Cognition: A missing link in mainstream CDA?

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Whether one agrees with the principles, methods or aims of CDA or not, one can surely not accuse CDA as having generated indifference within the linguistic and discourse analytic community. In fact, much CDA research has been very effective in promoting discussion and controversy over a number of social and methodological issues. CDA's focus on the discursive construction of social identities, power, ideology and domination, for example, has promoted a range of debates on exogenous vs. endogenous interpretations of social context (see Schegloff: 1997) and on the rhetorical and ideological underpinnings of various approaches to discourse analysis (see Wetherell: 1998; Billig: 1999).

More recently, CDA has been criticized on the grounds that it lacks a cognitive dimension in which human social action and/or social discourse may be better explained.[1] This view, promulgated by Chilton (2005), argues that the kinds of 'critical' analyses performed by CDA practitioners are inadequate in that they do not consider the workings of the human mind and the kinds of mental representations and processes contained therein. Chilton claims that without taking a cognitive linguistic perspective on discursive action, the analyst is predestined to providing a mere description of discourse and cannot hope to properly 'explain' how people think and understand or how ideologies, social identities or racist attitudes arise and get propagated. But even worse, Chilton suggests that CDA will most likely not be able to fulfill one of its ultimate aims, which is to combat inequality and oppression.

Chilton's turn to cognitivism has a seductive appeal, especially in an age where linguists are becoming increasingly interested in neurological/cerebral activity and what that can say about linguistic competence. Commonsense reasoning seems to be dictating that since 'brains' are obviously playing an enabling role in having us hear, speak, understand, etc., the mysteries of human nature, human sociality and human language must be locked up in there somewhere. I would argue, however, that the move to embrace cognitivism contains a number of potential pitfalls: First, it leads to an individualistic view in which 'meanings' are housed exclusively within minds or brains; Second, and related to the first, it tends to disregard the interactive and historical *process* by which people construct and negotiate meaning. As a third and last point, political action becomes construed simply as an innate capacity, as a brain module rather than as being linked to sets of interpersonal spaces in which conflicting human interests are fought over and negotiated.

For the rest of this paper, I will begin by briefly outlining some of Chilton's arguments for adopting a cognitive linguistic view. Following that, I will point out some of the weaknesses of cognitive science models of meaning and argue that a combinatory approach, one that takes account of both conceptual and interpersonal meaning would better serve the interests of discourse analysis in general and CDA in particular.

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[1]   A notable exception is Teun van Dijk's work on cognition.

1. Chilton's Arguments for why CDA needs to Consider Mind

CDA has been described as an "engaged and committed" social scientific approach to discourse that seeks to address social problems by rendering visible opaque aspects of social life such as unequal power relations, oppression, racism, sexism and ideologies (Fairclough & Wodak: 1997). By avowing their *commitment* to social problems, CDA practitioners do not merely content themselves with describing the mechanisms underlying oppression, racism, etc. Their goal is also one of active engagement in which social problems may become alleviated or even effaced. Another central CDA tenet is that *discourse is a form of social action* (Fairclough & Wodak: 1997, 279). Further, all forms of social relations that include aspects of power, ideology, racism, oppression, etc. are seen as discursively constituted.

Chilton has taken issue with CDA in a number of respects, including how discourse is characterized and how CDA may achieve emancipatory effects. At the root of CDA's troubles, Chilton notes that in most characterizations of CDA there is no mention of the human mind and how it relates to discourse. He views this omission as a major theoretical deficiency. Most of Chilton's arguments are drawn from work being done in cognitive science and cognitive linguistics. Simplifying greatly, cognitive science perspectives view the mind as a central processor and organizer of meaning. When we use language, our brains become engaged in various types of mental or conceptual activities. Chilton discusses two general areas of cognitive research: The first concerns the modularity of mind and the second, conceptual blending or integration. Taking modularity first, Fodor (1983) claims that brains have different modules for doing different kinds of tasks such as recognizing faces, space, colour, voices, etc. and that these modules provide input to a central processing system within the brain. This general concept of modularity has been avidly taken up by 'theory of mind' researchers (see, for example, Astington & Baird: 2005). What these researchers propose is that we have an innate ability to read other people's intentions and thus are able to predict others' future actions. This ability or module also enables what has been termed *Machiavellian Intelligence*. Because we are able to predict the intentions of others and because we can recognize how others are recognizing our own intentions, we may engage in tactical deception; that is, we may 'fool' others by 'pretending' to have a certain intention when we 'really' have a different one.

According to Chilton, modularity is a concept that CDA theorists must somehow engage with. Machiavellian intelligence, for example, is (innate) political behaviour and is not derived from socialization as CDA would claim. Chilton (2005, 30) thus comes to the general conclusion that "if the field is to take account of all relevant science, then it seems inevitable that it has to confront the question of how the human mind works when engaged in social and political action, which is largely, for humans, verbal action." But even more damaging for CDA is Chilton's claim that the findings of cognitive science may render the critical analyses characteristic of CDA unnecessary:

> If individual humans are innately machiavellian, they are also innately able to counter one another's machinations. If language is crucial to this ability and associated activity, then they should have an innate ability not just to use language in machiavellian ways but to detect and counter one another's machiavellian use of language. […] In the meantime, the question is, given the foregoing remarks: What is CDA for if people can do it anyway? (Chilton: 2005, 31)

In Chilton's view, CDA has done a fine descriptive job of identifying the discursive construction of attitudes, stereo-typing categorizations, mitigation devices of 'apparent de-

nial', etc. (Chilton: 2005, 24). What is lacking, however, is an *explanatory* account of why phenomena such as racism, oppression, sexism, etc. continue to be omnipresent in our society despite critical analysts' vigilant efforts at combating these tendencies.

> The disturbing fact is that racism, xenophobia and other kinds of exclusionary behaviour continue to appear. This suggests that we may need to delve deeper into why this kind of category formation is so persistent a factor in social behaviour, and why the language forms associated with it are so potent. […] This means that taking an explanatory stance rather than a merely descriptive one and it also means, I am suggesting, taking account of ideas developed in cognitive and evolutionary psychology. (Chilton: 2005, 24)

One aspect of Chilton's answer to these problems is to consider the range of cognitive work being done on the modularity of mind because it can provide an explanation of the genesis and evolution of social problems such as racism. Mithen's (1996) concept of *cognitive fluidity*, for example, provides an explanation for how racism evolved through the integration of two modules involving technical and social intelligence. Initially, so-called early humans contained separate modules for manipulating objects (technical intelligence) and for thinking about people (social intelligence). As the brain evolved, so the story goes, humans were able to combine these modules and in that way begin to think about people as objects to be manipulated and to perceive certain groups of people as inferior.

An even more sophisticated treatment of how people create meanings through different modules or input spaces by creating analogies, identity relations, contrasts, etc. is found in the work of Fauconnier & Turner (2002). What they call *conceptual blending* is, according to Chilton (2005, 31), an important contribution to helping us understand "what the mind is doing when it does racist discourse." Two important concepts include *conceptual integration* and *mental spaces*, which are defined below:

> Conceptual integration is at the heart of imagination. It connects input spaces, projects selectively to a blended space, and develops emergent structure through composition, completion and elaboration in the blend. (Fauconnier & Turner: 2002, 89)

> Mental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action. They are very partial assemblies containing elements, structured by frames and cognitive models. (Fauconnier & Turner: 2002, 102)

In conceptual integration, a standard blend is created by integrating meanings from two input spaces (also mental spaces).[2] Chilton gives the example involving nazi anti-Semitic propaganda. He shows how a conceptual blend that viewed Jews as parasites (and that acted to justify the heinous act of murder) was made possible through two input spaces. One space contained a medical/biological frame of parasitology and the other space contained a cultural/nationalist/migratory frame.

Input Space 1: Medical/Biological Frame of Parasitology
Hosts/ Parasites: Parasites are contained within (i.e., infect) hosts; Parasites are exterminated via medicine.

Input Space 2: Cultural/Nationalist/Migratory Frame
Nation/ Subgroup: Subgroup (Jews) has migrated into a (German) nation.

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2   A fourth space, termed a *generic space*, also forms an integral part of the model. But due to space restrictions, I have not included this in the analysis.

In the blended space, these two inputs spaces are integrated, allowing for nations to be thought of as hosts and subgroups (i.e., Jews) to be thought of as parasites.

Blended Space
Host=Nation; Parasite=Subgroup: Subgroup (Jews) has invaded (i.e., infected) the (German) nation; Subgroup needs to be exterminated.

Thus, through the creation of this blend, Nazis were not only able to conceptualize Jews in a highly offensive way, but it also helped them to justify their horrendous crime against humanity (a much more detailed analysis of this blend is found in Chilton: 2005, 38-41).

Conceptual blending is a theory of what the mind is doing when it 'thinks' or processes discourse. Chilton (2005, 46) argues that, although the theory has limited practical value (it is of little use in combating racism), it has the potential of deepening our understanding of how concepts emerge: "If it has any value it is of a scientific kind, in so far as it sketches a hypothesis as to how certain conceptual structures take hold of the mind and spread."

To sum up, Chilton proposes the following advantages to incorporating a cognitive science model of mind in one's theory and analysis:

1. It allows us to explain rather than merely describe social action and thinking and how such thinking and action has evolved;
2. It shows the actual process of thinking (i.e., cognitive fluidity, conceptual integration);
3. It allows us to go 'deeper' than merely identifying speakers' discourse practices; speakers are experts in this domain anyway (i.e., people are doing it without the help of discourse analysts) so there is limited benefit to studying social interaction.

I will argue, however, that the tenets of cognitive science approaches, if taken as *the* framework for understanding how people make meaning, essentially lead to an individualistic, non-social view of discourse. A predominant focus on 'mind' and the mental representations that minds contain and construct (e.g., blends, scripts, schemas, frames, etc.), without taking into account how people *interact*, implies that 'meaning' is largely an internal construct and process and is only peripherally dependant (if at all) on what people say to each other in specific settings.

In the cognitive science view, communication is often equated with the mind's problem solving abilities. Understanding is seen as the mind's skill at reading others' intentions (or others' masking of their intentions) or at construing counterfactuality, riddles, similarities, analogies, contrasts, temporal and spatial relations, etc. Very little relevance is given to the contextual situation and to how meaning is a collaborative process involving more than one person (i.e., 'mind'). In fact, it is 'minds' or 'brains' that are seen as understanding and constructing meaning but not people. This kind of reductionism allows us to think of communication as something that happens between brains (much as an information transfer process occurring between computers) rather than as something that happens between people who are embedded in a historically and locally constituted social world and who actively take part in negotiating meaning.

In Blending Theory, it would appear that we *first* form mental constructs about phenomena (objects, people, groups, counterfactual situations, etc.) and then, as a result of having formed these constructs, we are somehow moved to action. But why separate

'thought' and 'action' in this way? For example, do we first construe a person or group as inferior (or a parasite) and then do something? Or, by contrast, do our dealings with others have us also construct feelings of fear, hatred, jealously, etc., which leads us to form negative attitudes? Or is it not a matter of one causing the other (e.g., a thought leads to action), but of both arising in tandem?

2. Thought, Action & Mind

What is thinking? The answer from cognitive linguists such as Fauconnier & Turner is that it relates to a complex process termed conceptual blending in which human brains integrate mental spaces, thereby creating emergent cognitive structures. This view proposes to explain what is going on inside our heads, but on what grounds? If one looks closely at Fauconnier & Turner's book, you rarely find 'real' texts that involve people actually communicating with each other. Mostly, we are presented with a situation (or phrase/ sentence) and then are told what is going on in the mind for that situation.

Ethnomethodologists such as Jeff Coulter have for some years now been problematizing the concept of 'mind' and its underlying assumptions. Coulter has argued that although cognitive scientists tend to equate 'thinking' with a concrete activity such as 'digesting', he notes that an examination of its grammatical properties reveals something different.

> 'Thinking', however, is a polymorph and is not the name for a particular, identifiable process with specific ingredients, such as, e.g., masticating or digesting. I can, for example, on the basis of my words/deeds, be correctly said to "think that it is Tuesday" (when it is in fact Wednesday) without my ever having entertained such a discursive expression to myself. Note as well that, context apart, being informed simply that someone is "thinking" does not yet specify what he is doing: he may be trying to recall where he left his cigarettes or how to spell a word, figuring out his tax bill, wondering if it will rain, and a myriad of other possibilities. (Coulter: 1999, 174)

If we look more closely at the grammar, we may take note that the preferred construal of 'to think' in cognitive science is "think about" rather than "think that". Although the former refers to an activity, the latter construes a state and behaves more like the verbs 'be' or 'have'. For example, we tend to say "I *think* that Fauconnier & Turner are cognitive linguists" rather than "*I am thinking* that Fauconnier & Turner are cognitive linguists." A comprehensive treatment of the semantics of 'to think', therefore, should consider all aspects of the term's meaning and not only selected ones.

But even apart from this point, Coulter is asserting that the 'activity' being represented by 'thinking' is opaque rather than uniquely specifiable or inferable as a certain operation occurring in the mind. Consider example (1), taken from a couples therapy session involving a therapist and her client Dave.

01   Ther: how how are you <u>feel</u>ing Dave?
02   Dave: I'm just thinking about everything

What activity is 'thinking' referring to in Dave's response? The pronoun "everything" renders the scope of Dave's thinking excessively broad and, therefore, unidentifiable. So, we cannot know *what* Dave is thinking and the specific wording of his response

seems to act as a shield against the therapist's ability to gain any insight in this matter. But even if Dave had specified the scope of his thinking with something like "I'm just thinking about how sad I've become", can we now say with more precision what exact process is being referred to by Dave's "thinking"? It appears that we cannot and perhaps for this reason, cognitive linguists are eager to delve behind the scene or into the person's mind to get some answers. We could say, for instance, that Dave had just been 'thinking' about various events and that this led him to reveal his thoughts. Thus, we generate a thought, a mental representation, a conceptual blend, whatever, and this can cause us to express our thought: 'I'm thinking about being sad' [internalized thought] which leads Dave to say "I'm thinking about being sad" or even just "I'm sad". Coulter, however, warns us about drawing such conclusions.

> But much of what I do, I do non-ratiocinatively, without prior reflection, although not thereby 'thoughtlessly', and on those occasions when it generally makes sense to say that the way he or she thought about something was related to what he or she subsequently did or said, the connection is not necessarily (nor even empirically generally) one of a prior action guiding a consequent one. (Coulter: 1999, 174)

What this implies is that to understand how communication works, we need not posit a 'mental device' that transforms thoughts into utterances (or vice versa). But, we may then ask, how do we access the thoughts of others and understand what others mean? Is it through a theory of mind module that we are able to read off others' meanings and intentions? If so, what part does language play in this process? The route to take for Coulter and other researchers working in the areas of ethnomethodology (Leudar & Costall: 2009), conversation analysis (Schegloff: 1997) and discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter: 1992) is first to adopt an action-oriented view of meaning: Our understanding of others' meanings and intentions is not achieved by somehow gaining access to internalized representations (or thoughts or conceptual blends, etc.), but by attending to others' social actions that are embedded within social contexts. It is what people do and say in recognizable social settings that allows us to 'know' what someone meant and make inferences about their intentions. Furthermore, in the medium of conversation, we are constantly, on a moment-by-moment basis, displaying our understanding of others' meanings. It is by monitoring others' behaviour and by engaging with others in interaction that we come to understandings. Even if brains are somehow involved, it is *people* that are doing it not brains.

> It is in and through the exhibited conduct toward or with the object that one can tell in what way it was 'thought about', only if 'thought about' is here taken to mean something like: 'construed', 'understood', etc., and not as signifying a prior spate of reflection or interpretation. The conduct-with-the-object, in other words, displays the way(s) in which the object was construed. Invoking the expression 'thinks about' here only misleads us into falsely postulating antecedent, undisclosed 'thoughts' as omnirelevant in understanding conduct. (Coulter: 1999, 174)

3. Conceptual AND Empirical Analysis

Fauconnier & Turner's (2002) theory of conceptual blending is basically 'experiential' in scope. By *experiential*, I mean that it focuses mainly on the representation of experience and events (see Halliday 1994 for a discussion of experiential meaning). But, as

Halliday (1978) has pointed out, language also contains an *interpersonal* component, for *interacting* with others, that is just as relevant as the experiential component. In this way, people do not make meaning solely by integrating different mental spaces (e.g., construing analogies, identities, contrasts, temporal/spatial relations, etc.), they also create interpersonal relations by asking questions, making requests, having arguments, displaying emotions, downplaying their interests, modulating threats to own and others' face, etc. Language is put to use to perform a range of rhetorical and interactional business (Edwards & Potter: 1992) and so restricting one's focus on 'conceptualizations' will fail to take account of the 'bigger' picture of how meaning is made and negotiated. Along similar lines, Coulter (1989, 1999) makes a plea for performing both a *conceptual* and *empirical* analysis of discourse. The former proposes an analysis along the lines of Wittgenstein (1958) and Ryle (1949) in which we look to the grammar to understand what concepts mean; the latter relates to an 'ethnomethodological' analysis (Garfinkel: 1967) in which accountable conduct (and speakers' practices for organizing this conduct) be examined within naturally occurring social settings.

To give an example of how interpersonal meaning and not just conceptualization is important for understanding social interaction, consider example (2) taken from a couples therapy session involving a therapist, Dave and Lisa.[3]

(2) 23:6 [19:28]

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        01   Ther:   what are you lau:ghing abou:t.
        02   Lisa:   I'm laughing about myse:lf.
        03           (1.6)
        04   Lisa:   hhhhhhh.
        05           (2.7)
        06   Ther:    about yourself?
→       07   Lisa:   tch u:m. (0.3) I'm just- oh I might as well just ask Dave when my
→       08           birthday party is going to be:. cuz I've been waiting for it.
        09           (3.5)
        10   Dave:   its gonna be the Sunday at my parents house.
→       11   Lisa:   I thought you work Sunday.
        12           (1.8)
        13   Dave:   well its gonna be after I get off of work.
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This conversation contains a few examples of what Fauconnier & Turner would call *implicit counterfactuals*. These are expressions that are contrary to 'reality' and include "when my birthday party is going to be:. cuz I've been waiting for it" and "I thought you work Sunday": For the first example Lisa expresses a wish to have a birthday party and, for the second, she expresses a claim that is paraphrasable as something like "If you work Sunday, you won't be able to organize my birthday party". Fauconnier & Turner argue that counterfactuals are all-pervasive and are able to set up complex conceptual blends that prompt a range of thoughts, scenarios and inferences.

Let us attempt to construct a blend for the first counterfactual. As input spaces, we might have one space in which Dave organizes a birthday party for Lisa (and, by implication, Lisa feels appreciated through Dave's action) and, for the second she waits for

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[3]   The transcription notation is derived from Atkinson & Heritage (1984: ix-xiv): 'Underline' = 'emphasis'; ':' = 'sound extension'; '(1.6)' = 'pause recorded in seconds'; 'hhhh' = 'outbreath'.

but does not have a birthday party. As a result of blending these two spaces, we may have something like 'Lisa's waiting for Dave to organize a birthday party for her leads her not to feel appreciated'. Now, although this seems a plausible analysis for what Lisa meant (and how Dave and 'we' as analysts may understand Lisa's utterance), there most likely are many other ways to construct a blend for Lisa's utterance. In fact, my analysis was based largely on my knowledge of the sessions prior to this in which Dave's 'lack of appreciation of Lisa's wants and needs' was identified as a problem. Without having this privileged knowledge, it might have been inferred instead that Lisa is simply becoming a bit impatient with Dave and that it is not all that important to her anyway.

But an even larger point is that if the conceptual blend is supposed to represent what Lisa (and more importantly Dave, since he is the target of Lisa's utterance) is thinking, then the ensuing conversation should provide some clues. But Dave's response of "its gonna be the Sunday at my parents house" merely addresses the "when" of Lisa's prior turn. Now of course, the point is also that Dave is ignoring, and perhaps even resisting, Lisa's complaint, but do we know that Dave was indeed thinking in terms of the blend? It appears that conceptual blending is a theory about how speakers can 'mean' much more than they 'say' and offers many possibilities that extend far beyond Grice. But we still need to examine the interactional context to check whether the blends that we are proposing are warrantable and in some oriented to by the speakers.

As a last point, the conceptual or experiential meaning behind Lisa's utterance seems only to scratch the surface in explaining this interaction. For example, it was mentioned before that Lisa's turn functions to complain, but there is more; she also designs her turn to ward off the implication that she has too much stake in her complaint (i.e., that she is a constant 'nag'). The preface, *I'm just- oh I might as well just ask…*, mitigates her investment in the complaint by making it appear that she had, *just at that moment*, become aware of Dave's lack of effort in organizing a party (for a discussion of *stake & interest* and how speakers inoculate against stake, see Edwards & Potter: 1992).

To conclude, it would appear that if blending theory stays purely at the conceptual level of thought and action, it will remain a 'partial' theory that neglects the interpersonal domain. But even worse, in its present state it is mainly an academic exercise in which we theorize about what people mean based on mental space models. Empirical/interpersonal analysis is needed to *ground* any proposals of how people construe events in *how* they display their understandings.

4. Conclusions

Although cognitive science and cognitive linguistic approaches to discourse offer important insights pertaining to the experiential realm of meaning, it has very little to say about how meaning is negotiated in different social and political spheres. The proposal, then, to offer up cognitive linguistics as a panacea to the ills of critical discourse analysis seems far-fetched, to say the least. The *discourse-historical* approach exercised by Wodak and her colleagues (e.g., Muntigl, Weiss & Wodak: 2000; Wodak: 1996; Wodak, Nowak, Pelikan, Gruber, de Cillia & Mitten: 1990) is, in my opinion, much more effective in mapping out the genesis of social and political events and the social problems that result. Doing this form of analysis is much more than mere 'description'; it helps to explain how certain practices (institutional, professional, etc.) have unique (and sometimes undesirable) social outcomes.

It may be that CDA needs to add more conceptual analysis to its investigations. But this should not be viewed as a trade-off, as doing more conceptual analysis and less empirical. If it is to become innovative, it should develop into a complementary approach that keeps the social, *interactional* construction of meaning at centre stage.

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