here is the discussion of intertextuality, in particular how the concept of social and interpersonal struggle can be seen working out, as it were, in the structures of discourse. The extended case-study of the discourse of Thatcherism provides an exemplary model.

We identified earlier one role of the Language in Social Life Series as the advancing of particular causes in the context of the need for social change. We did so not because we naively attribute to language either the ultimate cause of current disorders and inequities or, more romantically perhaps, because we believe that greater awareness of language in critical linguistic terms will easily restore or create the equilibrium many seek, but because it is our belief that an understanding of the social order is most conveniently and naturally achieved through a critical awareness of the power of language. More directly even, that access to and participation in the power forums of society is dependent on knowing the language of those forums and how using that language power enables personal and social goals to be achieved. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that Chapter 9 of this book addresses this central question and especially so in relation to language education in the school. In many countries and many educational systems there is current concern surrounding the need for an enhanced communicative competence among school

children from all social backgrounds. It is in itself interesting, and not perhaps surprising, that most concern centres around the concept of language deficit and attributes causes of such deficit to the inadequate learning by certain pupils of language seen as text. Now there are notable exceptions both to this focus and to its implied remedy, some of the most imaginative in fact from within Australia; what Norman Fairclough's book demonstrates very clearly is the implausibility of such a narrow definition of communicative incompetence in terms of text, the need to connect discursal study and teaching to an understanding of contemporary society, and to see the critical consciousness of discourse as a basis for social emancipation.

Language and power, language is power; these are the themes of this first book in this new Series. The groundwork is laid, both linguistically and social theoretically, for the volumes that will follow. Several are in production or in active preparation, illuminating different professional worlds and exploring particular crucial communicative sites. All will derive benefit and a grounding from Norman Fairclough's book. It is a source of much personal pleasure to me as an erstwhile colleague and collaborator at the University of Lancaster where many of the ideas contained here were debated in detail, that his book has set this new Series off to such a productive start.

Christopher N Candlin
General Editor
Macquarie University, Sydney

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Introduction: critical language study

'How do we recognize the shackles that tradition has placed upon us?
For if we can recognize them, we are also able to break them.'

- Franz Boas

This book is about language and power, or more precisely about connections between language use and unequal relations of power, particularly in modern Britain. I have written it for two main purposes. The first is more theoretical: to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power. The second is more practical: to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation.

The more theoretical objective stems from my own academic background, which is in linguistics. Linguists, and especially those working in sociolinguistics (which is often said to deal with 'language in its social context') have had quite a lot to say about language and power, but they have not in my opinion done justice to the rich and complex interrelationships of language and power. There are for example many studies of 'standard' and 'nonstandard' social dialects, and of how the amount of prestige which attaches to such dialects depends on the power of their users. There have also been studies of the ways in which power is exercised in conversation and other forms of talk between people, though perhaps surprisingly few. These studies have generally set out to *describe* prevailing sociolinguistic conventions in terms of how they distribute power unequally; they have not set out to *explain* these conventions as the product of relations of power and struggles for power. The point is that sociolinguistic conventions have a dual relation to power: on the one hand they

incorporate differences of power, on the other hand they arise out of – and give rise to – particular relations of power.

My main focus in this book will be on the second of these – on trying to explain existing conventions as the outcome of power relations and power struggle. My approach will put particular emphasis upon ‘common-sense’ assumptions which are implicit in the conventions according to which people interact linguistically, and of which people are generally not consciously aware. An example would be how the conventions for a traditional type of consultation between doctors and patients embody ‘common-sense’ assumptions which treat authority and hierarchy as natural – the doctor knows about medicine and the patient doesn’t; the doctor is in a position to determine how a health problem should be dealt with and the patient isn’t; it is right (and ‘natural’) that the doctor should make the decisions and control the course of the consultation and of the treatment, and that the patient should comply and cooperate; and so on. A crucial point is that it is possible, as we shall see, to find assumptions of this sort embedded in the forms of language that are used.

Such assumptions are *ideologies*. Ideologies are closely linked to power, because the nature of the ideological assumptions embedded in particular conventions, and so the nature of those conventions themselves, depends on the power relations which underlie the conventions; and because they are a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted. Ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour, and the form of social behaviour where we rely most on ‘common-sense’ assumptions. But despite its importance for language, the concept of ‘ideology’ has very rarely figured in discussions of language and power within linguistics, which is itself symptomatic of their limitations.

It is not just because it has been neglected that I have chosen to focus upon the relatively neglected ideological dimension. My main reason for this choice is that the exercise of power, in modern society, is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language. We live in a linguistic epoch, as major contemporary social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas have recognized in the increasing importance they

have given to language in their theories. Some people refer to 'the linguistic turn' in social theory – though more recently, writers on 'postmodernism' have claimed that visual images are ousting language, and have referred to postmodernist culture as 'post-linguistic'. It is not just that language has become perhaps the primary medium of social control and power, though that is noteworthy enough; language has grown dramatically in terms of the uses it is required to serve, in terms of the range of language varieties, and in terms of the complexity of the language capacities that are expected of the modern citizen. If, as I shall argue, ideology is pervasively present in language, that fact ought to mean that the ideological nature of language should be one of the major themes of modern social science.

Language is therefore important enough to merit the attention of all citizens. In particular, so far as this book is concerned, nobody who has an interest in modern society, and certainly nobody who has an interest in relationships of power in modern society, can afford to ignore language. That, to some degree or other, means everyone. Nevertheless, many people with precisely such interests have believed they could safely ignore language. This is perhaps not surprising, for the general level of attention and sensitivity to language has been woefully inadequate, and in particular the teaching of language in schools has to a remarkable extent contrived to ignore its most decisive social functions. This cannot be blamed on the teachers, because the same is true of most of the academic work on language which the teachers have been offered as models. This gap between the level of consciousness which the contemporary position of language demands, and the level it actually attracts, is another reason for my choice of focus.

It is important to emphasize that I am not suggesting that power is *just* a matter of language. There is always a danger, in focusing upon one aspect of a social relation or process, of being tempted to reduce it to that aspect alone, especially if as in this case it is a neglected aspect. Power exists in various modalities, including the concrete and unmistakable modality of physical force. It is a fact, if a sad fact, that power is often enough exercised through depriving people of their jobs, their homes, and their lives, as recent events in for example South Africa have reminded us. It is perhaps helpful to make a broad distinction between the exercise of power through *coercion* of various sorts

including physical violence, and the exercise of power through the manufacture of *consent* to or at least acquiescence towards it. Power relations depend on both, though in varying proportions. Ideology is the prime means of manufacturing consent.

The more practical objective mentioned in the opening paragraph is to help increase consciousness of language and power, and particularly of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others. Given my focus on ideology, this means helping people to see the extent to which their language does rest upon common-sense assumptions, and the ways in which these common-sense assumptions can be ideologically shaped by relations of power. Although I shall be painting a somewhat depressing picture of language being increasingly caught up in domination and oppression, this will I hope be offset by my faith in the capacity of human beings to change what human beings have created. Resistance and change are not only possible but continuously happening. But the effectiveness of resistance and the realization of change depend on people developing a critical consciousness of domination and its modalities, rather than just experiencing them. The more practical objective of this book is therefore to make a contribution to the general raising of consciousness of exploitative social relations, through focusing upon language.

My aim has been to write a book which is accessible not only to students and teachers in higher education, but also to a variety of people in other spheres, and I have correspondingly not assumed that readers have specialist backgrounds in language study or indeed in social theory, though I imagine that most readers will have some acquaintance with one or the other. I have had in mind in particular those who are or may eventually be in a position to act as educators in a broad sense – who may be able to draw upon books such as this in order to produce appropriate informative or teaching materials suited to the particular needs and circumstances of particular groupings of people. This would include, most obviously, students, teachers and teacher trainers, and those who are involved in various forms of specialist vocational or professional training (of health workers or social workers, for instance). But there may be others, such as political and trade union activists, or activists in the peace, feminist, black,

or other social movements, part of whose work is educational in this broader sense.

I have tried to make this book as accessible and as practically usable as possible, but no matter how practically organized a book of this sort may be, it is clearly not enough on its own for reaching the majority of the people who could make good use of some form of critical language analysis – and that, as I have said, really includes everyone. It needs to be complemented by pamphlets, leaflets, and other types of material (film, video, cartoons) which many people find more digestible than books. My hope is that among the readers of this book there will be educators who will be able to take this work forward.

I am sure that readers will have already formed some impression of the political position from which I am writing this book. It is widely understood that people researching and writing about social matters are inevitably influenced in the way they perceive them, as well as in their choice of topics and the way they approach them, by their own social experiences and values and political commitments. I think it is important not only to acknowledge these influences rather than affecting a spurious neutrality about social issues, but also to be open with one's readers about where one stands. I shall spell out in some detail my view of the society I belong to in Chapter 2; for the moment, let me say that I write as a socialist with a generally low opinion of the social relationships in my society and a commitment to the emancipation of the people who are oppressed by them. This does not, I hope, mean that I am writing political propaganda. The scientific investigation of social matters is perfectly compatible with committed and 'opinionated' investigators (there are no others!), and being committed does not excuse you from arguing rationally or producing evidence for your statements.

The approach to language which will be adopted here will be called *critical language study*, or CLS for short. *Critical* is used in the special sense of aiming to show up connections which may be hidden from people – such as the connections between language, power and ideology referred to above. CLS analyses social interactions in a way which focuses upon their linguistic elements, and which sets out to show up their generally hidden determinants in the system of social relationships, as well as hidden effects they may have upon that system.

APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE STUDY

There are many existing approaches to the study of language, so why do we need CLS? Because, while each of the approaches which I review below has something to contribute to CLS, they all have major limitations from a critical point of view. Just as important, the relationship which is standardly assumed to hold between these various branches of language study is itself unsatisfactory in a critical perspective, a point which I develop at the end of this section. The approaches to language study which I shall review are those of: linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence, conversation and discourse analysis. I shall also say something about views of language in recent social theory. My aim is only to give a brief characterization of these complex areas of study from a critical perspective, and I shall refer mostly to 'mainstream' work, although most of them include other work which is in contention with the mainstream, and sometimes closer to a critical perspective than the mainstream.

Linguistics

The term *linguistics* is used ambiguously within the mainstream: it sometimes refers to all the branches of language study which are inside the academic discipline of linguistics (some are not), but it sometimes refers just to the branch which has the most privileged status, 'linguistics proper' as people occasionally say. I am referring here to 'linguistics proper', which is the study of 'grammar' in a broad sense: the sound systems of language ('phonology'), the grammatical structure of words ('morphology') and of sentences ('syntax'), and more formal aspects of meaning ('semantics'). Linguistics has won widespread acceptance within the human sciences and beyond for the centrality of language among human phenomena, and of language study among the human sciences. It has done so by developing an impressive array of systematic techniques for the description of language which have been widely drawn upon as models in other human sciences, and which any modern approach to language study (including CLS) can benefit from.

However, the achievements of linguistics have been bought at the price of a narrow conception of language study. It is a