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## *Mediation between discourse and society: assessing cognitive approaches in CDA*



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**ABSTRACT** While reviewing relevant recent research, it becomes apparent that cognitive approaches have been rejected and excluded from Critical Discourse Analysis by many scholars out of often unjustified reasons. This article argues, in contrast, that studies in CDA would gain significantly through integrating insights from socio-cognitive theories into their framework. Examples from my own research into the comprehension and comprehensibility of news broadcasts, Internet discussion boards as well as into discourse and discrimination illustrate this position. However, I also argue that there are salient limits to cognitive theories which have to be taken into account, specifically when proposing social change via rational/cognitive insights. Examples from recent political debates on immigration and from the election campaign in the US in 2004 serve to emphasize these arguments.

**KEY WORDS:** *comprehensibility, comprehension, discourse-historical approach, frame, prejudice, racist/anti-Semitic discourse*

### *1. Prologue<sup>1</sup>*

In this short contribution, I would like to illustrate the influence Socio-Cognitive Theories have had on my own research as well as some – potentially new – perspectives for applications of cognitive concepts in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Although I have not been active in the field of Discourse and Cognition for some time, the principles, models as well as ‘heuristic metaphors’<sup>2</sup> from socio-cognitive approaches have been very useful and have guided, manifestly or latently, many of my theoretical approaches and thoughts; it is also very useful to consider issues in my research in the past years where possibly more focus on cognition might have proved to be relevant and if so, in which way. In particular, theories by Teun van Dijk and George Lakoff have been most influential for my work.

Let me start with some, probably trivial, but nevertheless useful claims for my argument throughout this article while considering my first ventures into 'discourse and cognition' almost 30 years ago.

Although we are all aware that nobody can actually 'look' into somebody's or one's own brain ('black-box'), (almost) all of us are convinced that some mental processes must exist which link text production and text comprehension to both explicit utterances, text and talk as well as to social phenomena. This becomes most apparent while analyzing phenomena such as attitudes towards language (behaviour), as well as stereotypes and prejudices held about specific social groups. Moreover, when studying identity constructions or narratives of the past, we are confronted with perceptions, beliefs, opinions and memories as essential parts of these discursive processes; of course, all these notions (such as 'collective memories' or 'imagined communities') inherently label cognitive processes which need to be spelled out (Halbwachs, 1985; Anderson, 1988; Confino, 1997; Wodak et al., 1999; Heer et al., 2003; Musolff, 2004). Furthermore, even in our everyday lives, we experience constantly how we – necessarily and usually automatically – reduce complexities by applying mental models or common sense knowledge which all guide our decision-making and our interactions (Luhmann, 1984). By being socialized into a specific culture, we have learnt to recognize recurring events quickly, act accordingly, and update information (see Kunda, 1999, who addresses aspects of cultural cognition).

Thus, being interested in analyzing/understanding and explaining social problems of a fundamentally interdisciplinary nature (this being true as a constitutive assumption for all approaches in CDA), Cognition and Socio-Cognitive concepts, in my view, necessarily must form part of this research endeavour (see Wodak and Meyer, 2001; Wodak, 2004a, for extensive overviews on CDA).

Most recently, Koller (2005) suggested some relevant new aspects for possible links between Cognitive Theories and CDA, focusing on elaborations of traditional research on metaphors, on the one hand, and on social aspects of discourse, on the other. In her conclusions, she rightly remarks that even though cognitive processes can not be studied directly (a criticism brought forward by Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999), the same seems to be true for ideologies: 'Certainly, researchers should be aware of the fact that all research on cognitive models is represented in new cognitive models – just as all writing on ideology is itself ideologically vested' (Koller, 2005: 220). Dirven et al. (2005) take this discussion on the notion of 'ideology' further and distinguish between two types of 'ideology' (broadly and narrowly defined), integrating van Dijk's (1998) approach to 'ideology' as well as recent results from metaphor research (Hawkins, 2001) while elaborating characteristics of Nazi ideology and its claims on 'superhuman and subhuman races'. They conclude: 'Cognitive Linguistics provides analytical tools for a critical assessment of ideologies, not "ideal ways" of conceptualizing' (Dirven et al., 2005: (in press)).

However, it should be stated that most of the on-going research in Cognitive Linguistics related to CDA is restricted to a small field (with the exception of van

Dijk's work): investigating metaphors in the tradition of cognitive metaphor theory, in a narrow or broad sense (see literature cited earlier).

In the following, I would therefore like to point to other domains where the link between discourse studies and cognition proved, proves, or could prove, to be salient.

## 2. *Unsolved problems? Linking 'society and discourse'*

What is of particular relevance for the theory formation process in Discourse Studies in general, and in Critical Discourse Analysis in particular, is the often quoted but never sufficiently elaborated '*mediation between the social and the linguistic*'. Major difficulties of operationalizing the research process are usually related to this mediation problem (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2003, 2005; Wodak, 2001; Weiss and Wodak, 2003; Chilton, 2004).

Discourse analysts agree to a large extent that the complex interrelations between discourse and society cannot be analyzed adequately unless linguistic and sociological approaches are combined. However, with very few exceptions, theories on cognition are explicitly rejected and therefore not perceived as relevant.

Basil Bernstein and William Labov, two important founders of Sociolinguistics, were already aware of this challenge more than 30 years ago and proposed different innovative approaches, usually summarized as 'deficit' and 'difference' theories. Sociological, linguistic and also cognitive categories, however, are basically not immediately compatible as they tend to be dependent on 'different horizons' (have diverging *Horizontgebundenheit*, in Husserl's terms). Thus, for example, in sociological contexts the term 'representation' usually denotes something different (or has a wider meaning; i.e. standing for a political party, a group, etc.) than in specific linguistic analyses (a semantic term, a linguistic unit – verbal or visual – manifesting meaning) or even more so in cognitive theories ('social representation'; i.e. shared frame of reference for communication; cognitive structures shared by a group; see Moscovici, 2000). The term 'institution' is likewise used with completely different meanings in discourse-analytical concepts and sociological theories (linguists often making no difference between 'institution' and 'organization', whereas the latter define institutions as abstract set of rules in a social domain, organization as the concrete material environment; see Giddens, 2000). A theoretical foundation capable of reconciling sociological, cognitive and linguistic categories (mediation) is therefore obviously required.

No such uniform theoretical framework of mediation has been proposed in CDA to date. Nevertheless, one can speak of a theoretical synthesis of conceptual tools developed in different theoretical schools, as illustrated to a certain extent by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999). Foucault's *discursive formations*, Bourdieu's *habitus*, or *register and code* as defined by Halliday and Bernstein (Lemke, 1995) could be considered as such tools. This synthesis of theories is by

no means a monistic theory model, and it does not claim to be 'more true' than the individual theories, from which singular conceptual ideas are drawn. It is primarily committed to a 'conceptual pragmatism' (Mouzelis), focusing on 'criteria of utility rather than truth' (Mouzelis, 1995: 9).

Such a pragmatic approach would not seek to provide a catalogue of context-less propositions and generalizations, but rather to relate questions of theory formation and conceptualization closely to the specific problems that are to be investigated. In this sense, the first question we have to address as researchers is not, 'Do we need a grand theory?' but rather, 'What conceptual tools are relevant for this or that problem and for this and that context?'

With these questions in mind, I would like to address the problem of 'bridging discourse and society' (i.e. *mediation*) in cognitive terms, as Teun van Dijk has certainly attempted successfully throughout his research in this domain. The widely acknowledged fact, for example, that the *context of discursive practices* needs to be addressed adequately leads to the fruitful integration of theories on cognition in CDA. Hence, some CDA representatives have concentrated on the issue of the 'context' (meaning 'society' or 'social practices') and the development of a '*context model*' in recent years (van Dijk, 2001; Panagl and Wodak, 2004; Wodak and Weiss, 2004). This research further led to the insight that issues of '*knowledge*' need to be addressed as well. How do we understand/deconstruct utterances in context? Why is the same text or utterance understood in significantly different ways by different groups of listeners/writers/viewers? Does this depend on their cognitive/conceptual background and stored knowledge? Thus, as is to be seen, we have come a long way since both Bernstein and Labov!

### 3. *Models of text/discourse production and text/discourse comprehension*

Attempting to answer these important issues, discourse-analytical studies on text comprehension and comprehensibility over the past decades have focused largely on issues of mediation, using different cognitive models to explain processes of '*understanding and text comprehension*' (van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983; Lutz and Wodak, 1987; Wodak, 1996; O'Halloran, 2003). In all these investigations it proved useful to assume cognitive strategies which underlie mental processes of text deconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

For example, in our study on the comprehensibility and comprehension of news (Lutz and Wodak, 1987), we provided empirical evidence for the fact that when updating information from news broadcasts, *mental representations* necessarily must guide our understandings and *mental models* most probably support linking new information with stored information. Due to different belief and knowledge systems, news is experienced and stored depending on available *cognitive frames*. This became most apparent when we interviewed people after they had listened to certain news items and asked them to summarize important

contents (Wodak, 1987). The summaries were always related to their personal experiences and commented upon from their own perspective. This explained why different people obviously inferred significantly different meanings when confronted with the same information. The summaries also depended largely on background knowledge as well as on opinions and preconceived stereotypes; thus, information was adapted to existing and stored event models (Wodak, 1996).

In this study, we suggested a model of text planning and text comprehension which related several dimensions: the dimension of knowledge and experience (i.e. cognition; frames, schemata and scripts; see Schank and Abelson, 1977) with different production and deconstruction of discourses, genres as well as specific texts linked to sociological variables of the speakers/listeners, such as age, gender, social class, and so forth. Moreover, we suggested viewing text production and text comprehension as recursive processes where constant feedback to mental models in episodic and long-time memories takes place as well as the updating of such models.

Such updating processes follow systematic, conscious and subconscious strategies (nowadays, we could term this as picking out the relevant information whereby 'relevance' is subjectively defined; Sperber and Wilson, 1986). These empirical results strongly suggest the assumption of a *cognitive link between language/discourse and society*.

Furthermore, in another interdisciplinary ethnographic and discourse-analytic study investigating the effect of therapeutic communication on behavioral changes of suicidal patients (Wodak, 1986) it was striking to discover that male and female patients as well as patients from different social backgrounds formulated their problems in significantly different genres: female patients tended to use narratives, while male patients reported their problems in non-personalized ways. Patients from working-class backgrounds tended to verbalize their relevant problems as scenic experiences, whereas more educated patients told well-structured stories. Due to such salient differences in the choice of genres, the therapeutic process and the interaction between therapists and patients followed different patterns. Moreover, the therapeutic effect manifested itself in a change of genres; acute problems were solved and narrated in a less involved manner, combining elements of different genres. Both *frames* (areas of experience) and *schemas* (understood as structured patterns of experience and knowledge) changed, due to the emotional and cathartic therapeutic interaction. In this study, I again related discourse and society to each other through the intermediate step of suggesting a cognitive level in a model of text production.

A sociolinguist by training, I was fascinated by the statistically significant relations between gender, social class and text production as well as text comprehension/production. The introduction of cognitive concepts into Sociolinguistics proved to be innovative (see also Cicourel, 1969, 2002) and allowed to elaborate the previously, sometimes naïve assumption of possibly direct (one-to-one) links between social variables and linguistic realizations.

#### 4. *Moving on: investigating sexist, racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic discourses*

In his book *Prejudice in Discourse* (1984), van Dijk suggested a socio-cognitive model which attempted to explain the production and reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices, due to a whole complex range of cognitive processes, most importantly the storage of individual experiences as *event models in episodic and long-term memories*. This influential theoretical approach could be very well integrated with my own research in this field, which focused more on intertextual knowledge and experience, thus including and elaborating a detailed historical dimension and a triangulatory methodology (*Discourse-Historical Approach*; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2001, 2004b).

On top of explaining why certain events, experiences, utterances, and so forth were perceived and reproduced in specific, prejudiced ways, I was and am concerned to date to explain how such meanings become widely accessible and why and how they are tied to specific ideologies in certain periods of time in specific socio-political contexts. This is an issue where theories on collective memories as well as collective experiences over time would need to be theoretically linked with relevant empirical results.

For example, anti-Semitic beliefs have different historical roots in Austria than they have in Germany, France or Italy, due to complex historical and socio-political factors and developments (religion, industrialization, National-Socialist ideology, and so forth). Anti-Semitic stereotypes go back for centuries, and the mixed bag of stereotypes ('syncretic anti-Semitism') is nowadays available both in common sense knowledge as well as intentionally functionalized for political aims in elite discourses (Pelinka and Wodak, 2002; Wodak, 2004b).

In our research on the 'Waldheim Affair' of 1986 (Wodak et al., 1990; Mitten, 1992), we were able to follow the genesis of certain stereotypes realized in implicit and covert anti-Semitic utterances both from the official public sphere to the private anonymous sphere and vice versa, as well as over time, by covering and investigating the debates surrounding this specific historical event in various genres and on a daily basis (newspapers, TV talk-shows, TV news, news broadcasts, conversations on the street, and so forth). Empirical evidence was collected on how certain important terms were recontextualized in to new contexts and how their explicit racist/anti-Semitic meanings turned into easily understandable insinuations due to the collective knowledge of the speakers/readers/listeners. The meaning and use of 'East coast', alluding to the seemingly 'powerful Jewish lobbies in New York' provides a perfect example. This term was first explicitly connected in collocations representing the intended meaning explicitly, but then took on a life of its own in Austrian public discourses without the co-text. In cognitive terms one could propose that 'East coast' developed into a conceptual metaphor and frame. In this way, the *Discourse-Historical Approach* could have been elaborated further integrating recent cognitive theories (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001).

Stereotypes and prejudicial beliefs are thus enforced and manifested inter alia by metaphors, analogies, insinuations as well as stories. Such deeply culturally embedded frames are difficult to change, which might explain the failure of a purely rational education in the sense of 'enlightenment' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). Such traditional belief systems also explain the widely observed phenomenon of 'anti-Semitism without Jews and without anti-Semites', as described by Bunzl and Marin (1983) and Marin (2000): people need never have encountered Jews and need never have had any negative experiences, but are still massively prejudiced. Opinion polls and surveys even suggest that anti-Semitism is stronger and more prevalent when no daily experiences were or are available. Fantasies, projections and imaginations based on folklore and on prejudicial heritage are transferred from generation to generation and obviously stored as mental models and common sense knowledge. Much the same could be said for sexist, homophobic and racist discourses.

Moreover, event models integrate and update every new experience in specific prejudiced ways even if these events mean something totally different. They are automatically processed as anti-Semitic. They get distorted, adapted and integrated with previous stored event models. A 'positive' anecdote about a Jew or Turk, for example, is thus usually processed as an exception because it is schema-inconsistent while a 'negative' experience lends itself as 'proof or evidence' for already stored anti-Semitic beliefs (Wodak and Matouschek, 1993).

### 5. *Changing frames?*

In his recent book *Don't Think of an Elephant!* (2004), George Lakoff analyzed 'frame-setting' as a means for political propaganda. He investigated the election campaigns of George W. Bush and John Kerry in the US in 2004, and claims that the Bush camp was successful because they were able to set the relevant frames first in the on-going debates. The perceived failure of the Kerry camp was detected in only reacting to the Bush agenda and not countering by introducing their own, new frames, which could have shifted the debates into a different direction.

For anyone interested in Critical Discourse Analysis, this proposal is by all means an interesting one: thus, Lakoff claims that by setting new agenda, the electorate could be persuaded to believe in other programs.

However, viewing the theories and empirical results summarized above in more detail and more carefully, it is important to state a caveat: if belief systems are cognitively and emotionally deeply embedded and also have historical roots, a change of frames – should this be more than a superficial change of language – turns out to be very difficult. Whole belief systems and ideologies would need to be reformulated and substituted by others. Due to the extended research on racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism and its implications, such changes – if possible at all – would take a long time and would need to produce some kind of deep insights ('catharsis') which would allow substituting certain mental representations and long-stored event models by new ones.

Two recent examples should prove my point:

Debating 'values' has been at the forefront of the 2004 election campaign in the US. The definition of values was proposed by the Bush camp: values were defined as related to family values, traditional gender roles, religion, nationalism, patriotism, and so forth. The Kerry camp did not succeed in defining their agenda as values, although issues such as social welfare, National Healthcare, fighting against poverty and more public spending on education, would certainly count as legitimate positive values for many voters. The 'value' frame had been taken over, that is, colonized; other possible values were thus not perceived as negotiable anymore. How to proceed: develop a new label? Generate a new set of experiences, new cognitive frames? A new conceptual metaphor? The guidelines drawn up by Lakoff (2004) provide some rhetorical rules to win political debates; but they certainly do not solve the problem of regaining the territory and semantic-conceptual field of positive values.

My second example relates to another interesting semantic process to be observed nowadays: the conflation of two distinct concepts, namely '(im)migrant' and 'asylum-seeker'. In debates across the European Union, these two concepts are mixed up and reproduced as 'illegal asylum-seekers; illegal immigrants; illegal refugees; economic immigrants; economic refugees; bogus-asylum seekers; asylum-bombers', and so forth, in the press as well as in slogans, leaflets and other propaganda materials (Baker and McEnery, 2005), often used in the same text or even paragraph, and finally intended to mean the same. Thus, the two previously semantically distinct groups are not constructed as separate anymore: anybody wanting to enter a country (for example, the UK, where my examples stem from) is perceived as the same and as being 'illegal'. This strategy is used to justify and legitimize ever more restrictive immigration and asylum policies (Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999; Wodak and Van Dijk, 2000<sup>4</sup>). Moreover, a whole world of metaphors accompanies these labels, such as 'being inundated by' or 'flooded by', and so forth (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). However, not only metaphoric frames are used to produce and reproduce the related context- and event models. In a leaflet distributed by the British National Party (BNP) 2004, visual, textual, rhetorical, pragmatic, semantic and argumentative linguistic strategies and devices are combined, ultimately leading to the construction of a xenophobic discourse.<sup>5</sup>

These necessarily short examples illustrate the wide range of domains where socio-cognitive models certainly have explanatory power. These examples also prove, on the one hand, that superficial changes of language might not be effective; on the other that deeply embedded cognitive concepts have to be assumed to explain why prejudices have such long, even 'eternal' lives (Adorno, 1973/1950). In short, detailed interdisciplinary theories are called for which could explain such complex phenomena as racism, anti-Semitism, and so forth. Without having solved the fundamental problem of 'mediation between discourse and society' I hope that my arguments to integrate the analysis of cognition as part of the complex link prove to be a valuable step forward.

## NOTES

1. I am very grateful to my colleague Veronika Koller for commenting on the first drafts and for her important insights. The responsibility for this article is, of course, my own.
2. Both Konrad Ehlich as well as Aaron Cicourel convinced me of the metaphorical effects of quasi-theoretical concepts which lend themselves well to 'explain' social phenomena; in particular, these remarks related to 'habitus' (Bourdieu) as well as to 'strategy' (as used in many different ways by various linguists; see also Wodak, 2004c) (personal communication with Konrad Ehlich and Aaron Cicourel). Increasingly, we are led to believe that we are explaining a complex issue by labelling it habitus or strategy because the terms themselves are so suggestive. However, terms themselves never explain, they classify due to implicit or explicit assumptions. However, one has to be aware, of course, that a metaphoric expression at the surface level need not correspond to a conceptual metaphor at a cognitive level.
3. It is important to state at this point that – as in all social science debates – relevant terms are used throughout with very different meanings and implications. This is true for 'strategy, mental/event model, context, episodic/long-term memory, frame, schema, script', and so forth. Due to space restrictions, I am not able to review the massive literature in this field or to provide lengthy discussions of such central concepts. Hence, I refer readers to the literature I draw upon for the specific meanings of the above mentioned terms used throughout my contribution: Schank and Abelson (1977); van Dijk and Kintsch (1983); Van Dijk (1984, 2003, 2005); Wodak (1996); Moscovici (2000); Reisigl and Wodak (2001); Lakoff (2004). Moreover, I also neglect the on-going new–old discussion about biological or socio-biological evolution and the possible foundation of cognitive or linguistic concepts and theories in evolutionary terms (Chilton, 2005) was recently triggered because no convincing arguments or empirical results – to my knowledge – have yet been brought to light.
4. These results are supported by evidence of an on-going EU project (5th framework) XENOPHOB where discrimination in education, employment, housing and media representations in eight EU countries is being investigated (see Delanty et al., in press).
5. Due to space restrictions, it is impossible to provide more detailed examples of media debates as well as of written genres (leaflets, posters, slogans) of the national election campaign in the UK 2005. The immigration issue was recently triggered by the Conservative Party; however, this new debate is intertextually related to many other mainstream, rightwing and extreme rightwing texts in the past such as the leaflet mentioned above. I am particularly grateful to Elena Semino and her lecture on 'Metaphors in Political Discourse', Lancaster, 15 February 2005, where she presented some important examples.

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