

Opening lecture for DN 17: Reflexivity and Critique in Discourse

Title: Discourse studies and the articulation of reflexivity and critique

I would like to open this conference with some personal reflections. While reading the abstracts you submitted to this conference, it became quickly clear that it would be utterly unfeasible to distil just one theme, merely one common thread, only one theoretical argument or philosophy that connects the work of everyone here. Instead, your papers are marked by many family resemblances, overlapping concerns and perspectives, each one offering a unique perspective on some aspect of reflexivity and/or critique in discourse.

We have contributions that focus on reflexivity and critique in the contexts of: learning new languages; anti-racist pedagogies; political debates on nationalism, war and peace; policy and governance procedures; as well as on narratives on self and identity. You will discuss reflexivity and critique in the context of education, journalism, sociology, literature, politics and art. As a way of opening this conference, I think it is possible to distil some recurring conceptualizations of reflexivity and critique from the online book of abstracts. I hope that my little sketch may be of some use to you in the transdisciplinary discussions that will be held in the upcoming days.

When preparing for this conference, I was surprised to find out how rarely students of discourse make use of the concept of reflexivity. Whereas the notion of critique has been debated thoroughly under the influence of neo-Marxists, post-Marxist and poststructuralist approaches to discourse – most notably in CDA – the same cannot be said about reflexivity (Blommaert 2001, Blommaert et al. 2001, Forchtner and Tominc 2012, Lemke 2002, Verschueren 2001, Breeze 2011, Forchtner 2011, Slembrouck 2001, Glynos and Howarth 2007).

Reflexivity comes in many guises. In linguistics, socio-linguistics, the ethnography of communication and linguistic pragmatics, reflexivity is more commonly treated under the headers of poetics, metalinguistics, metapragmatics, or metadiscourse. The idea is not so much that interlocutors can occupy a meta-position *outside* of language, communication or discourse, but rather that the resources that allow us to communicate, also allow for communication about communication itself (Hyland 2005, Meinhof 2004, Bublitz and Hübler 2007, Caffi 1998, Hübler 2011, Verschueren 2004, Coupland and Jaworski 2004, Nazaruk 2011). Without this principle, no analysis – and certainly no critical discourse theory or analysis – would be possible. One might even argue that the social – and therefore the political – would cease to exist without it (Zienkowski 2014, 2015).

Pragmatic and interactive perspectives on discourse offer a notion of reflexivity as a universal characteristic of human communication. Reflexivity is conceived as an interaction-based feature of human cognition and a human sense of self. At the same time, it is argued that all discourse is inherently interactional, dialogical or polyphonic.

This quasi-universal understanding of reflexivity can be traced back to the work of symbolic interactionists such as Mead and to the pragmatism of authors such as Dewey, Cooley and James that preceded them (Bacon 2012, Taylor 2004, Wiley 2006, James 1947, Williams 1961, Mead 1967). The reflexivity we encounter here can be described as the human ability to act interpretively upon the (potentially) interpretive behaviour of others. It is grounded upon an internalisation of the other's viewpoint into one's own sense of self in the twin process of interaction and interpretation.

Since a great deal of interaction is mediated and performed discursively, this quasi-universal reflexivity gets refracted through the lenses of identity, narrative, genre, and medium. We come to ourselves as embodied discursive beings, and so do the others we interact with. Moreover, if we consider reflexivity as a quasi-universal for human (inter-) action, it follows that there is a reflexive – and potentially critical – dimension to *all* aspects of symbolic, social and material reality. And this reflexivity may or may not be marked in varying degrees in the discourse through which we communicate.

In a provoking thought experiment I stumbled upon preparing for this conference, the author Talbot J. Taylor asks his readers to imagine a world without metadiscourse. It is a world where we have to do without the basic words we use in order to describe language and communication more generally. We can no longer talk about 'talking', 'tricking', 'lying' or 'conversing' with each other. But neither is it possible to judge statements on their veracity, accuracy, truthfulness or poetic qualities. In fact, it is a world in which even the designation of something as 'meaningful' becomes unconceivable and where even the concept of a human language ceases to be. Taylor's point is that metadiscourse is a constitutive dimension of all human communication and cannot be understood as a mere add-on to supposedly more 'basic' forms of communication and language use such as 'pointing' or 'naming' (Taylor 2000).

Nevertheless, even if reflexivity operates as a quasi-universal feature of human communication and subjectivity, not all forms of reflexivity are alike. The many contributions to this conference testify to this. Reflexivity and critique are always refracted through the discursive prisms through which they are articulated. An unschooled labourer working in a sweatshop will not reflect upon her living conditions in the same way an academically trained anthropologist might. But this does not mean that this labourer would be necessarily uncritical about her position, her bosses, the inequalities that characterize her social relationships or the political discourse that justifies these inequalities. Likewise, two social scientists studying the practices that allow that sweatshop to operate may articulate very different forms of critique depending on their frameworks, the genres in which they write, the methods they deploy and the voices they rearticulate in this process.

The contributions to this conference explore reflexivity and critique in a variety of modalities. For instance, reflexivity and critique will be discussed as capacities that can be honed and sharpened. In this sense, these notions operate as pedagogical or educational goals. Simultaneously, they can be thought of processes that are stimulated and performed by metadiscursive means in concrete teaching situations. Reflexivity and critique can also be thought of as key aspects of political practice. Without the metadiscursive capacity to distinguish between the voices, arguments, narratives and identities of social actors, it would be impossible to criticize the way political opponents

seek to overpower each other in debates, policies and other practices. A metadiscursive capacity and awareness is key to processes of persuasion, domination and control, but also for dialogue, emancipation and the creative shaping of social relations in the image of a more equal or just society.

Moreover, even though many discourse analysts may use the label 'critical' in order to mark their identities as left-wing intellectuals, right wing authors will be more than happy to claim the term as well. Everyone criticizes everyone in politics. Critique is such stuff debates are made of. It can be understood as a process of societal renewal that operates as an antidote to stale and depoliticizing understandings of self and society. Critique can be conceptualized metaphorically as a discursive autoinoculation against the crystallization of standpoints, positions, identities, boundaries and societal structures into rigid and limiting patterns of control and domination. But this does not mean that critique comes in a single predefined form. It is not the monopoly of academics, far from it. It is also the trade of poets, writers, comedians and talk-show hosts. Think of the daily show, the online discourse of the 'black lives matter' movement, the satirical outlets of the Onion or the French Guignols. As a practice predicated on implicit or explicit theories about (discursive) reality, it operates as a key dimension of any transformative praxis.

The issue of politics brings us to the question of ideology. Like all abstractions, reflexivity and critique potentially operate as ideological 'values'. People value these signifiers in different ways depending on their subject positions and the habitus they acquired through their socialisation into various societal fields. In sociology and anthropology, the researcher's 'reflexivity' has become a key aspect of many heuristics. Anthropologists are stimulated to reflect upon the effects of their involvement in the 'field' of investigation as well as in the 'academic field' to which they belong. They are supposed to reflect critically on the usage of their conceptual frameworks as well as on the way their observations, interactions and writings impact upon the realities they co-construct. Researchers cannot claim a monopoly on reflexive practice.

Bourdieu's plea for a reflexive sociology testifies to a consideration of reflexivity as a value peculiar to social science. His theory of field and habitus presents us with a society in which most social actions are marked by relatively low degrees of reflexivity. It is the task of the reflexive sociologist then, to escape from the trappings of the pre-constructed categories offered by mainstream discourse and to think relationally, so that (s)he can reflect critically upon the processes whereby social realities come to be defined and experienced as social problems. Put differently, even though anyone may display some degree of reflexivity in times of crisis (when field and habitus do not match), Bourdieu deals with 'reflexivity' as a field specific requirement for the development of a sociological habitus. His reflexive sociology is meant to offer something more than a mere 'intelligent commentary' upon a social phenomenon by an expert, a journalist or a politician (Bourdieu 1992). It is a mode of analytical engagement that allows researchers to deal critically with the very categories through which the social world problematizes itself.

Nevertheless, reflexivity may be more common than Bourdieu's approach seems to suggest. In this respect, one cannot bypass Anthony Giddens and his 'extended reflexivity' thesis. According to Giddens, self-reflexivity has become one of the defining

features of our highly modern times. He recognizes that *“sociology ... deals with a pre-interpreted world, in which the meanings developed by active subjects actually enter into the actual constitution or production of that world”* – an old pragmatist claim. But he adds that changes in communication technologies and structures, increasing global flows of money, images, ideas, and cultural change add up to an increasing awareness of the contingent nature of identities and convictions – the overall effect being a situation in which the reflexive question how to shape one’s life has become an integral part of everyday life, leading to a situation in which people are more free than ever to shape their lives (Giddens 1991, Adams 2006).

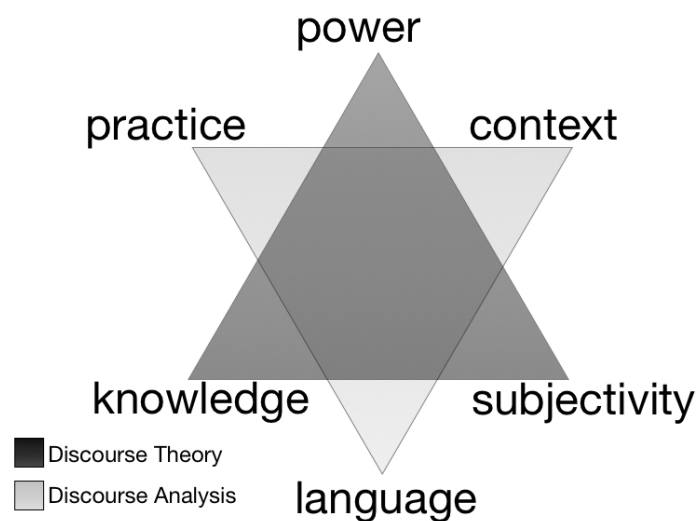
Reflexivity and critique are certainly important in our day and age. I don’t know if they are more important now than they have been in the past. But it is probable that explicit ‘reflexive’ discourses and practices have come to play a more important role in the truthful, deceitful and constitutive ways in which we monitor, articulate and value our selves. It should be noted that reflexivity is not only a symbolic value. It can be valued economically for those who are able to sell their financial audits, their devices for measuring and quantifying the functions of our bodies and online behaviour. Critical reflexivity can be commercialized just as much in the context of our own work as paid academics as when we act as novelists, producers, artists or comedians. But even if critique and reflexivity operate as important personal, professional, economic and – ultimately – ideological values in our day and age, they do not operate in the same way for everyone.

There is a reflexive component to the confessions dictators force out of their victims before executing them. And there is an element of control that goes along with the reflexive ways in which we deal with our bio-data generated by our iWatches or the ways in which we write about ourselves on blogs and in diaries. Moreover, propaganda can only operate effectively if people feel like they are articulating their own ideas and do not let others think for them. Entire economies are built on the reflexive capacities of advertisers, managers, psychologists, coaches and financial analysts. It seems as we are being haunted by highly modern Foucaultian spectre that incites us ‘to be reflexive’ or to govern the government of one’s self in most areas life. This type of reflexivity is not necessarily good or bad, but it is always dangerous – as Rabinow would put it. As critical students of discourse, I think it is important to heed Bourdieu’s warning and not to treat reflexivity and critique at face value.

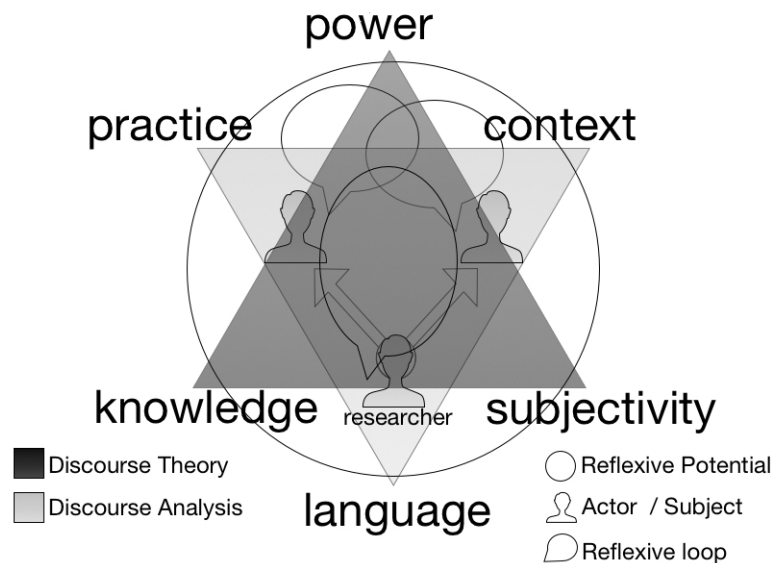
Critique and reflexivity are not the sole property of academics. These ideological values also infuse journalistic, psychological and even political ethics and self-images. Moreover, politically conscious citizens adhering to very different ideologies would be more than happy to articulate these terms into their hegemonic projects, dismissing the discourses of their opponents as naïve or politically correct nonsense. Social researchers should therefore train themselves to recognize the way others communicate their reflexive and critical stances to each other. At the same time, they should recognize that neither critique nor reflexivity frees us from ideology. We can merely loosen ideology’s hold over us, allowing ourselves the freedom to occupy a different position, a different point of view from which to analyse and re-imagine society beyond reality as we find it.

I would like to conclude with a question. What place(s) should we accord to the study of reflexivity and critique in the transdisciplinary field of discourse studies? In order to

visualize this place, I would like to elaborate a bit on the scheme of ‘discourse studies as theory and analysis’ proposed by. Discourse studies can be thought of as a field of investigation constituted by the overlapping areas of discourse analysis and discourse theory. Whereas DA can be described as a scientific field emerging in the articulation of answers to questions of context, identity and language use, DT can be understood as a field that problematizes subjectivity, power and knowledge Angermuller (Angermüller 2014, Angermüller, Maingueneau, and Wodak 2014). So, where do reflexivity and critique come in? The figure below was initially conceptualized as a map of the academic field of discourse studies. However, in order to rethink critique and reflexivity in this transdisciplinary field, we can also consider this map as representing the constitutive dimensions of social reality.



Seen as such, I would suggest that reflexivity only exists in acts of interpretive movement. Depending on where actors (i.e. researchers, interlocutors, interviewees, citizens) find themselves, they throw reflexive loops around themselves and specific dimensions of their discursive environments. These environments can be described in terms of language, discourse, identity, subjectivity, power and other aspect of contextual reality. Some of these loops leave ripples on the surface of language and communication for others to pick up and engage with. The hexagram depicted below thus represents an open discursive field in which subjects seek to grasp the meanings they articulate by engaging in metadiscursive strategies that partially fix who and what they are in an unequal and power-infused world whose boundaries can only be re-imagined through interpretive and critical praxis.



Critique can be thought of as a quintessentially political practice that requires reflexivity and metapragmatic awareness with respect to the power-infused ideological and hegemonic dimension of discourse and subjectivity. It is a label for discursive practices that challenge the presuppositions and conditions of established power relationships in public settings. It is a key condition for social change, but at the same time, it is important to realize that critique and reflexivity alone do not lead to social change. One may be very much aware of numerous possibilities for self-development or social change while having none of the resources for achieving personal or social change. We may know that we are destroying the planet and do nothing to stop it. For this reason, *"reflexive awareness and the delimitations of field enclosures uncoupled from resource realization amount to frustrated isolation. Reflexivity in this context does not bring choice, just a painful awareness of the lack of it"* (Adams 2006, 525).

I hope that this conference will be a venue for a critical exchange on the question how to realize the values of critique and reflexivity in everyday life, in education and in politics. A place where we not only reflect upon who we are and what we do, but also for examining what our investigations could mean to others in various spheres of life and for a just and democratic society in general.

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