

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: SHEDDING LIGHT ON AN HE POLICY DOCUMENT

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Abstract

This paper discusses advantages of taking a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine a policy document: “Born Global: implications for Higher Education” (British Academy, 2016). An adaptation of Hyatt’s (2013) CDA framework is useful for analysing the document’s linguistic features. This paper gives examples of the use of Hyatt’s categories to show that the document encapsulates a particular discourse, the justification of language learning through economic considerations. Linguistic features of the report – the choices of verbs, nouns and adjectives, use of tenses and passive voice, unheralded removal of hedging, and definite articles – all give the impression of factual evidence, whereas they disguise unresolved contradictions. CDA shows that the economic rationale in the document is tenuous.

Introduction

This paper explores policy for Higher Education Modern Language provision in the UK. I am currently doing a professional doctorate involving non-specialist Institution-Wide Language Programmes in Higher Education. The paper outlines the case for taking a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine a policy report. The report discussed, “Born Global: implications for Higher Education” (British Academy, 2016), or BGHE for short, was generated by a British Academy ‘Born Global’ (BG) research project on languages and employability. A framework designed by Hyatt (2013) is adapted to micro-analyse the report’s linguistic features and reveal rhetorical devices underpinning its discourse. The CDA shows how the HE language learning policy discourse reflects education’s dominant economic model and wider neoliberal discourse. The paper’s conclusion is that the policy evidenced by the report is not fully coherent, and that the restricted discourse matters.

Taking a Critical Discourse Analysis approach: the advantages

CDA is a well established approach for scrutinising texts in the field of education policy (e.g. Taylor, 2004), and Higher Education in particular (e.g. Fairclough, 1993; Askehave, 2007; Saarinen, 2008; Mautner, 2012). Using CDA recognises that policy texts are “a resource for analysis in terms of the messages they convey” (Ozga, 1999, p.94).

There are different definitions of discourse (Bacchi, 2000, p.55), yet CDA always focuses on how language is an organising force in society (Farrelly, 2010, p. 99). It “sets out to capture the dynamic relationships between discourse and society, between the micropolitics of everyday texts and the macropolitical landscape of ideological forces and power relations” (Luke, 2002, p.100). This has also been described as the relationship between small d discourse and big D discourse (Gee, 2014, pp. 24-25). In short, focussing on discourse “enables us to conceptualize and comprehend the relations between the individual policy text and the wider relations of the social structure and political system” (Olssen, Codd and O’Neill, 2004, p. 71).

One aspect of questioning the dominant economic rationale for language learning is “loosening the grip of the narrow concepts... that have been circulated by neoliberals” (Apple, 2009, p. 250). This emancipatory belief was adopted by Fairclough, a key figure in the development of CDA, who said “it would seem vital that people should become more aware and more self-aware about language and discourse” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 142). In

particular, Fairclough wished to establish a “social, critical and historical turn” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138) in language studies, referring to the “struggle” of those working in HE and the need for alternatives to both the traditional and the newly dominant discourses which seem to have supplanted them.

Pitfalls of CDA and responses to them

Before applying CDA as an approach, it is worth considering potential pitfalls that the analyst may encounter. One possible criticism of CDA is that the analyst ‘cherry-picks’ texts. What is sometimes seen as ‘cherry-picking’ is however often deliberate selectivity or “purposive sampling”; such methods “expose more directly the nature of the transaction between investigator and respondent (or object) and hence make easier an assessment of the extent to which the phenomenon is described in terms of (is biased by) the investigator’s own posture” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 40). In a seminal paper using CDA, Norman Fairclough, an early CDA advocate, explicitly made his subjectivity transparent by using phrases such as “I think” and “I would predict that” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 149). Thus, in CDA one can “choose cherries from an informed position” (Baker and Levon, 2015, p. 222).

Another potential pitfall of CDA is that findings may not be generalisable (Baker and Levon, 2015, p. 233). Researchers such as Fairclough acknowledge this: “It would be premature to draw sweeping conclusions... on the basis of such a limited range of illustrative examples” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 158). He also counters possible criticism by indicating the need to investigate from other angles. Baker and Levon (2015) echo this in recommending triangulation, combining “close qualitative readings with a corpus linguistics approach that uses computer software to identify frequent and salient linguistic patterns over large amounts of data” (p. 223). However, producing findings generalisable to other areas of policy is not the aim of this paper, which uses CDA to analyse a text to understand the logic of the policy.

It could be argued that close reading of a small number of texts by an individual analyst is an obsolete methodology in these days of big data and sophisticated digital tools. However, researchers who have at their disposal state-of-the-art computer-based analytical tools, able to handle vast databases of text, are still convinced of the merits of close scrutiny of a text or a small set of texts. The researcher “is able to identify more subtle social and linguistic patterns in the texts and to situate... interpretations of these patterns within a multi-level understanding of the broader ideological context” (Baker and Levon, 2015, p. 233). Nonetheless, the mention of texts (plural) suggests that even if one particular text is being scrutinised in detail, the analyst must look at the bigger picture, particularly in view of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Wodak, 2006, p.177). An intuition-based approach can thus be combined with a corpus-based approach: “The two are complementary and must be so if as broad a range of research questions are to be addressed” (McEneaney, Xiao and Tono, 2006, p. 7).

Doing CDA is not easy. Poor quality work gives discourse analysis an unfair reputation as a methodology in which “anything goes” (Antaki et al., 2003, p. 2). Claims are sometimes made that discourse analysis has been undertaken, when the work merely superficially appears to be discourse analysis. Antaki et al. give a useful definition of real discourse analysis: “...a close engagement with one’s text or transcripts, and the illumination of their meaning and significance through insightful and technically sophisticated work. In a word, Discourse Analysis means Doing Analysis” (Antaki et al., 2003, p.10).

The C in CDA is crucial: it must feature the “critical” element. CDA justifies its usefulness by revealing what is “opaque” or “disguised”, as it tends to “... open up for critical examination aspects of practice that might otherwise be taken for granted” (Farrelly, 2010, p. 100). It means analysing policy processes “not simply at the level of wanting or resisting a particular

policy initiative, but...constituting the shape of the issues to be considered" (Bacchi, 2000, p. 50). CDA should therefore "map out the connection between a close textual analysis and wider discursive and political structures" (Mills, 2004, p.140), bringing political concerns to the linguistic analysis.

Paradoxically, CDA analysts have to use language to analyse language, and so must be self-critical as well as critical: "If critical analysts use the same forms of language whose ideological biases they are exposing in others, then they might be uncritically and unselfconsciously instantiating those very biases" (Billig, 2008, p. 784). Billig, for example, draws attention to the preponderance of nominalisations and instances of reification in the very writings that criticise the use of these stylistic features. Fairclough refutes some of Billig's criticism, but agrees "that as critical discourse analysts we should be careful about how we write ourselves, and make the question of how we write more of an issue than we have done" (Fairclough, 2008, p. 208).

A final observation is that CDA is not a single method, but rather a programme or set of principles (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 5), consisting of various methodologies (Mulderigg, 2012, p. 702). It is therefore important to identify the specific method to be used, and analytic frameworks are available to guide the researcher (Shaw, 2010, p.202). The method chosen should enable analysis of the specific linguistic choices made in the text (Taylor, 2004, p. 437) and make presuppositions visible (Saarinen, 2008, p. 722).

Using Hyatt's (2013) frame

BGHE is here analysed using a CDA frame based on the one devised by Hyatt. His frame focuses on both macro and micro aspects of discourse, and thus enables the "principled shunting back and forth between analyses of the text and the social" (Luke, 2002, p.103), fundamental to CDA. Hyatt's frame is not an "all-encompassing, universal tool" (Hyatt, 2013, p. 837), and so, following his suggestion, it has been taken as a starting-point, grasping his invitation to "appropriate and take ownership of" aspects of the frame (Hyatt, 2013, p. 843).

Hyatt does not tell the researcher how to apply the frame, for most discourse analytic frameworks are "not concerned with following a series of pre-defined steps" (Shaw, 2010, p.205), leaving the analyst to make the choices. Although not all analysts give details of how they conducted their analysis (e.g.Taylor, 2004; Askehave, 2007), others see doing so as important (Shaw, 2010, p.205). I developed a three-stage way of using Hyatt's framework: 1) the entire document was read to get the gist and overall impression, and features of initial interest were noted; 2) Hyatt's headings were used to classify those features; 3) Hyatt's headings were used in further close readings of the document and any additional features were identified. Though not suggested by Hyatt, the first stage of pre-framework reading was important because some features were identified which might otherwise have been missed. The classification stage involved some modification of Hyatt's headings, in particular incorporating analysis of lexico-grammatical features under the other headings. In the examples from the document that follow, Hyatt's categories are italicised.

Interdiscursivity and intertextuality are apparent from the start of the document. The title "Born Global", accompanied by cover images such as a globe, aeroplanes, and figures representing a mobile professional graduate workforce, conveys an immediate signal of what students studying languages should aspire to. The emphasis on the workplace and employability is immediately clear. The document contains 42 numbered references to other documents listed as endnotes, designed to convey an impression of authority, although close scrutiny reveals that many of these refer to one and the same source.

Rationalisation of the importance of the document during a time of crisis in language learning is shown through lexis (vocabulary) which carries strong negative connotations. Different

word classes come into play: adjectives ('under-appreciated', 'alarming', 'lost', 'unmet'), nouns ('struggle', 'decline'), and verbs ('undervalue', 'fall'). One striking feature is the use of the present continuous tense in the passive voice with a negative ('is not currently being met', 'is not currently being satisfied', 'are clearly not receiving'). Continuous tenses often carry the meaning of temporariness, so although the lexical choices create a sense of crisis, the tense (coupled with the temporal adverb 'currently') emphasises that something can be done about this. The crisis in language learning is framed as the failure of 'young people' to recognise the career benefits of language learning. This places emphasis on the responsibility of the individual and the "commodification of oneself" (Blacker, 2013, p. 144). It is hard for the analyst not to fall into the trap of using the words of this discourse, for example the "value" that languages bring the individual.

Authorisation is given through reference to 'employers', 'businesses' and 'companies' (i.e. supposed authorities), often with the quantifier 'many', for example "...many businesses have a need for the qualities that language graduates can bring to their workforces" (BGHE p.3). However, the terms 'businesses' and 'employers' are often used loosely, and some of the apparent 'employers' are actually respondents to a survey who may not be in any position to determine who gets employed. This makes some of the claims in the document highly questionable.

Legitimation through narratives takes the form of direct quotation from survey respondents, in the first person, for example "I think...", "I believe...", and "I work...". These narratives seem to give substance to the claims made in the document, and are introduced as being "direct evidence" (BGHE, p.14), but are actually a way of injecting opinion in the guise of authority. The quotations are, under closer scrutiny of the sources, largely from respondents to a survey who all had language skills and were thus likely to be enthusiastic about the benefits of languages in their own careers.

Moral evaluation (ideological desirability) comes across in different parts of speech: nouns such as 'reinvigoration', verbs such as 'advocate' and 'open doors' and adjectives such as 'encouraging' and 'positive'. They all display "attitudinal judgment" (Hyatt, 2013, p.840), conveying the overt evaluative stance that more HE language learning is desirable and reinforcing the dominant rationale.

Presupposition is somewhat more difficult to trace, as it occurs through a process of the disappearance of hedging expressions. For example, the statement "These figures suggest that ... recruitment onto IWLP courses generally appears to be relatively buoyant" (BGHE, p. 6) has hedging not only in the verb 'suggest' but also the adverbs 'generally' and 'relatively'. However, this later becomes "... the success of IWLP" (BGHE, p. 14). Here the hedging has disappeared, and the definite article "the" implies the factuality of "success". This brings into question the use of statistics within the document.

Other lexico-grammatical constructions are treated by Hyatt as a separate category. However, in my analysis they were largely incorporated under the other headings. Moreover, my initial reading had highlighted some features which did not fit into Hyatt's other categories. Other lexico-grammatical constructions I considered noteworthy were the constructions that remove agency and audience, namely the use of passive voice and nominalisations. An example of passive voice is: "these positive developments have to be seen" (BGHE, p. 7), with no indication of who is supposed to implement the recommendations. Similarly, nominalisations (verbs turned into nouns) remove any agency. For example, in the sentence "findings from Born Global could help to bring about...a reversal of some of the more alarming trends... and a realisation of the potential of language learning..." (BGHE, p. 3), it is unclear who will do the reversing or realising. The lack of agency avoids making any demands on employers or government, and thus makes the document's conclusions vague.

Conclusions

Hyatt's (2013) framework proved to be both workable and adaptable. The document analysed reflects a discourse which centres on an economic rationale for language learning. Using Hyatt's CDA framework revealed how dominant this discourse is, and showed that the argument in the document is tenuous. The policy document is designed to persuade, and is not supported by authoritative rigour or with genuinely hard evidence.

Using CDA, and Hyatt's framework in particular, helps expose the weaknesses in arguments, and thus throws up questions for further consideration. This paper is envisaged as a stepping-stone towards analysis of connected themes in my EdD thesis. Issues I now need to consider are whether language teachers are critically aware of such a dominant/hegemonic discourse, and to what extent they are able, individually or collectively, to develop alternative practices which subvert the dominant discourse. Language teachers are part of the policy process, and their voices matter (Lo Bianco, 2010, p. 170); their stance on the predominance of the economic rationalisation for language learning needs exploration. Ball (2015) points us towards "critical work, destabilising accustomed ways of doing and being, and positive work, opening spaces in which it is possible to be otherwise" (Ball, 2015, p. 7). For language teachers in HE, this may involve seeking alternatives to the economic rationale that is the basis of the current discourse of language learning and teaching in HE. In that case CDA will have fulfilled what is arguably its key role, that of empowering people to challenge dominant discourses.

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Biography

I have been a lecturer at the University of Worcester since 1997, and currently teach German, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and English Language teacher-training courses (CELTA). I am also a part-time professional doctorate student at the University of Birmingham. I tweet on language, linguistics, and education @JennyLewinJones