

# *Reflexivity and Critique in Discourse Analysis*

**Mary Bucholtz**

*Texas A&M University*

*Abstract* ■ Within linguistic anthropology, the anthropological concern with reflexivity and critique emerges most explicitly in debates over discourse analysis. Through critical discussion of the contributions to this two-part special issue, several dominant approaches to discourse – including critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and natural histories of discourse – are assessed for their ability to yield insights into culture and power. It is suggested that an ethnographically grounded discourse analysis can be critically effective not only within linguistic anthropology but within anthropology more generally.

*Keywords* ■ agency ■ discourse analysis ■ linguistic anthropology ■ reflexivity ■ representation

The problem of critique is not original to anthropology, nor is it new to the discipline. Indeed, anthropology has been in the business of cultural critique for quite some time, as documented most fully by Marcus and Fischer (1986) but as attested as well by numerous ethnographies written from feminist, socialist, antiracist, postcolonial and other politicized perspectives – and, of course, as steadfastly developed in this journal. But where, for many of these scholars, critique is seen as a solution to the otherwise untenable (because inequitable) project of anthropology, it is also a still unresolved problem in its own right. The problem becomes particularly acute in the context of linguistic anthropology, a field in which the tremors of earth-shattering theoretical shifts in the past decade or more have not always had the same catastrophic effect as they have had elsewhere. While the last 15 years have witnessed a dramatic challenge to the fundamental assumptions of sociocultural anthropology, and especially to the notion of ethnography itself, linguistic anthropology has set its own terms of engagement in the postmodernized arena of ethnographic endeavor.

A primary trope of this trend is reflexivity, which manifests itself as a certain self-consciousness about why ethnography is as it is, and a focused concern with what anthropologists have done to make it that way. Some linguistic anthropologists have been participating in this undertaking, but more quietly, and with much less breast-beating fanfare. By inviting such

scholars to consider more closely the importance of discourse as an object of critique, this special issue may also persuade them to become more vocal participants in ongoing debates about ethnographic representation as a site of unequal discursive power, an outcome that would benefit all of anthropology. As several articles in this issue point out, the adequate investigation of discourse of any kind requires attention to large-scale cultural forces, to local contexts of practice, and to the fine details of discursive form and content. While sociocultural anthropologists have focused mainly on the first two levels of analysis, the disciplinary concerns of linguistic anthropologists lie predominantly in the latter domain. The reflexive analysis of ethnography as discourse entails an approach that integrates these distinct but interconnected scholarly traditions.

For linguistic anthropologists, this means asking hard questions about why we do what we do: what counts as linguistic anthropology, with emphasis alternately on the 'linguistic' and the 'anthropology'? It also means asking how we decide what to include and exclude in the scope of our fieldwork, analysis and writing: what is the role of the historical, the economic, the political, in producing the linguistic issues we seek to understand, or, as Blommaert in this issue suggests we ask, what is the role of the linguistic in producing the historical, the economic, the political? How do global processes shape local contexts and how, if at all, does the local get to talk back? How do nonlinguistic practices form and inform linguistic practices and vice versa, and can we distinguish between the two? Should we even try?

These articles help us begin to answer such questions by focusing on how discourse, the very subject matter of linguistic anthropology, is embedded in relations of power. The authors all contribute, in different ways, to the goal of developing a discourse analysis that is both critical and reflexive (see also Bucholtz, 2000). In such an approach, the analyst's choices at every step in the research process are visible as part of the discourse under investigation, and critique does not stop with social processes, whether macro-level or micro-level, but rather extends to the analysis itself. In the spirit of this special issue, then, my aim in commenting on this remarkably cohesive and provocative set of articles is both to offer constructive criticism and to generate a critical and reflexive dialogue among the authors themselves. In this enterprise, the present collection has the great advantage of drawing on multiple resources, bringing together as it does the acute political consciousness of European thought and the rich nuance of North American linguistic-anthropological scholarship. The disciplinary, geographical and theoretical breadth represented by these articles ensures that the dialogue begun here will help to move linguistic anthropology in the United States and Canada into a fuller engagement with related developments elsewhere.

## Critical discourse analysis and its critics

An enquiry into the relationship of discourse and critique must begin with some discussion of the range of methods that operate under the rubric of discourse analysis. The approaches familiar to most linguistic anthropologists – conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and the ethnography of communication – are not always critical in orientation, although they have been enlisted at various times for purposes that can be glossed as ‘critical’. Given the dearth of critical work within discourse analysis generally, it is not surprising that all of the articles in this collection address themselves to what is perhaps the most fully formed version of critical analysis within the field: critical discourse analysis. Indeed, one of the most refreshing things about critical discourse analysis as an approach, particularly for scholars of language within the United States, is its willingness to voice an overt political commitment. This approach, especially as developed by British linguist Norman Fairclough, has garnered a great deal of attention, both positive and negative, since its emergence, inspiring a flurry of scholarly activity proudly bearing the label *critical* (see e.g. the articles in Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard, 1996) as well as a number of articles attacking its overtly political foundations (particularly from the vantage point of conversation analysis, e.g. Schegloff, 1997). The three articles in this issue (*COA* 21[1]) that discuss critical discourse analysis most extensively – those by Slembrouck, Verschueren and Blommaert – balance these polarized perspectives. They agree that discourse analysis needs to develop a more critical outlook, but they convincingly argue against the direction taken by critical discourse analysis, pointing to theoretical and methodological weaknesses that mar the project’s political efficacy.

In his article, Slembrouck takes a historical view of critical discourse analysis, taking account of both its original goals and its most recent manifestations. The value of this perspective is its clear focus on the contextual conditions under which scholarship develops. By locating the birth of critical discourse analysis in a particular historical moment in linguistics, Slembrouck helps us understand how the approach emerged and what it offers. His even-handed assessment acknowledges numerous contributions to the critical study of discourse: its understanding of power as a reproductive as well as repressive force, its potential for historically grounded research, its awareness of the multi-facetedness of ideology. Moreover, the approach holds out the hope of forging interdisciplinary connections, for the linkage of micro-level practices and larger social phenomena that is the central concern of critical discourse analysis is relevant to many other fields (including anthropology).

It is all the more unfortunate, then, that in spite of these merits critical discourse analysis does not entirely succeed in its goals. In particular, as Slembrouck notes, in light of the framework’s explicitly liberatory aims, it is surprising, and dismaying, that the methods by which political

emancipation is to proceed are left undiscussed. This problem is rooted in the ambivalence of critical discourse analysis regarding individual agency, an ambivalence that can be traced ultimately to the version of critical theory that informs the model. On the one hand, all language users are believed to be able to analyze discourse in the same way as the analyst (though with less conscious awareness), but on the other hand, these language users may need the assistance of the analyst to guide them to see their own misunderstanding of the world. Critical discourse analysis is therefore engaged in a politics that privileges the analyst's viewpoint. This bias may help explain why much critical discourse analysis has been a disappointment, despite its initial promise as a politically engaged form of discourse analysis: it yields findings that can always be predicted in advance, once the basic power relations have been sketched out. It is too rarely surprising, too rarely sensitive to subtlety, complexity, or contradiction.

This predictability is also one of the objections that Verschueren has to critical discourse analysis. Challenging the rapidity with which some research within the framework moves to the perilous level of explanation, he asserts that purported findings in critical discourse analysis are often merely unremarkable consequences of what we know about how language and society work. Verschueren is right to warn of the dangers of over-obvious analyses, and critical discourse analysis is indeed vulnerable to such criticism. However, it must also be recognized that what counts as obvious depends on one's point of view. For Verschueren, who works within linguistic pragmatics, a tradition that seeks to understand the general principles underlying the contextualized use of language, certain facts can be presupposed without earning the appellation of *explanatory*. He argues, for example, that media reliance on common-sense ideologies, a situation that is the mainstay of many critical discourse analyses, is simply an example of the wider pragmatic phenomenon of invoking common ground in discourse. Yet common ground need not mean common sense, in Gramsci's theoretically laden use of that term, and given the range of available and conflicting ideologies in public discourse, it is indeed striking that only a small subset of these are invoked in mainstream media reporting. Likewise, Verschueren objects that the strategies whereby educational discourse has become linked to the discourse of marketing are self-evident from the larger economic context and hence do not warrant Fairclough's analytic attentions. As Collins demonstrates in his article in this collection (*COA* 21[1]), however, it is indeed valuable to understand precisely how the discourses of education and corporate capitalism have come to be linked in recent decades. But these minor issues do not mitigate Verschueren's larger concern: that, given its constrained view of discourse as a tool of hegemony, critical discourse analysis misses numerous opportunities to examine the ways in which meaning in discourse is negotiable, fluid and contestatory.

For his part, Blommaert expands Slembrouck's and Verschueren's critiques to include conversation analysis as an approach to discourse that

presents a complementary set of analytic difficulties concerning the researcher's relationship to discourse meaning. To be sure, Blommaert finds ample flaws in critical discourse analysis – among them, its penchant for identifying ideological state apparatuses in an a priori way and its reductive theory of power – but he finds problems in conversation analysis as well, especially the claim, in its strictest formulations, that the analyst is essentially absent from the analysis, that meaning is discovered, not made. This remarkable abdication of researcher responsibility for the interpretative process of analysis is the counterpart of the researcher-as-political-vanguard stance that characterizes a good deal of critical discourse analysis.

Yet, for all the assertions of hardline practitioners of conversation analysis, Blommaert's data show that what you see is not what you get. His three 'forgotten contexts' of discourse (resources, trajectories and data) give us a way into discourse analysis that is both flexible and critically viable by calling attention to differential access to and uses of linguistic resources of various kinds. His data on the narratives of Africans seeking political asylum in Belgium dramatically reveal that such forgetfulness has consequences not only in discourse analysis but also in the lives of those whose discourse is subject to the institutional workings of entextualization, including by researchers of discourse. But in refusing the fullness of context, conversation analysis cannot unveil the political dimensions of data like Blommaert's (whereas critical discourse analysis might be inclined to over-read the political dimension but solely at the level of institutional discourse). If, for critical discourse analysis, discursive structure is reducible to social structure, then, for conversation analysis, social structure is reducible to discursive structure. That is, while critical discourse analysis moves directly from textual to micro-level analysis without requiring a strong contextual link between the two, conversation analysis remains entirely at the level of the text: to be relevant to the analyst all social phenomena must be evident on the surface of the discourse. Such limitations in handling the politics of discourse render the conversation-analytic model inadequate as a corrective to critical discourse analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### **Critical junctures: alternative and hybrid approaches**

Several authors in this issue suggest developments in linguistic anthropology, and especially natural histories of discourse (Silverstein and Urban, 1996), as a way out of some of these dilemmas. There are many virtues in this framework for the critical analysis of discourse, such as the focus on the recontextualization of discourse as an ongoing social process and the theoretical motivation for considering the researcher's role in transforming discourse into text. Moreover, the dialogic, process-oriented perspective that grounds this approach brings with it the advantages of the ethnographic tradition of anthropology.

Nevertheless, it is again necessary to sound a cautionary note. Tracing the natural histories of discourse does not guarantee that one will avoid the pitfalls of critical discourse analysis. We can hope that all such work will be like Miyako Inoue's (1999), a historically and politically sensitive analysis of how discourses of technology manage unruly language. But no approach can ensure that we will always get such satisfying outcomes. As Slembrouck points out, both natural histories of discourse and critical discourse analysis build history, society, politics and culture into their theory, but in actual analysis either approach may end up shortchanging one or more of these and becoming text-bound (or perhaps text itself will get shortchanged). Moreover, the intellectual capital associated with natural histories of discourse as an approach – its alluring theoretical density, its impressive arsenal of polysyllabic concepts – may attract practitioners who are more interested in the trappings than in what the framework can do for the critical analysis of discourse.

We might also want to consider the ways in which natural histories of discourse contribute to a long-standing theoretical project of understanding discursive circulation. The concept of entextualization, for instance, shares with the Derridean notion of citationality the insight that discourse becomes text through iterability, through the reproducibility of speech acts in new contexts. Both concepts also rely on the fact that each new manifestation of a text reveals the traces of its own discursive history. And like Derrida's (1988) view of speech acts, natural histories of discourse presuppose a discursive economy that operates, in some sense, without the intervention by an agent, a limitation that is signaled by the very name of the approach. More accurately, however, natural histories of discourse are *social* histories of discourse, naturalized, yes, but not entirely natural. Such issues are at the root of recent theorizing and critique within gender studies, especially within linguistic anthropology (Livia and Hall, 1997; Kulick, 1999; Livia, 2000).

In fact, unlike critical discourse analysis, the concern with agency and power is not necessarily fundamental to the research enterprise of natural histories of discourse. Power may emerge from the analysis, and often does, but it may not and does not surface in every case. And linguistic anthropology more generally has tended to understand power as something available for description but not for critique. But if we are to do critical analysis, we will need a better concept of power than critical discourse analysis offers, one that considers it not only as hegemony but as a potentially counter-hegemonic agency. Consequently, we may need some new theorists. Foucault and Bourdieu have brought us a long way, but how much further might we go with other theorists (even perhaps some who are not French)? Several likely candidates are mentioned in the pages of this issue. Although some are already venerable parts of the linguistic-anthropological tradition, we are not done with them yet, and few have been sufficiently tapped for what they can offer the critical study of discourse.

It is therefore encouraging that Rampton, in his contribution to this issue (*COA* 21[1]), suggests that we revisit one such familiar framework within linguistic anthropology: interactional sociolinguistics. He reminds us that the approach, from its very beginnings (Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b) stems from a concern to address social inequities. This explicit political engagement is unusual in linguistic anthropology, and thus interactional sociolinguistics may appear to be the most viable alternative to critical discourse analysis. Certainly, as Rampton indicates, the concern with face-to-face oral discourse that is central to the project of interactional sociolinguistics greatly expands the range of data available for critical analysis. It brings to the forefront the crucial importance of interaction and dialogism, two concepts that rarely enter critical discourse analyses. In addition, interactional sociolinguistics is founded on a deep concern with context, and in this sense it lays the groundwork for the development of natural histories of discourse.

It is unclear, however, whether interactional sociolinguistics can transcend its original focus on spoken discourse to encompass written texts as well, a necessary addition in order for the framework to be comprehensive. Such an extension would enable a more contextually sensitive analysis of written text as an outcome of interaction than is possible under most current critical discourse analysis. The accommodation of written discourse would also bring interactional sociolinguistics closer to natural histories of discourse, which readily integrate both spoken and written modalities without losing sight of the shifting contexts in which they intersect. (In this issue, Slembrouck and Blommaert offer powerful examples of such an analysis.)

It may seem, then, that interactional sociolinguistics has clear theoretical advantages over critical discourse analysis and clear political advantages over natural histories of discourse. But interactional sociolinguistics is not a panacea for the critical study of discourse. Unlike critical discourse analysis, its political aims are traditionally liberal rather than radical. Where critical discourse analysis seeks to transform society, the goal of interactional sociolinguistics is to improve communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. But because in this approach power inequities are often considered a result of, rather than a reason for, apparent miscommunication, the broader workings of power go unexamined. Consequently, the analytic focus on 'cultural misunderstanding' can place the burden on those with less power in the interaction.

Rampton helps to overcome this limitation by introducing Voloshinov's concept of 'behavioral ideology' into his own interactional-sociolinguistic analysis. This concept is a valuable inclusion, for it ties ideology to interactional processes and thereby enriches the critical potential of interactional sociolinguistics without redirecting its analytic aims. Once this is achieved, interactional sociolinguistics may actually hold more political promise than critical discourse analysis, insofar as it shows a somewhat greater tendency to put its politics into practice in a wide range of local

situations.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it provides numerous models of precisely the sort of scholarly intervention into the politics of institutional discourse that Slembrouck calls for in his article (e.g. Roberts et al., 1992).

Slembrouck's wider point – that the institutional realm merits a more nuanced analysis than has often been the case in critical discourse analysis – is addressed not only by Rampton's article but also in the case studies by Heller and Collins. As Heller shows in her analysis of francophone ideologies in Canada, institutions are themselves flexible and malleable bodies, not faceless hegemonic forces. Rampton and Collins show a similar awareness of context in their investigations of educational institutions. In Rampton's study of the everyday interactions that reproduce linguistic and social stereotypes as well as in Collins's investigation of the ideological conditions under which educational institutions must currently operate, the authors demonstrate that the overly deterministic approach taken by critical discourse analysis misses the moments of ambiguity, instability and resistance to which all discourse is subject. Finally, both Heller and Collins make clear that the line between institutional discourse and its reception by members of society is hard to identify, for it is by responding to discourses that social actors implement them.

The frequent return to the institutional level in these articles suggests that critical work, of whatever strain, is largely understood as concerned with the public and institutional level; very little 'private' discourse appears in this collection. Certainly, a concern with broader issues of resource allocation and the dispersion of discursive meaning is one that draws attention to the workings of large-scale historical and political trajectories, an arena not always adequately engaged by discourse analysts. Yet it will be necessary to integrate this larger picture with what is going on in the realms of the unofficial, the marginal and the everyday. This might be one place where critical scholars of discourse might benefit from the sustained critical attention that language and gender researchers have long directed to this arena. And this too might be a way of bringing *people* more directly into critical analysis – gendered, racialized, sexualized, and otherwise located in shifting and negotiable identities as well as in large-scale social processes. While a number of articles address the individual dimension from different perspectives, Rampton's work perhaps takes the largest steps in this direction by looking in detail at how a single speaker's identity is implicated in ideological systems. In taking ideologies as our analytic starting point, we may lose sight of the individual and collective identities that they create and through which they are created.

The last two articles go more deeply into some of these issues, exploring the possibilities and limits of various frameworks and offering hybrid approaches that integrate critical and ethnographic approaches to discourse. Heller's article pushes methodological boundaries in her investigation of the historical conditions and institutional settings that endow the French language with ever-changing political meanings in Canadian

society. The attention Heller pays to the central role of language ideologies in the shaping of social and political processes improves upon critical discourse analysis, in which ideologies of language are rarely scrutinized. Similarly, her large-scale study of the relationship of discourse, material resources and history exemplifies a wide-angle analysis that does not prematurely focus on text to the detriment of other dimensions of social life, as conversation analysis is wont to do. Blommaert argues that we need the macro as well as the micro in our analysis of discourse, and Heller's article makes the same case cogently and vividly.

Heller is equally critical of more anthropologically oriented scholarship. She rightly points to the need for both interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology to make more of the relationship between discourse and history, a perspective that allows for greater attention to be paid to the connection between multiple discursive sites. And where authors like Blommaert locate the problem in discourse analysis and the solution in linguistic anthropology, Heller notes that much linguistic anthropology is itself rather uncritical, or clumsily critical, of broader social forces. But she also adopts the strongest aspects of these different approaches. As in critical discourse analysis, Heller seeks to bring together the Foucauldian and linguistic notions of discourse, thereby remedying the often near-exclusive emphasis on micro-level discourse analysis in linguistic anthropology. For Heller, this approach inevitably involves compromise: examining the broad historical sweep of discourses about *la francité* means sacrificing detailed discourse analysis in the traditional linguistic sense; examining history as it unfolds means sacrificing a full account of history as it is recorded. Heller's self-awareness as a researcher keeps these compromises from being blind spots; she knows where she needs to look next in her unfolding research project.

The danger of relying too heavily on Foucauldian discourse, however, is that it is often too easy to read particular discourses as pervasive at a given historical moment. It is unlikely, for example, that all speakers exemplify each discourse Heller identifies to the same extent and in the same ways, and it is likely that they invoke multiple, sometimes conflicting, discourses at various points. Another difficulty with Foucauldian discourses is that their agency resides both everywhere and nowhere: the discourse exists independently of the speaking subjects that bring it forth. Hence discourses may not be as easily identifiable as a macro-level analysis would suggest, and the details of discourse are often the sites of such ruptures. To apply for a moment the reflexive discourse analysis that has been advocated throughout this issue, the organization of francophone discourses into traditional, modernizing and global implies a neat teleology that may not be warranted (or intended). Yet clearly there is a shift afoot, as Heller's analysis of the discourse surrounding institutional francophone activism demonstrates. The battles and debates Heller documents show that these discourses are not historically distinct but coexist, if not peacefully. These issues indicate

that although linguistic discourse is the dowdy country cousin of sexy and sophisticated Foucauldian discourses, we will continue to need both.

There is a satisfying symmetry in rounding out the articles in this special issue with Collins's article, which argues for both critical discourse analysis and natural histories of discourse as ways of approaching the debate over educational standards. Collins's theoretical prelude to his article suggests that these frameworks may have more in common than we may have thought. His analysis of the *American Educator*, the publication of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), traces the emergence of the now prevalent public discourse on standards over the course of a decade. Collins's consideration of the poetics of the newsletter's utterly prosaic prescription for standards is particularly welcome, for this aesthetic dimension is often omitted in critical analyses, as though power and pleasure were not tightly linked. Also striking is the completeness of the official consensus about the issue – a completeness, one suspects, that is only possible because of Al Shanker's tremendous power as president of AFT. At the same time, however, we need to be careful not to shift from thinking of the union publication as a source of the new discursive formation to thinking of it as *the* source. Collins alludes to the larger economy of texts in which the *American Educator* circulates, and it would be interesting to know more about how the discourse of these sources shaped and was reshaped by AFT. As Heller suggests, in attending to the history of discursive flow, it may be difficult to see the micro-history from which discursive change is wrought. Thus the discourse of educational standards that Collins identifies in the official publication of AFT clearly did not originate there but is a reflection of and reaction to discourses that exert pressure on union officials. But the origins of this discourse are not identified in Collins's article.

The politics of poetics emerges here too: how did the polished piece of invented dialogue that Collins analyzes come to be embedded in an article on standards? How exactly do such entextualizations come about? And we may also ask, as Verschueren is likely to do, whether the strategy of invented quotation serves a particular need in this very public and institutional domain that it lacks in the less politically charged (but no less political) realm of private conversation, or of the interviews that Collins conducted. The 'statistical stories' of the teachers are in some ways the converse of the poetic political discourse of the union leaders. The strategic, rhetorical blending of discourse frames is why, Collins argues, a hybrid form of discourse analysis is necessary.

One may wonder whether there was any official venue for dissension from this carefully crafted 'consensual' discourse, and certainly in Collins's account of teachers' responses to Shanker, much more dissensus emerges. But given unequal access to the material means of discourse production – deprived even of a letters-to-the-editor section in the *American Educator* – this dissensus remains unofficial and less audible; it does not enter the official record. It is also important to remember that this unofficial

discourse is no less self-interested than Shanker's: we should see the statistics offered by the teachers Collins interviewed not as fact but as discourse. Thus, for example, the teachers whose responses Collins documents participate in their own discourse of authority via the confident citing of facts and statistics, not through the language of *we* and *you* that the union officials use in their communiqués to the rank and file. It is a particularly nice touch that a teacher who supplied these statistics did so by writing them on a blackboard: a potent reminder of educational authority through the use of the tools of that authority. It is worth recalling here Verschueren's caution that if our political commitments drive our analysis, we may miss certain things. (Heller's article offers a useful alternative: not 'taking sides' in political conflict but deconstructing it.) Even more contextual detail would be helpful: who reads the union publication?, under what conditions?, what is remembered from the reading?, and how is it entextualized in a new discourse context? It is certainly remarkable that none of Collins's interviewees regularly read the union publication carefully crafted for them. Why they choose not to read the publication is an important question in its own right. I am asking for more than can be provided in a brief article, of course, and these questions should not overshadow the significance of Collins's article. His combination of textual and ethnographic approaches nicely answers the call other authors in this issue have made for greater attention to the conditions and practices of discourse production and reception.

Such methodological and theoretical eclecticism is most evident in Collins's and Heller's articles, but it is a thread that runs through all the articles in this issue (*COA* 21[1], 21[2]) and, indeed, through much of the research within discourse analysis. These articles offer no single answer to the problems they raise: approaches as diverse as critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, natural histories of discourse, quantitative sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and the sociology of language are invoked at various moments. This diversity should be viewed as a strength of the collection; most scholars, after all, draw on multiple methods to investigate their data as fully as possible. There are relatively few card-carrying critical discourse analysts or conversation analysts or natural historians of discourse or interactional sociolinguists; there are many more researchers who make use of these frameworks without subscribing wholeheartedly to their entire doctrine. Indeed, as the articles in this issue make clear, it is from slavish adherence to a single method that problems arise.

Another important point made by these articles is that each method may be particularly suited to specific kinds of questions. Rampton suggests that a focus on quantitative variation might reveal how social structures are reproduced in language, while a consideration of style yields more information about creativity, agency and resistance. Likewise, the big-picture issue that Heller takes on – what francophone ideologies circulate in

English-speaking Canada – requires a big-picture approach, one that looks at discourse with a capital D. The articles also offer a range of epistemological stances, from Verschueren's reliance on a (social) scientific framework to the more postmodern and humanistic approaches taken by some of the other authors. Thus Verschueren's focus on the empirical basis of discourse analysis complements the more interpretative approach that Collins takes. Where Verschueren invokes a model of scholarship in which agreed-upon rules must be adhered to in order for the enterprise to succeed, Slembrouck offers a view of scholarship as something that comes with far fewer guarantees that, with the proper method, the pitfalls of interpretation can be evaded. Verschueren aims to eliminate sources of bias, while Blommaert and Slembrouck settle instead for the humbler but more realistic goal of recognizing that bias is inevitable and bringing it more fully into our range of vision.

### **The end of critique**

This rich array of sometimes conflicting theories and methods raises a final question: when does critique stop? If we are committed to an approach to discourse that is reflexive as well as critical, it never does. I wish to illustrate this issue through a close examination of specific points in Verschueren's article. I single out this piece because, more than any other in this collection, it invites critique of its own discourse. In doing so, I am taking seriously Verschueren's forceful call for more genuine criticism in academic exchanges (and in commentaries on special journal issues in particular, an injunction that makes a certain amount of critical reflection on my own role practically unavoidable). My aim is not to launch an all-out attack on this well-reasoned article but to raise some points for discussion that, if addressed, might expand the utility of the article's critique for linguistic anthropology and related fields. Indeed, it is due to some of its strengths that Verschueren's work lends itself to critical analysis: like the theoretical model it seeks to improve, it is explicit about its scholarly investments, and it does not shy away from programmatic statements about the nature of discourse-analytic research.

I am especially persuaded by Verschueren's insightful re-analyses of texts originally treated within the framework of critical discourse analysis; his work powerfully points out that analysis cannot exhaust interpretation. Verschueren's consideration of Fairclough's own discourse, too, and particularly its rhetorical strategies, is compelling and innovative. And there is no question that, as Verschueren ably demonstrates, critical discourse analysis can be a heavy-handed approach, as earnest and humorless as the brand of Marxism on which it was founded. The answer to the problem of the scientific materialism informing critical discourse analysis, however, is not more science but more materialism: not more striving for the 'right'

answer but close attention to the specific conditions and practices that shape people's lives. For this reason, any attempt to formulate foolproof guidelines for an acceptable critical discourse analysis will be defeated by its own universalist urge. How, for example, might one put into practice Verschueren's proposed 'minimal guideline': 'Whatever can be detected on the basis of a "formal" analysis (broadly conceived, with a wider notion of context than Schegloff's) can never be ignored'? It is difficult to imagine what might constitute adequate formal analysis in advance of actually carrying it out: must all analyses attend to phonetic detail?, to syntactic structure? There is no a priori way to set the limits of 'form', a concept that the linguistically trained scholar may think is obvious, but is not. Equally problematic is the notion of context, for, as Blommaert shows, any definition of context inevitably excludes as well as includes. We cannot anticipate how discourse will become recontextualized, so we cannot foreclose what counts as admissible context, with the result that everything is potentially available for analysis. Most importantly, any such 'basic rule' cannot be assumed to be self-evident, disinterested and uncontested. It is this recognition that allows us to move from critical to reflexive discourse analysis.

Verschueren is right, then, to find fault with critical discourse analysis for its tendency to map particular linguistic forms on to particular politically charged functions without investigating how they operate in specific discourse contexts. His illustration of this point with relation to the doctor-patient discourse first analyzed by Fairclough vividly shows the limitations of such an approach. Thus the second 'basic guideline' that Verschueren proposes – 'the fundamental negotiability of language in the process of meaning generation (taking place with real language users in real contexts of use)' – is far more useful than the first as a foundational principle for a critical and reflexive discourse analysis. In acknowledging the flexibility of all discourse, this principle offers an alternative to Verschueren's desire to seek a solution in science. Interpretation, in his critique of critical discourse analysis, must be bolstered by 'methodological rigor'. I share his uneasiness about the too frequent disjunction of text and its interpretation, yet it is helpful to keep in mind other ways of understanding interpretation, and indeed criticism itself. In literary criticism, for example, texts are not closed off by a single authoritative meaning but instead are opened up for multiple readings that keep authority from entirely consolidating in any one place. Rather than discouraging theory-driven interpretations of discourse, then, we might think instead about reading texts through (different kinds of) theory as a way of unsettling the certainties of 'methodological rigor'. It was precisely this literary approach that informed the move toward a more reflexive ethnography in the 1980s (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), and, despite the many potential dangers of collapsing the ethnographic and the literary, the focus on the researcher as meaning-maker remains a valuable lesson for all students of discourse.

The reflexive examination of discourse calls for us to consider not only the multiple meanings of text in context but also the ways that discourse circulates within our own scholarly practice. Thus when Verschueren notes that critical discourse becomes decidedly less critical in examining the work of its own practitioners, I would ask not, 'How does this weaken the approach?' but, 'How and why does this self-affirming discourse develop?' Verschueren would prefer to see substantive critique instead of this 'community-building effort', but the goal he offers, the 'search for enhanced understanding', appeals in turn to its own sort of community. Similarly, Blommaert's charge that critique is 'too often and too much a matter of the credibility of the researcher' does not address the sticky issue that, at some level, the credibility and legitimacy of researchers as community members is what sustains the entire scholarly enterprise.

It is important to realize that Verschueren is speaking from a position in the European academy, where politicized research is not as hard to find as in its US counterpart. For him, the best reflexivity comes from critique, particularly the scholarly critique that in his view has been superseded by community-building and mutual support. One way to short-circuit this scholarly tendency is to invite critique from the outside: the recent debates between critical discourse analysts and conversation analysts (e.g. Billig and Schegloff, 1999) raise numerous issues that push both fields to make their assumptions more explicit. Yet we would be naïve students of culture and society indeed if we believed that we could ever entirely move away from community-building as a fundamental component of academic practice. Verschueren's invocation of science is itself a discourse that can persuade only like-minded others, and his promotion of criticism as 'our best chance for being taken seriously' merits a bit of rudimentary critical discourse analysis of its own: who is 'we?', 'taken seriously' by whom? As the readers of this discourse, how do we interpret it and respond to it?

In this regard, Verschueren's article is both the most optimistic and the most pessimistic in this collection: optimistic in its belief in a critical science of discourse, pessimistic in what it grants to critique. His proposal that critical work be decoupled from scholars' political positions, for instance, empties the notion of critique of its very meaning. It is simply not possible to separate critical work from political work. The strength of recent anthropology is its awareness that researchers are embodied and specific, not interchangeable, and that while this affects the research process it is inevitable. But the subjectivity of researchers does not invalidate their results. Nor does a political commitment of a particular sort necessarily dictate a specific research outcome: the problem is not that researchers hold 'professed and well-defined political commitments' but that they may fail to consider how their politics shapes the research process itself. Of course, taking up an explicit political position cannot insulate the researcher from the thorny problems of interpretation that Verschueren raises. I fear, however, that the solution he proposes would turn out, albeit unintentionally, to be simply

hegemonic business as usual. Just as there is no expectation that nonfeminists can successfully conduct feminist research or that racist scholars will reach the same conclusions as their antiracist counterparts, so there can be no requirement that critical discourse analysis – or any analytic method – must offer equal time to all researchers. The problem, in the end, lies not in politics but in practice, and it is the illumination of scholarly practice that is offered by reflexive discourse analysis.

Although I have picked on Verschueren rather unfairly, this is in part because I found his article so stimulating. I hope at the end of this exercise my point has been made: while critical discourse analysis is unquestionably vulnerable to Verschueren's critique, his critique, and indeed all our work, is equally vulnerable to critical discourse analysis, or whatever form of deconstructive analysis we favor. And Verschueren is smart enough to know this and acknowledge it up front – and to acknowledge that his acknowledgment may be suspect. Just as we cannot get to the end of critique, neither can we reach the end of reflexivity. This is the bind of representation, and we will be entangled in it for some time to come.

### **Reflexivity and relevance**

As natural histories of discourse make plain, the process of reflexivity, like the process of critique, has no end because entextualization has no end. This issue is of special concern to discourse analysts, for the scholarly phenomenon of making discourse into text, Blommaert's third 'forgotten context', is the fundamental method of discourse analysis. Slembrouck's article shows precisely how the entextualization of discourse reifies and recontextualizes language that was produced for an altogether different purpose. He skillfully details how the practice of discourse analysis in any framework inevitably reproduces its own agenda through the entextualization and recontextualization of discourse. What is especially appealing about Slembrouck's article is his willingness to examine his own practices of recontextualization and thereby reveal the often-invisible 'messiness' of the research process, in which research publications are simply way-stations and not the final stop. Hence Slembrouck's excavation of the contextual layers through which discourse became the data of his own analysis could have also included its recontextualization in the article that appears in this collection, and this recontextualized text may itself be inserted in yet another context.

The theoretical insights of natural histories of discourse, therefore, make a valuable contribution to a reflexive discourse analysis. Likewise, other approaches offer additional resources: as Rampton notes, one of the central methods of interactional sociolinguistics, the playback interview, invites the participants (and others) to reflect on the meaning of their interaction. Neither of these approaches on its own, however, offers a sufficient

theoretical or methodological base for the critically reflexive analysis of discourse. Playback interviews encourage the researcher to reconsider her or his analysis in light of others' critical reflections, but such self-reflexivity may be motivated solely by methodological concerns rather than political commitment. Similarly, in spite of the considerable usefulness of the concepts of entextualization and recontextualization, natural histories of discourse do not necessarily focus on the analyst's own strategies of suppression and selectivity. This contrasts with work like Slembrouck's, whose explicit purpose is to highlight his earlier attempt to elide the research process from the research product (Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996). It is therefore important, as the authors in this issue demonstrate, to draw on a variety of theories and methods to accomplish the dual tasks of criticism and reflection.

Further barriers to reflexivity may be inherent in our unexamined writing practices, for the objectivist orientation of much social-scientific writing creates its own kind of analysis, its own version of events. Likewise, Verschueren notes that the ubiquitous acronyms of social-scientific discourse reify an approach as more stable than it actually is. Indeed, being aware of one's own practices can be as simple as calling attention, as Slembrouck does, to one's entextualization of discourse by discussing not an objective set of 'data' but our own individually arrived at 'data representation'. In short, the way we write matters. Although this insight is (perhaps overly) familiar to sociocultural anthropologists, the problem of representation is ongoing, and it becomes especially challenging when one seeks to represent language within language. Discourse analysts' focus on discursive form, both what it enables and what it obscures, can thus help anthropologists reflect upon their own representational practices.

Perhaps the most challenging question to emerge from these articles, then, is the question of relevance. Setting aside issues of theoretical and methodological adequacy, who benefits from the critical analysis of discourse? Certainly not the readers of the British popular press, which appears to be read more widely by the critical discourse analysts who frequently mine it for data than by its target audience. Often the imagined readership consists of the idealized universal subjects of critical discourse analysis, not actual readers, whose practices of text consumption remain speculative, as a number of the articles in this collection have pointed out. Slembrouck and Verschueren both problematize the assumption within critical discourse analysis that the analyst's interpretation is analogous, or even homologous, to the language user's interpretation. If discourse indeed centers, as critical discourse analysis implies, on a quasi-Chomskyan ideal speaker-hearer in a homogeneous speech community whose implicit knowledge can be made explicit through the analyst's intuitions, then we haven't come very far at all. Although critical discourse analysis is a frequent target of such criticism, similar charges can be made against most other forms of discourse analysis, particularly those that harbor no broader political goals.

But if critical discourse analysis does not always serve the subjects who are interpellated into hegemonic discourse, then who does it serve? Those who do it, certainly, and no doubt their students as well. This is not to be underestimated. Critical discourse analysis, after all, may be a source of inspiration for students – it is far more accessible to them than, say, the dauntingly erudite (and invaluable) work of Michael Silverstein, and it may spark an interest in critical social theory – and perhaps even in Michael Silverstein. Additionally, as suggested above, the critical and reflexive analysis of discourse may be of use to scholars in adjacent fields. But all this may not be enough if we want to reach beyond the confines of the academy. Slembrouck's suggestion that critical discourse analyses rely less on introspection and more on intervention is promising, and all of the articles in this issue set up the conditions for such an approach. Blommaert's and Heller's work are two examples of precisely what it means to do research that is at once reflexive and critically relevant. Both authors think hard about how their research has shaped the very discourses they are studying, how their own institutional status contributes to the institutional recognition of particular kinds of ideologies. Finally, it is a great strength of all these studies that they hold themselves as accountable to the standards of scholarship that Verschueren outlines as to the political concerns of the language users with whom they work.

## Conclusion

The articles in this collection demonstrate that a critical and reflexive discourse analysis must necessarily be an anthropologically sensitive discourse analysis: one that is cognizant of power, context, history and agency. Equally evident from these articles is that the anthropological critique of discourse analysis must also be coupled with a discursive critique of anthropology. The much-heralded, and much-criticized, move to make discourse more central to anthropological theory has foundered largely because discourse never became central to anthropological practice. The insights of discourse analysis should not be limited to linguistics, or to linguistic anthropology, but have the potential to enrich the study of culture more generally.

In the end, however, a politically effectual discourse analysis must turn inward as well as outward, for critique does not ensure reflexivity and reflexivity does not necessitate critique. We must also learn to replace self-effacement in the research process with a heightened self-consciousness – not to indulge our narcissism but to look squarely at our own relationship to our research. This vital step is nicely encapsulated by Heller's question: 'How do we feel about what we claim to be seeing?' This question echoes the drive for reflexivity taken up by many of the other authors, but it also focuses on our subjectivity in an inescapably intimate way. We don't just think things

about our research, we don't just believe them – we feel them, and we need to explore the profound consequences of that fact. As these articles compellingly enjoin us in different ways, if we are to be critical, let us first be critical of ourselves.

## Notes

- 1 As several of the articles here indicate, there are many examples of effective and persuasive research within each framework; I would add to the list Talbot (1995) in critical discourse analysis and Goodwin (1999) in conversation analysis, to name only two. It is perhaps no accident that both of these studies are feminist in outlook.
- 2 This is not to discount the growing body of work in applied critical discourse analysis, much of it focused on critical pedagogy (e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Clark and Ivanič, 1997).

## References

- Billig, Michael and Emanuel A. Schegloff (1999) 'Debate: Critical Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis', *Discourse & Society* 10(4): 543–82.
- Bucholtz, Mary (2000) 'The Politics of Transcription', *Journal of Pragmatics* 32(9): 1439–65.
- Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen Rosa and Malcolm Coulthard (eds) (1996) *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Clark, Romy and Roz Ivanič (1997) *The Politics of Writing*. London: Routledge.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus (eds) (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988) *Limited Inc*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Fairclough, Norman (ed.) (1992) *Critical Language Awareness*. London: Longman.
- Goodwin, Marjorie Harness (1999) 'Constructing Opposition within Girls' Games', in Mary Bucholtz, A.C. Liang and Laurel A. Sutton (eds) *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*, pp. 388–409. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gumperz, John J. (1982a) *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, John J., ed. (1982b) *Language and Social Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Inoue, Miyako (1999) 'Technology of Presence: Stenography and the Linguistic Experience of the Modern in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Japan', Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago.
- Kulick, Don (1999) 'Language and Gender/Sexuality', Paper presented at the Sixth Language and Culture Online Symposium, <<http://www.language-culture.org/colloquia/symposia/kulick-don/>>.
- Livia, Anna (2000) 'The Future of Queer Linguistics', Paper presented at the First International Gender and Language Association Conference, Stanford University, CA.
- Livia, Anna and Kira Hall (1997) '“It's a Girl!": Bringing Performativity Back to

- Linguistics', in Anna Livia and Kira Hall (eds) *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, pp. 3–18. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer (1986) *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roberts, Celia, Evelyn Davies and Tom Jupp (1992) *Language and Discrimination: A Study of Communication in Multi-Ethnic Workplaces*. London: Longman.
- Sarangi, Srikant and Stefaan Slembrouck (1996) *Language, Bureaucracy and Social Control*. London: Longman.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1997) 'Whose Text? Whose Context?', *Discourse & Society* 8(2): 165–87.
- Silverstein, Michael and Greg Urban (eds) (1996) *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Talbot, Mary (1995) 'A Synthetic Sisterhood: False Friends in a Teenage Magazine', in Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (eds) *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, pp. 143–65. New York: Routledge.

■ **Mary Bucholtz** is assistant professor of linguistics and discourse studies in the Department of English at Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on the discursive production of gender, racial and youth identities in the United States. Her recent publications include the co-edited volume *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and a 2001 co-edited special issue of the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* on 'Discourses of Whiteness'. She is currently at work on a book entitled *Signifying Nothing: Language, Youth, and Whiteness*. Address: Dept. of English, TAMU 4227, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4227, USA. [email: bucholtz@tamu.edu].