

Dialogue Matters: Transcending Dichotomies

Commentary on James Gee's "Discourse Analysis Matters – Bridging Frameworks"

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1. Negotiating Meanings

James Gee proposes that discourse analysis could work as a bridge between cultures and enhance understanding. He makes very important points in his paper, specifically in respect to the interpretation and understanding of contested meanings; and about the different conceptual systems governing different world views and influencing perception and dialogue. More specifically, he emphasizes the relevance of context, i.e. situational meanings (by drawing on Williams 1991):

“Semantics lives in language as a system. Situational meanings live in the world. The bridge between the two is negotiation, contestation, discussion, communal agreement or disagreements over what is sufficiently like what to count as having a given word applied to it” (pp. XXX).

This insight which has widely been accepted and acknowledged in the field of Pragmatics ever since Ludwig Wittgenstein's seminal *Philosophical Investigations* (1967[1953]) implies that no fixed meanings exist; meanings are always open to discussion, contestation, and dialogue. Indeed, the entire development of the fields of Pragmatics and Sociolinguistics as well as Discourse Studies can be traced back to Wittgenstein's assumptions and their elaboration by various different philosophers and linguists (e.g., Angermuller et al. 2014; Culpeper et al. 2009; Wodak 1996).

Furthermore, Gee also poses the question about how people would or could settle their arguments if discourse/dialogue is not possible (p. XXX). Unfortunately, as he states, frequently not via argumentation but through “hate, war intolerance, and withdrawing into meaning ghettos” (ibid.). In other words: if people (groups, political parties, and so forth) remain dogmatic and cultivate their fundamentalist beliefs and ideologies (and related meanings), then any understanding, any negotiation or co-construction of meanings will become impossible. This leads us to much existing work on argumentation and deliberation as well as on cognitive frame theory or even conflict and peace research, i.e. on political communication (e.g., Amossy 2002; Habermas 1992; Forchtner 2016; Hansson 2015; Lakoff 2004; Musolff 2010; Van Eemeren 2008). In this context, Gee's concept of a socially-derived framework (“of how to think about certain things” (p. XXX) becomes relevant. Gee defines such frameworks as a “type of social and cultural *theory*.” (p. XXX) Here, I am immediately reminded of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach and his notions of context models and epistemic communities (Van Dijk 2007, 2008) as well as of Aristotle's important term ‘*endoxon*’ (Boukala 2016).

Aristotle uses the concept of *endoxon* in order to describe an opinion that can be accepted by the majority of people in any society, because it represents traditional knowledge but not necessarily true knowledge. Accordingly, van Eemeren (2010, 111) also claims that *endoxa* are

defined as commonly held beliefs or generally accepted commitments. This approach supports Habermas' thesis (1992) that legal systems must ultimately always be grounded in moral systems, and that formal procedural law, having cut its connections with sacred law and its larger religious context, was forced to let morality in again through the back door, to shape whatever room for interpretation was left – the more so, the more law in fact became an instrument of governmental control.

Obviously, nobody acts on the basis of a *tabula rasa*, everybody has been socialized into knowledge communities and communities of practice; and everybody always carries specific expectations into every speech situation with them (Wodak 2011). Thus, it would be – and here I totally agree with Gee's appeal – really important to make such expectations explicit in order to understand each other's background and positioning, and to possibly make compromises between each other's frameworks.

In order to succeed in such an endeavor, people, however, would have to be willing to learn, to accommodate or even change and modify their views – which takes us to theories of learning (Wodak 2006; see below). However, if people (for example, teachers in Gee's paper, p. XXX) are not willing to learn or are “trapped into their frameworks”, learning and subsequent dialogue become impossible. In such cases, people only hear and understand what they want to hear or understand; every new piece of information is used to support their already existing points of view. In politics, we frequently encounter such situations: politicians do not listen to each other; they actually don't seem to want to listen to each other, parallel worlds clash with each other and no understanding can be achieved.

2. Learning and Power

Generally speaking, Gee offers a vision of a world where people want to understand each other and make their socio-cultural frameworks explicit. In other words, a world where exchange, negotiation, deliberation, dialogue and compromise would be desirable and achievable. Such an imaginary presupposes, I believe, contexts where power relations would also be made explicit and hence, 'true' learning would become possible. However, Gee does not discuss power relations and structural conditions and constraints in any detail. Gee offers us an interesting example of learning and claims that goodwill is necessary to engage in critical discussion. Goodwill would imply – as mentioned above – the willingness to compromise and to challenge one's own belief systems. However, structural constraints and power relations also have to be considered. Thus, in the following, I briefly add some considerations on the notions of power and learning.

Discourse theorists of Foucauldian governmentality studies, hegemony analysis (Laclau) or psychoanalysis (Lacan) assume that both power and subjectivity shape and are shaped by discursive practices. Indeed, society and its actors, social inequality and its agents, symbolic and cultural orders and their subjects are no givens; they are made and unmade in discursive practices. In this sense, discourse does not only represent what people do, think and are in the social world; representing the world can also mean constituting it in a certain way (Angermüller et al. 2014). At the same time, discursive practices testify to the intricate relationship of power and subjectivity. Who is entitled to say what from which position and with what effect is discursively regulated: not everybody has the same chance to become visible and exist as a

subject, to participate in the exchange with others and thus to shape what counts as reality in a community.

Typically, critical sociolinguistics and discourse studies are interested in the way discourse (re)produces social domination, i.e. power abuse by one group over others, and how dominated groups may discursively resist such abuse. Gramsci's observation that the maintenance of contemporary power rests not only on coercive force but also on '*hegemony*' (winning the consent of the majority) has been particularly influential. The emphasis on hegemony entails an emphasis on *ideology*, and on how the structures and practices of ordinary life routinely normalize capitalist social relations. Althusser (1971) made a major contribution to the theory of ideology, demonstrating how these are linked to material practices embedded in social institutions (e.g. school teaching). He also showed their capacity to position people as social 'subjects', although he tended toward an overly deterministic (structuralist) version of this process which left little room for action by subjects (Fairclough et al. 2011). Lukes (2005, 28) emphasises the ideological dimensions of power (relations):

“Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they see it as natural and interchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?”

Foucault primarily focuses on “technologies of power”: discipline is a complex bundle of power technologies developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Power is thus exercised with intention – but it is not individual intention. Foucault relies on what is accepted knowledge about how to exercise power (Jäger & Maier 2015). He recommends an analysis of power with a rather functionalist strategy: in his historical analysis in *Surveiller et Punir* (Foucault 1975), Foucault raises questions concerning the social functions and effects of different technologies of surveillance and punishment: How do things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, and dictate our behaviour?

In every text (written, oral, visual), discursive differences are negotiated; they are governed by differences in power that are, in part, encoded in and determined by discourse and by genre. Therefore texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance. It becomes apparent that communication is always governed by more or less subtle or explicit power relations. Thus, any proposals for mutual understanding or “building bridges” would necessarily have to consider power structures and how to cope with these in dialogue.

Let us now approach the concepts of understanding and learning which have both, of course, been the subject of huge philosophical, sociological, political science, and linguistic literatures: Forchtner (2011) elaborates the weak but unavoidable, pragmatic presuppositions of communication oriented towards understanding as reconstructed in Jürgen Habermas' work. These presuppositions are viewed by Habermas (2008, 28) in terms of

“a world of independently existing objects, the reciprocal presupposition of rationality or ‘accountability’, the unconditionality of context-transcending validity claims such as truth and moral rightness, and the demanding presuppositions of argumentation”.

The latter are particularly significant and need to be counterfactually assumed in communication oriented towards mutual understanding (including equal communicative rights, sincerity and freedom from repression and manipulation) (Forchtner & Wodak 2017).

Much recent interdisciplinary work on political argumentation draws on Habermas’s seminal *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984). Habermas’s critical approach proposes that two parties, should they want to reach agreement or consensus, have to satisfy a set of so-called “validity claims.” These claims imply that the speakers have to make their utterances “intelligible” (or “comprehensible”), “true and truthful,” and “right.” Truth claims refer to the objective world being true or false (e.g., “I hereby say that the milk is spilt”); rightness claims refer to social actions being right or wrong (e.g., “I hereby declare that killing is wrong”); truthfulness claims refer to the degree of sincerity in our self-representation (e.g., “I hereby promise to return the book”). Another important concept draws inherently on Habermas’s political philosophy: the concept of “*deliberation*.”

For Habermas, in contrast to Fischer and Gottweis (2012), deliberation does not necessarily equal argumentation. Deliberation can be understood as the public use of reason as inclusively as possible. Deliberation is rational to the extent that claims are exchanged in an egalitarian, inclusive, and discursive context. Thus, Reisigl and Wodak (2001,34) drawing on Habermas’s emancipatory model, define “deliberative democracy” as “based on a free public sphere and a strong civil society, in which all concerned with the specific social problem in question can participate. ... This model of democracy [...] is also a theory of rational argumentation [...] and discursive conflict solving.”

Forchtner and Schneickert (2016) have further elaborated this line of thinking: the authors draw on work inspired by Habermas in which the idea of learning processes and their blocking has been conceptualized. For example, Miller (2006) offers a four-dimensional conceptualization of blocked learning. Such blockage of interaction could be caused by an existing consensus or a disagreement which cannot be challenged due to references to an authority, be it an individual/corporate actor or an idea/institution. *Dogmatic learning* leads to consensus, which is not challenged because of legitimizing references to an individual or corporate actor. *Defensive learning* views collectively shared knowledge and practices by a group as protected from criticism through reference to a particular idea or institution. *Regressive learning* excludes the *other per se* (for example through an *argumentum ad hominem*) from those who decide what is collectively shared. *Ideological learning* claims the existence of a fundamental antagonism/disagreement, which cannot be challenged by a certain idea. Forchtner and Schneickert (2016) offer manifold examples of these learning pathologies (which cannot be summarized here due to reasons of space); suffice to mention, however, that they analyze ideological learning in much detail by deconstructing various documents formally used in Higher Education in the former German Democratic Republic (ibid, 303).

Forchtner (2016) combines a Habermasian perspective with a narrative approach, by arguing that *modes of emplotting stories* (that is, the selective arrangement of events as melodramatic, tragic, comic or ironic) provide a more realistic dimension to assess intersubjective relations (and could thus also be used for an application of Gee's endeavor). Forchtner focusses on the ways actors, events, objects and processes feature in a *narrative*, and the expectations, emotive states and levels of certainty and self-righteousness of more or less self-critical subjects, which emerge from these stories. Melodramatic stories usually depict the world as being divided into dichotomies (good and bad), with the main protagonist of the story (with whom the audience is asked to identify) standing on "the right side". Comedies too, though less clear-cut, offer reassurance to the subject (indeed, they offer a happy ending) and thus, there is little reason for self-critique (see also the notions of "fictionalization of politics" and the "politicization of fiction": Wodak 2010, 2011). One of the examples analyzed by Forchtner concerns Habermas and Derrida's famous manifesto (2003) which, as he maintains, is characterized by strong comic elements, such as rebirth, reconciliation and a happy ending (Forchtner 2016). Other people can be criticized as lacking experience and having not learnt, thus facilitating self-righteousness and closure.

3. "East and West"

In a joint paper in 2010, Paul Chilton, Hailong Tian and I discussed the different traditions and meanings associated with the notion of "critique" in "the East" and "West" (Chilton et al. 2010). This was not an easy or straight forward undertaking as many dimensions had to be taken into account.

Firstly, we challenged the alleged dichotomy between East and West as such a dichotomy would presuppose two quasi homogenous static geographical entities characterized by distinct and observable differences. This is not the case as obviously no homogenous societies exist. Quite in contrast, both the Eastern and Western worlds have undergone manifold historical socio-political and cultural developments, terrible wars and revolutions, and different philosophical, political, and ideological changes. Indeed, also within nation states, there exist no homogenous societies or cultures. As apparent from decades-long sociolinguistic research, even linguistic variation is constitutive for every society. Hence, whenever we talk about East and West, we actually – I believe – reproduce orientalist and colonialist belief systems. Obviously, it is important to study socio-political change, both on a macro- and on a micro-level. We can distinguish, on the one hand, tendencies of change over long periods (such as described by Fairclough 1992); and, on the other hand, we can trace shifts on a local, regional or national micro-level, in context-dependent ways (Rheindorf & Wodak 2016).

Secondly, it is important to consider developments of power and power struggles. These also affect ideologies and belief systems, thus also what Gee labels as socio-cultural frameworks. Some frameworks are regarded as more adequate for specific contexts than others, by specific authorities, experts and politicians, i.e. those in power. This structural condition necessarily affects struggles over meaning, in all heterogeneous complex societies. This is why we stated in our paper that critique and reflection, i.e. not taking anything for granted, are relevant in order to deconstruct and understand meanings, to understand the presuppositions, implicatures and

endoxa in each context. Moreover, the normative stance and position, the specific stories and values which subjects endorse should be made explicit, challenged and reflected.

Thirdly, by reflecting on the notions of critique, deliberation, and ethics, we concluded that

“Being “critical” in Western CDA [Critical Discourse Analysis] does, then, imply ethical value judgments concerning what is “the good life”, and these fundamental premises in all CDA work are not always overt. What this implies is a rather open-ended need to incorporate philosophical reflection into the underlying social, political and ethical premises of CDA, which may actually be independent of language and discourse.” (Chilton et al. 2010, 25).

This is certainly true both globally and locally. Intellectual perspectives and traditions meet one another, in various local, regional, national, and transnational contexts, at differing points in time. Here, we could return to Gee’s proposal that “interpretation of words and cultural frameworks – in and across science, politics, religion, society, institutions, and cultures – is a job for everyone with goodwill” (pp. XXX). I am convinced that we have enough theories, methodologies, and tools to conduct such “jobs” (and don’t require new approaches or labels); however, such endeavors remain abstract if one does not consider, reflect, and challenge the normative frameworks on which one draws and which one would like to propose and discuss, as well, as complex socio-cultural contexts of understanding and learning, in the depth these issues deserve.

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