In Defense of Critical Discourse Analysis

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I enjoyed reading the article "Multiple Discourse Analyses of a Workplace Interaction." The comparative analyses of the particular interaction nicely showcase some of the similarities and the differences between the analytic approaches applied. I feel, however, that the critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the interaction, done by Marra and Holmes, has some limitations. These limitations lend credence to two of the most common criticisms leveled against CDA: (1) the approach too easily allows for a researcher to uncover the findings that he or she expects or wants to find, and (2) the approach lacks methodological rigor. I would like to argue here that Marra and Holmes's analysis (1) highlights a potential weakness of CDA in terms of the first criticism, and (2) is not evidence of the weakness of CDA methodological rigor but rather a poor application of CDA methodology.

All social science research is based on assumptions that constrain and direct the findings of the research to some degree. An enormous amount of linguistics research has been generated based on Chomsky's (1965) assumption that a description and explanation of language could be based on "an ideal speaker-listener . . . [who] is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance" (p. 3). Applied linguistic approaches to language study arose based in part on the assumption that the "errors" Chomsky referred to are often not, in fact, errors at all, but systematic patterns of language use. Fairclough (1992), in outlining CDA, argued that applied linguistic approaches such as sociolinguistics implicitly assume a static, abstract system, *Language*, used by populations or groups cooperatively and in ways which can be predicted by surface-level social variables. CDA, on the other hand, is based on assumptions of disharmony, conflict, and power differentials between populations and groups, and on the assumption that language use reflects, reproduces, and changes these social phenomena. CDA, then, is interested in and makes explicit assumptions about social phenomena, language use, and a mutually constitutive relationship between the two. The complexity and dynamic nature of this research focus demands that the assumptions behind it be well formed. In addition, the fact that the assumptions are made explicit demands that they seem reasonably accurate, or at least feasible, to the consumers of the research. These requirements apply at a general level and at the level of specific instances of research. If the assumptions are problematic, then findings based on those assumptions will be problematic.

Marra and Holmes's analysis is a case in point. In the introduction to their analysis, Marra and Holmes make clear what their assumptions are about the social context of the interaction. They state that "Tom and Claire work in an organization characterized by hierarchical relationships. There are large differences in the degree of power and authority wielded by different members of the organization" (p. 368). Given this background, they assume that "Tom's role as a senior manager" (p. 368) will provide him with certain privileges of power when interacting with Claire, who has a "less influential role as senior policy analyst," (p. 368) and they do in fact find evidence for this in the discourse features of the interaction. Their assumptions about the social power inherent in the situation fit with their understanding that

CDA research looks at "the enactment, exploitation, and abuse of social power in everyday interactions" (p. 367), and their findings support the assumptions.

I would argue that a more accurate understanding of social power in any situation attributes some type(s) and degree of power to each participant. The hierarchical structure at their company, and Tom's and Claire's place in that structure, are important factors in a critical analysis of their interaction. However, there is another key feature of the social context which Marra and Holmes fail to acknowledge. In the second analysis in the article, Vine and Stubbe note that gender bias "was a 'hot issue' in the organization at the time of recording" (p. 360). Although we cannot know for certain, it seems safe to assume that Tom, as a senior manager, was aware of some general discontent among female employees. We know that Claire was aware of this discontent, was party to it, in fact, because Vine and Stubbe tell us that Claire "and some of her female colleagues interpret [Claire's being overlooked for the shared acting manager position] as another example of gender discrimination within the organization" (p. 359). Given this additional background, a reinterpretation of the power dynamics in the interaction should acknowledge that Claire comes to the interaction with her own type of power, specifically a power of resistance.

Because Marra and Holmes's assumptions about the social context of the interaction are not rigorously formulated, their analysis and some of the conclusions they draw can be easily challenged. Much of what they say about the phone call Tom receives, for example, seems almost to derive from their assumptions about the power relationship rather than from the linguistic evidence, which itself is not detailed. Lack of a detailed and rigorous linguistic analysis is not a problem exclusive to this one segment of the interaction. I would argue that it is the second major weakness of this analysis. Unlike the first weakness discussed above, though, this weakness is not necessarily inherent within the CDA framework. Marra and Holmes claim that "while scholars adopting a CDA approach are committed to studying discursive forms of the use and abuse of power, the precise methods they use to achieve this are very variable" (p. 368). CDA does in fact draw on techniques from different discourse analytic approaches, and analysts may apply these techniques in various ways. However, certain points of interest are common across much of the seminal work in CDA—including verb tense, voice, modality, and nominalization—and methodological guidelines do exist for CDA, though one might be led to conclude otherwise after reading Marra and Holmes. Fairclough (1992), who is one of a handful of scholars associated with developing the foundations of CDA, has extensively outlined procedures for carrying out a comprehensive analysis. Oddly, Marra and Holmes do not refer to him at all.

A more rigorous linguistic analysis following at least some of the procedures suggested by Fairclough (1992), for example, supported by a richer understanding of the social power dynamic behind the interaction, would result in a fuller, stronger analysis of the data, one that might contradict some of Marra and Holmes's interpretations. Given the space limitations here, I cannot address all the points of Marra and Holmes's analysis or offer a more complete CDA of the data, but some additional analysis of Tom's use of argument structure to justify the behavior Claire is criticizing might suffice to make the point. In the course of asserting his definition of the situation, as well as his status and his right to define the situation, Tom engages in an extraordinary amount of hedging, using an array of expressions, adverbs, and other qualifiers. Following are only several examples taken from the beginning of the transcript (shown here with the transcript line numbers in parentheses):

*yeah **i don't think** it's a it's **a question of** er favourability* (line 17)

*i mean it was **a question more** [9:00] practicalities **more than anything else*** (line 18)

*plus the fact that **i suppose** it had **a little bit** also to do that with the fact that er* (line 22)

*um i **probably** had more immediate contact with him 4//you know\4* (line 23)

*/er so\\ **from my point of view** it was simply logistics* (line 31)

In the entire transcript, there are few examples of categorical statements by Tom. The extensive hedging, coupled with frequent use of filler words and expressions—*er, um, I mean, you know*—has to be interpreted as indicating something beyond a straightforward assertion of authority.

Tom also deflects personal responsibility for the action in a number of ways, including by pronominalizing the action of overlooking Claire—using the pronoun *it*—instead of using the first person pronoun *I* with active verbs. Again, these are only several examples from the beginning of the transcript:

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*i mean **it** was a question more [9:00] practicalities more than anything else* (line 18)

*plus the fact that i suppose **it** had a little bit also to do that with the fact that er* (line 22)

*/er so\\ from my point of view **it** was simply logistics* (line 31)

Just in the tokens examined above, we see that Tom is generally unwilling to commit to definite statements on the action he took in overlooking Claire, and in fact he attempts at several points to deflect personal responsibility for this action. Tom does indeed use the argument structures of assertion, denial, and defense, as Marra and Holmes note, but a closer look at his language use indicates behavior that is closer to discomfiture, avoidance, and defensiveness than assertion, denial, and defense. Looking only at the propositional content of many of his statements, one might conclude that Tom is simply attempting to reinforce the status quo; but looking critically at his linguistic behavior, one sees someone who, at best, is making excuses for the status quo, and who is likely becoming increasingly wary of the discontent within his organization.

As Seidlhofer (2003) demonstrates, the debate surrounding CDA is not likely to subside any time soon, particularly as more people engage in practicing the approach. Open debate about CDA and the research conducted under its name should contribute to strengthening the approach, and this piece is written in that spirit.

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