Discourse, Power and Society

Introduction

This essay will analyse the relation between discourse, power and society. Its concern will be to design a model that accounts for the different ways in which power is present in discourse and thus in society - a model which might be used as a basis for the development of a framework for discourse analysis as well as for the conceptualisation of social change and its relation to language change.

In the first part I shall discuss what 'discourse' is and what role it plays with regard to the individual's identity, to the construction of social relationships, the interpretation of psychological processes, and to the creation of meaning. The second part will focus on how power is contained in discourse: I shall develop a concept of power which subsequently can be used to show how different aspects of discourse are related to different forms of power. The final part will briefly discuss some of the implications of the model developed in the preceding parts, especially with regard to discourse analysis and social change.

Discourse and its Role within Society

The notion of *discourse* refers to a view of language which regards it primarily as social practice: language both constitutes and is constituted by society (Fairclough 1992). *Discourse* is therefore first of all to mean language as a social phenomenon with its various aspects. Yet, the term *discourse* has also been used to designate particular 'modes of talking' associated with particular social institutions, which points to the fact "that social institutions produce specific ways or modes of talking about certain areas of social life, which are related to the place and nature of that institution" (Kress 1985). These 'modes of talking' have also be called *orders of discourse* (Fairclough 1989). As Fairclough (1992) points out, the importance of discourse lies in the fact that

it contributes to the construction of 'social identities', to the structuring of 'social relationships', as well as to the creation of systems of knowledge and belief.

Discourse plays a primordial role in the constitution of an individual's identity and self-understanding, for it is only "through social interaction, and in particular verbal interaction", that we construct a self-image (Watts 1991, p. 54). In an ever-ongoing dialogue with their social environment individuals draw upon existing discourses in order to shape their identity, their interests, and their social positions. A person's identity does not exist *a priori*, but has to be constructed and enacted continuously in order to be sustained (Cameron 1995, West and Zimmerman 1987 cited in Uchida 1992). Personal identity is not a fixed construct, but a continuing performance, and social 'codes' according to which particular identities are represented change over time. Thus, as Cameron points out, "the way gender is enacted on the surface through conventions of dress, bodily demeanour and social interaction has altered dramatically over the past twenty years" (Cameron 1995, p. 169). Such changes are the product of a dialectic process, for neither are individuals completely free to create their identities independently from already existing social structures, nor remain social structures unaffected by the individuals' choices.

It has been pointed out that personal discourse is shaped by society and that social roles are learned during childhood. This is reflected in Andersen's role-play study where children, aged 4 to 7, appeared to become more and more sensitive to social roles as their age increased (Ervin-Tripp et al. 1984). As Kress (1985) points out, individual speakers will primarily reproduce the discourse that they have previously learned. However, there is a number of different and often contradictory discourses at hand, providing speakers with a certain degree of choice, which enables them to shape at least partly their identities and social positions. One reason why personal identities are none the less largely determined by society lies in the fact that members of society behave in accordance with countless rules, which, widely unreflected, constitute their "practical consciousness" (Davis 1988, p. 79). Yet, it is only after such unreflected knowledge of the world is made explicit and is incorporated into our "discursive consciousness" (ibid.) that we can make a conscious choice with regard to our personal and social identities, and only insofar as we are able to shape our identity consciously is it possible for us not merely to reproduce a given social order, but to shape it according to our own preferences - preferences, which however will never be completely independent from our social environment.

This social environment, in which we live and with which we constantly interact, is constituted by a number of social networks and categories to which we belong and which we identify with. Social networks and categories are generally sustained by particular discursive

practices which fulfill a double function: on one hand they represent the world "in a way that blurs differences, antagonisms [and] conflicts of interests", thus playing an integrative role among [group] members; on the other hand they express the common interests and the distinctive characteristics of the group against other interests or particularities by exacerbating difference, hostility and superiority (cf. Hodge and Kress 1993). Thus, each group has its own discursive practices or *ideology* which, through collectively shared images and representations, co-ordinates the actions and world-view of its members (Thompson 1984). One aspect of group integration is the creation of a common classification system, which has an impact on structures of thought and feeling, and thus on the way group members conceive of the world (Hodge and Kress 1993, Lee 1992). However, ideologies structure society not only by defining social groups against other, often competing groups, but also by according their members a particular place within the social framework. This structuring effect of ideology is realised both in discourse and through discursive practice: within every social network ideas are sustained concerning the way different members of the network are expected to act, to speak and the position they are supposed to occupy within the group; at the same time group members constantly actualise their roles, either tacitly abiding by the rules present in their social environment or trying to challenge at least some of them and thus modifying the current ideology (cf. Moreau 1981). This dynamic concept of ideology, however, according to which ideological complexes are subject to constant modification, has a number of implications that are worth discussing.

First, I have tacitly assumed that there is not *a* social system, but a myriad of social networks, groups and categories which are all sustained by ideology. The social sphere is fragmented, "'society' as a unitary and intelligible object [...] is an impossibility" (Laclau 1983, p.22, quoted in Clegg 1989). Rather, it consists of an infinitude of individuals who, though they might have a range of things in common, are nevertheless all quite different from each other. Through the working of ideology, however, some of these differences are downplayed while others are given excessive significance. Thus, a social structure is created "on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences" (ibid., p.24).

Second, assuming that the social sphere is fragmented, we also have to postulate a fragmentation of the ideological: the various social networks which constitute the social system have all their own particular ideologies, which, drawing upon different types of discourse, integrate their members, provide them with specific roles, and distinguish them from other groups. However, due to overlapping networks and to the arbitrariness on which socially relevant distinctions are often based, it is quite common for individuals to be confronted with competing or inherently

contradictory ideologies. Black people, for example, might be compelled to adopt 'white' speech in order to improve their status within British society, being at the same time expected to assert their allegiance to the Black community by using 'black' features (Dalphinis and Nwenmely 1991). Similarly, women engaged in politics have been confronted with the dilemma that after lowering their pitch in order to gain authority they were criticised for their loss of femininity, which in turn was detrimental to their authority (Cameron 1995).

Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that, given a number of competing ideologies, we can only adopt a relativistic view of truth, for each ideology produces its own particular 'truth'. As observers we can never free ourselves from the working of ideology. Therefore, as Frow puts it, a theory of ideology shall not "assert a relationship of truth to falsity (and so its own mastery over error) but concern rather the production and the conditions of production of categories and entities within the field of discourse" (Frow 1985, p.203). According to Foucault, analysing ideology consists of "seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false" (Foucault 1980, p.118). And even Thompson, refusing to discard the critical conception of ideology, concedes that "[t]he critique of ideology is necessarily partial, fragmentary, incomplete; [that it] can never be conducted from a position outside of the history and the society to which we belong" (Thompson 1984, p. 188).

So far the focus has been on the relationship between individuals and their social environment. Yet, we are engaged in an ongoing dialogue not only with our social environment, but also with our psyche. In analogy to the way discourse serves us to structure the events of the outer world, we draw upon discursive forms in order to conceptualise our sensual and mental experience. Thereby language serves as a filter. It does not readily lend itself to the expression of any possible experience, for, as a result of its classificatory function, language is always somewhat imprecise, somewhat biased. As Cameron notes, "[t]he fit between experience and language is never exact, since words themselves are not exact, nor is the fit between speakers' and hearers' interpretations" (Cameron 1985, p. 193). This leads us yet to another problem: utterances do not transfer meanings between people. Rather they produce meaning through their interaction with a set of conceptual structures within our minds (Lee 1992). These conceptual structures are personal, and in the same way as different social groups may create their specific types of discourse, we all rely on some sort of *personal* discourse: the fragmentation of the social is perfect. However, the alienation among individuals, which results from this fragmentation, is disguised through the working of ideology, which, as we have already seen, over- and underemphasizes differences. Yet, this is not unproblematic, for, far from being an exclusively integrative force, ideology provides every social

order with its outcasts. The only way to overcome this negative effect of ideology is to become aware of its functioning: to become aware of the fact that some groups within our society are trapped in a dilemma (e.g. women or Black people as mentioned above), to become aware of the linguistic incongruities between different cultures (Roberts et al. 1992), to recognise the irrationality with which certain linguistic varieties are stigmatised (Trudgill 1975), to see how we unconsciously adjust our way of speaking to particular speakers while we dislike other speaker's accent, and so forth. In the end, however, this awareness of the working of ideology comes down to acknowledging our own being different, and thus to an emancipation from society. This emancipation - Jung called it 'individuation' - is accompanied by the integration of parts of the 'unconscious' into our 'conscious' (Jung 1960), or, to use Davis' (1988) terms, by the transformation of 'practical consciousness' into 'discursive consciousness', in a process which is very similar to the hermeneutic cycle described by Thompson (1984) in his attempt to come to grips with ideology.

Whether discourse is drawn upon to create individual identities, to establish social order, or to conceptualise mental processes, it is always related to the construction of meaning. As Hodge and Kress observe, "meaning does not exist outside discursive and semiosic [sic] processes" (Hodge and Kress 1993). It serves to maintain social structures, and therefore to sustain relations of domination, and it provides our actions with some signification (Thompson 1984). In short, discursive practices that are integrated into the dominant ideology of our social sphere are constitutive to the construction of reality (Fairclough 1992). However, we are in general not aware of the constructedness of our reality, and if we were, it would be impossible to think of some alternative reality which would appear less constructed. According to Althusser, "ideology is not a distorted representation of real relations but rather a real relation itself, namely the relation *through which* human beings live the relation to their world" (cited in Thompson 1984, p. 90). And as Fairclough points out, 'common sense', i.e. all these things which we have always taken for granted, "is substantially, though not entirely, *ideological*" (Fairclough 1989, p. 84).

Discourse, and therefore ideology, are social constructs, in the production of which all members of society have a share. Yet, to assume that conversational resources are equally available to all participants would mean to neglect the fact that certain individuals or groups of individuals "have greater scope for action and choice than other individuals or groups of individuals" (Thompson 1984, p. 170); it would mean to fail to notice that resources in our society are asymmetrically distributed (Davis 1988). For in merely every social context we can identify dominant and 'muted' groups: men and women in politics (cf. Cameron 1995), locals and foreigners

at the workplace (cf. Roberts et al. 1992), teachers and pupils at school (cf. Spender 1984), etc. We have, however, to keep in mind that the social sphere is fragmented and that therefore individuals generally belong to both dominant and 'muted' groups, according to the different social networks which they belong to. Furthermore, the ideological is subject to constant change, and patterns of domination are never completely fixed. In order to tackle the question of how these patterns of domination are constituted, of how linguistic resources are distributed and as to how power in general is present in society I shall set out in the following part of the essay to develop a concept of power, which will shed some light on the relation between power and discourse.

A Dynamic Concept of Power

Power is, so Foucault, "never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth" (Foucault 1980, p. 98). Accordingly, I shall conceive of power primarily as a resource present in our physical and social environment. 'Having power' therefore means to be capable of drawing upon this resource, of employing it as a tool in order to achieve one's goals; 'exercising power' describes the very act of making use of this resource. We can distinguish between two forms in which power resources are present in our environment: The first one - I shall call it 'potential power' - is inherent to our physical environment and consists of virtually anything which might serve somebody as a tool in achieving his or her goals (e.g. germs in a pestilent body, which can be thrown over the walls of a besieged town; or, in case of Thales (Guthrie 1962), an eclipse of the sun, the prediction of which served him to impress his contemporaries). The second one - 'structural power' - is the result of previous exercise of power; it is inherent to our social system in the form of habits, conventions and institutions. Before I am going to analyse how this kind of power is produced and maintained through discourse, I shall shortly comment on some of the implications of my definition of power.

One problematic aspect in theorising power is to account for the duality of agency and structure, without according either of them primacy over the other (Clegg 1989). In the model outlined here this interplay between agency and structure takes place in two ways: the creation of power in the first place is dependent both on externally available 'potential power' and on agency actualising it; secondly, the actualisation of power through agencies always results in the creation of 'structural power' which both constrains and facilitates further actions by the same or other agencies. How this constraint can manifest itself in reality is illustrated by Clegg's example of a court situation where the choice of witnesses was "structurally limited by the legal form of

questioning" which allowed only for 'yes' and 'no' answers (Clegg 1989, p. 101). At the same time, however, this institutionalised form of questioning has a facilitating effect, making it unnecessary to agree on the procedure each time, which would make the administering of the law impossible.

Another difficulty lies with the intentional approach to power, associating the exercise of power with the pursuit of goals: first, given the fragmentation of the social, we always have to expect that actions aimed at the achievement of goals within one social context might also have (wanted or unwanted) effects at a different level of the social context; second, the varying content of our conscious leads to a continuous adjustment of one's goals, which makes a definitive identification of such goals from the outside impossible; closely related to this is the problem of Lukes' notion of 'real' interests (Lukes 1974): it makes sense to assume that our interests are shaped by ideology, it also makes sense to expect that some individuals will try to influence other people's idea of what their interests are (through propaganda, through institutionalised discourse, etc.), it is even conceivable that people voice their disapproval of such practices, yet it is impossible to pin down someone's 'real' interests, for, in the same way as truth is a malleable construct, interests exist only in the context of our conscious and are therefore subject to constant modification through external and internal (psychological) factors (cf. Laclau 1983, p. 22).

For the further analysis of how discourse and power are related, I shall distinguish between four functions of discourse in relation to the exercise and the distribution of power: (i) discourse as the bearer of episodic power, (ii) discourse distributing power among individuals, i.e. discourse in its function of shaping social relationships, (iii) discourse as structural power, i.e. the petrification of discourse in habits, conventions and institutions, and (iv) discourse justifying the distribution of power, i.e. discourse involved in the construction of meaning, in the production of truth. This distinction is somewhat arbitrary, for every instance of discourse comprises all four aspects which in turn are all interrelated with each other and therefore not always clearly separable. Its strength, however, lies in the fact that it takes into account both Clegg's (1989) distinction between three circuits of power (episodic, dispositional and facilitative power), which grossly correspond to the power functions (i), (ii) and (iii), and Lukes' (1974) emphasis on the mobilisation of meaning - function (iv).

Episodic power can be found in directives, where language is used to incite the addressee to a specific action. Thereby, success often depends on the speakers' mastery of different linguistic features: the use of a local dialect, for example, in order to appeal to the interlocutor's solidarity (Bell 1991); the employment of the "Motherese" or the "Passive Power Strategy" (Smith 1992, p. 78); or the deliberate use of euphemisms and disphemisms (Bolinger 1980). Another instance of

episodic power is the exercise of the 'referee' function, which consists of imposing "one's definition of what is possible, what is right, what is rational, what is real" (Fishman 1983, p. 89; cf. Henley and Kramarae 1991 and Clegg 1989). The most important role of discourse as episodic power, however, is connected to the other power functions of discourse. As Frow points out, "[e]very use of discourse is at once a judgement about its relation to dominant forms of power and either an assent or a resistance to this relation" (Frow 1985, p. 204). That means that individuals constantly reassert or challenge social power structures, which in itself is a form of episodic power. We should however keep in mind that social structures are the product of the totality of their members, including those of the past; the scope of the individual's influence is therefore rather limited.

The second function of discourse is associated with the shaping of power relations. Every use of language involves some direct or indirect statement about social relationships. Obvious ones include the pronouns or titles we choose to address someone (O'Barr 1984, Brown and Gilman 1960); the form of directives we use, for "virtually all 'control acts' have a dual nature, both social and utilitarian" (Ervin-Tripp et al. 1984, p. 116); or the compliance with requests. Less obvious ones are intrinsic to grammatical features such as nominalisation and passivisation, which "both allow for the downgrading and oppression of agents" (Lee 1992, p. 107). The importance of all these markers of social relations lies in the fact that they provide the basis for the creation of structural power. It is at this level of discourse that the struggle for power takes place, it is here that episodic power is transformed into structural power - through the repetitive use of socially relevant markers which thus becomes a habit or even convention.

When discourse is petrified in habits, conventions, or institutions it is always the locus of structural power. The forms in which discourse serves to maintain power structures are manifold: Every social network has its specific conventions which, through the regulation of speech acts, differentiate it from other groups. Contextualisation cues, for example, which include intonation, pitch, pausing, etc., make interaction across cultural borders difficult (Roberts et al. 1992). A similar effect is produced through lexicalisation. "What concepts are furnished with names in the discourse of a particular social group is [therefore] of the utmost importance, since vocabulary reflects and expresses the interests of the group" (Fowler 1985, p. 69). Another way in which discourse serves to stabilise social structures is the process of reification, which consists in "representing a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural, outside of time" (Thompson 1984, p. 131). Reification is closely linked to the creation and maintenance of dominant orders of discourse. If a discourse type becomes so important within a social order that it eclipses competing types of

discourse, "then it will cease to be seen as arbitrary and will come to be seen as *natural*, and legitimate." (Fairclough 1989, p. 91). As an example might serve 'scientific' discourse which remains widely unchallenged throughout the Western world. Access to dominant types of discourse, of course, is not equally distributed. Often it is itself regulated by conventions; through a country's language policy, for example, which sustains existing power relations by controlling access to economic, political and social opportunities. (O'Barr 1984). This leads us to the fixation of discourse through institutions – through legal institutions, through school, through the scientific community, and so forth. This "imposition of ideology by official and public institutions", so Fowler, "[is] the most massive and pervasive linguistic practice working to maintain power differentials" (Fowler 1985, p. 67). Structural power, however, might not only be sustained by discourse, but also by unequal access to resources of 'potential' power (had Thales lived in a place where the eclipse of the sun was not visible, his predictions would have been without effect) and by psychological structures which are not necessarily shaped through discourse. The claim that such structures exist is supported by the findings cited in Hellinger (1984) and Cameron (1995), indicating that even if occupational terms are changed to gender neutral designations they are still understood to refer primarily to males, "simply because the concept of genericness is not generally available as a psycho-linguistic reality" (Hellinger 1984, p. 138).

As I have already pointed out, the role discourse plays with regard to the distribution of power and the maintenance of social structures is closely related to its involvement in the shaping of meaning and the production of truth. Discourse controls the flux of experience of physical and social reality and therefore shapes society's conceptions of that reality (Hodge and Kress 1993). As Thompson points out, discourse serves to justify relations of domination by presenting them as natural, i.e. "by a *mobilization of meaning* which legitimates, dissimulates or reifies an existing state of affairs" (Thompson 1984, p. 132). According to Moreau, "the dominant impose their own definition of their world order through the totality of their practices, including verbal practices, and thereby justify their power" (Moreau 1981, p. 61). However, this imposition of the dominant worldview on dominated groups might not be necessary to sustain the dominant group's hegemony. The creation of 'false' interests might not be as important as Lukes' (1974) would like to make us believe, for "[i]t seems likely that our societies are 'integrated' less by virtue of some underlying consensus among all of its members than by virtue of widespread dissensus and fragmentation, that is by virtue of a proliferation of divisions which obstruct the development of oppositional movements" (Thompson 1984, p.192, cf. Olson 1993 and Dowding 1996).

Conclusion

My concern has been in this essay to develop a model which accounts for the forms in which power is present in discourse and thus in society. To conclude, I shall briefly discuss some of the implications which this model has for discourse analysis and the conceptualisation of social change.

Discourse analysis based on this model is confronted with two major difficulties: the fragmentation of the social and the relativistic view of truth. As a result of the fragmentation of the social sphere and due to the fact that every individual is involved in a number of different social networks at different levels of society, it is hard to grasp the full extent of any discursive situation with all its implications. Discourse analysis therefore has to limit itself to a confined field of analysis, which none the less is subject to constant influence from the outside. Thus, discourse analysis will never give us more than a partial view of the discursive processes which it attempts to study. In addition, given the relativistic view of truth and the assumption that meaning does not exist in a pure form outside our minds, the observer of a speech situation has to take into account the fact that his view of the situation is always subjective (cf. Hindess and Hirst 1977) and not more relevant than the intention of the speaker or the impression of the addressee. Nevertheless, she or he might gain at least some valuable insight with regard to a particular discursive event by continuously confronting her or his findings with ever-new data. Thompson (1984), for example, argues that discourse analysis based on a hermeneutic process can provide us with some genuine insight reaching beyond the identification of contradictions inherent to a particular ideology. Similarly, Jung's (1960) concept of individuation conceives of the conscious as integrating an ever increasing part of the unconscious.

The concept of social structures based upon discourse leads to the assumption that one can change the social order by changing discursive practices. This might be true to a certain extent; there are, however, some limitations: First, social structure is not exclusively based on discourse alone, but also on the individuals' varying access to 'potential power' as well as on psychological patterns. Second, given the fact that power structures are based on and maintained by conventions and institutions, they are hardly affected by a change of certain discursive practices. In order to change relations of domination, the conventions and institutions themselves have to be changed. As Foucault points out, "the problem is not changing people's consciousness - or what is in their heads - but the political, economic, institutional régime of the production of truth" (Foucault 1980, p. 133). This is illustrated by the ineffectiveness of 'verbal hygiene' when it comes to labels for black

people, which keep on changing due to 'discursive drift' (Cameron 1995). Similarly, resistance to discursive change was also identified by Holmquist, who points to the fact that the use of *Ms* instead of *Miss* and *Mrs* seems to have unintended effects, as it has come to be associated with "divorcees, widows, businesswomen, feminists and others who may be supposed to have sexual experience and to be either available or militantly liberationist" (Holmquist quoted in Bolinger 1980, p. 103). Furthermore, social change induced by oppressed groups is unlikely to take place, due to the 'paradox of emancipation' described by Benton: it is impossible to reconcile the idea of "collective self-emancipation with a critique of the established order which holds that the consciousness of those from whom collective self-emancipation is to be expected is systematically manipulated, distorted and falsified by essential features of that order. If the autonomy of subordinate groups is to be respected then emancipation is out of the question; whereas if emancipation is to be brought about, it cannot be self-emancipation" (Benton 1981, p. 162). If we concede, however, that hegemony is not based on 'false' interests, but on dissensus and fragmentation among the oppressed, we have to admit that "while routinized circuits of episodic power [...] are always open to challenge and transformation through concerted action, this is an eventuality that remains abstract. If the organization of concerted action cannot be attempted or envisaged as a feasible form of resistance, routine relations, agencies, means, standing conditions, resources - in a word, powers - will be likely to endure" (Clegg 1989, p. 222).

Yet, although the change of discursive practices has a limited effect on relations of domination, there is none the less a good reason for changing discursive habits, for by "calling traditional usage into question, reformers have in effect forced everyone who uses English to declare a position in respect of gender, race or whatever" (Cameron 1995, p. 119). The point is to increase people's awareness of power relations. The goal is not the emancipation of the oppressed from the oppressors, but society's emancipation from obsolete structures of power, as it is intended by cross-cultural training (Roberts et al. 1992) or by the attempt to overcome cross-sexual miscommunication (cf. Tannen 1991) – both drawing on discourse analysis. Herein lies the particularity of the model developed in this essay: it allows for situations in which all social participants could be winners if they were able to rid themselves of oppressing power structures, which are often the heritage of the past. The model does not disapprove of the claim for emancipation of the oppressed from the oppressors, but it does not consider self-emancipation as a likely event. Rather, social change will be brought about by the combined will of the dominant and the dominated to do away with oppressing power structures and a contradictory ideology. Given the emergence of an egalitarian discourse in the Western world during the past three centuries, there is

hope – even for the oppressed. We should however consider that a society with no power structures at all might not be conceivable, for power "doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but [...] it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression." (Foucault 1980, p. 119).

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