



Critical Literacy as Critical Discourse Analysis *

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1. Introduction: What is Critical Literacy?

Why is there any need to talk about "critical literacy", rather than just "literacy" itself? The reason is this: The forms of literacy learned in school usually do not lead to the urge or ability to think "critically" in the sense of understanding how systems and institutions inter-relate to help and harm people. Therefore, it is worth thinking about what would constitute a "critical literacy".

In this paper I offer but one possible answer to the question, "What is critical literacy?". I argue that critical literacy is a species of *discourse analysis* (Gee, 1999). By "discourse" (with a little "d") I mean any stretch of language, oral or written, that is meant to communicate or can be taken as communicative (in this paper, I will leave aside other symbol systems, such as images and multi-modal texts, though much that I say below would apply to them, as well). I hasten to point out that to engage in this form of discourse analysis one certainly does not have to adopt any of the terms I use below (just the spirit of the enterprise).

Below I list four questions meant to suggest how one might begin a critical discourse analysis. These questions will help organize our discussion below: Given a piece of discourse (large or small), ask the following questions:

1. What *social language or social languages* are represented in this discourse?
2. What are some of the important *situated meanings* of key words or phrases in this discourse?
3. What significant *cultural models* are triggered (or could be triggered) by words or phrases in this discourse?

4. What *Discourse* (with a big "D") or *Discourses* is or could this discourse be a part of? How does this Discourse (or these Discourses) relate to other Discourses?

2. Data

In order to discuss what constitutes a critical discourse analysis, we need some data to work with. Below I reprint a small portion from each of two interviews (conducted by the same interviewer). The first is an interview with a female college professor of anthropology, a professor who worked in an elite private university in a post-industrial urban area. The second is an interview with a female middle school teacher who teaches in the same area. Both women are being asked about their viewpoints on social issues such as racism.

I print these portions in "lines" and "stanzas" (the units between slash marks are "tone units", see Gee, 1999). It is not important here what these are. I use them here only because I believe they organize the data in ways that make it easier to read and analyze. For ease of reading, as well, I have removed the interviewer's back channel cues (things like "uh, uh"). These most certainly can be important for analysis (as can a good many other features I have not transcribed), but I record here only those features most important for my discussion below.

A. UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

Interviewer: . . . How, do you see racism happening, in society, let's put it that way.

Stanza 1

1. Um well, / I could answer on, / on a variety of different levels
2. Um, at the most macro level, / um, I think that there's um, um,
3. I don't want to say this in a way that sounds like a conspiracy,
4. But I think um, / that um, basically that the lives of people of color are are / are irrelevant to the society anymore.
5. Um, they're not needed for the economy / because we have the third world to run away into for cheap labor,

Stanza 2

6. Um, and I think that, / that the leadership, / this country really doesn't care if they shoot each other off in in the ghettos,
7. Um, and, and so they let drugs into the ghettos,
8. and they, um, they, let people shoot themselves, / shoot each other,
9. and they don't have, / a police force that is really gonna, / um, work,
10. and they cut the programs that might alleviate some of the problems, and, um.

Stanza 3

11. So I think there's, / that it's manifested at, at the most, / structural level as, um, you know, / a real hatred, of, of, of uh people of color.
12. And, and it's shown, in, / the cutbacks and so forth
13. And, um, I think that um, that, it's, it's reflected in, / in the fact that, / they're, they're viewed as, / expendable, / by our leadership,
14. Um, and so I think, / I see cutbacks in programs as just a, an example of, of a broader, / you know, / sense, / that, that, from the point of view of, of those in power, / people of color are expendable, / and, and irrelevant. Um,--

B. MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

Interviewer: So I guess, it sounds like a lot of like really substantial social issues are coming up in the classroom. ... would you ever tie that into like present power relations or just individual experiences of racism in their lives or something like that.

Stanza 1

1. We do a little bit of it,
2. talking one of the things, / uh, being a white middle class brought up person is playing the game and teaching the kids
3. we have a junior achiever come in,
4. how do you go about getting a job

... [reports that she cut out and gave to her class a letter to Ann Landers from an employer whose message to teenagers was "I mean don't walk into my business if I'm gonna have you out in front of people in holey jeans saying 'yo man' and 'hey' and 'what the fuck' and you know things like that]

Stanza 2

5. uh I talk about housing,
6. We talk about the / we talk about a lot of the low income things,
7. I said "Hey wait a minute,"
8. I said, / "Do you think the city's gonna take care of an area that you don't take care of yourself?"

Stanza 3

9. I said, / "How many of you have been up Danbury Street?"
10. They raise their hands,
11. I say "How about Washington Ave.,"
12. That's where those gigantic houses are,

Stanza 4

13. I said, / "How many pieces of furniture are sitting in the front yard?"
14. "Well, none."
15. I said "How much trash is lying around?"
16. "None."
17. I said, / "How many houses are spray painted?"
18. How many of them have kicked in, / you know have broken down cars in front of them?

3. Social Languages

Any human language is composed of a myriad of different styles, registers, or "social languages" (for our purposes here it does not matter which of these terms we use). *A social language is a way of using language so as to enact a particular socially-situated identity (i.e., a specific socially meaningful "kind of person")*. For example, there are ways of speaking like a (specific type of) doctor, street-gang member, postmodern literary critic, football fanatic, neoliberal economist, working class male, adaptationist biologist, and so on and so forth, through an endless array of identities. Often, of course, we can recognize a particular socially-situated "kind of person" through his or her use of a given social language without ourselves actually being able to enact that kind of person.

In no way do I wish to imply that enacting and recognizing *kinds of people* (Hacking, 1986) is a matter of people falling into rigid kinds. Enacting and recognizing kinds of people is all about negotiating, guessing, and revising guesses about kinds of people; it is all about contesting and resisting being positioned as a certain kind of person.

Thus, too, there are often no strict boundaries to social languages. Social languages are, then, but one resource (there are others) with which to enact and recognize kinds of people in sometimes contest-filled, only probabilistic, and highly negotiable ways. Of course, things are not always so open-ended: "Your life or your money, m***er f***er", said with a gun pointed at your neck in front of an open-air cash machine is pretty straight-forward; so is the language of almost any article in a recent technical journal in physics.

Let's turn to our two texts above. The social languages being used in these two texts are different. We can distinguish them in a good many ways. Let me discuss but a few aspects here.

First, let's consider the level of words and phrases (*the lexical level*). The college professor uses lots of words and phrases for things that are **social, but general and abstract**: e.g., *people of color, the society, the economy, third world, cheap labor, the leadership, this country, our leadership*. The middle school teacher uses more **colloquial and concrete** terms (e.g., *a little bit, playing the game, teaching the kids, the low income things, wait a minute, gigantic houses, lying around*). Through her words and phrases, as well as other features we will consider below, the college professor is achieving a somewhat more formal and distanced identity (distanced from people and events "on the ground", so to speak) than the middle school teacher.

Second, consider the sentence level (*the level of syntax* or sentence patterns). Here, let's look at how the subjects of the speakers' sentences relate to the primary agents (the main doers and perceivers) they are talking about. In the college professor's text, the subjects of her main clauses are very often "I" in combination with the verb "think" (five

times). But the real agents she is talking about (which appear in her subordinate clauses) are a subset of those social but abstract entities we discussed above: e.g., *the lives of people are irrelevant to the society* ("the society" is agent); *they're not needed for the economy* ("the economy" is agent); *this country really doesn't care if they shoot each other* ("this country" is agent); *they're viewed as expendable by our leadership* ("our leadership" is agent); *from the point of view of people in power, people of color are expendable* ("people in power" is agent). Note that in these sentences the agents are not always, not even most of the time, in subject position, the normal position for agents in more colloquial speech for agents.

The subjects of the middle school teacher's main clauses are very often "I" in combination with the verb "say" (seven times). Furthermore, the main agents she is talking about are, indeed, herself as speaker/questioner/advisor and her students as recipients of her words (which is the main "drama" of her text). The middle school teacher uses the very basic pattern "pronoun verb object" over and over again (*we do X, we have X, you go about X, I talk about X, we talk about X, I said X* six times, *they raise X, I say X*) and basic question forms (*How many ...? four times, How about ...?, How much?*), adding further to the colloquial, "everyday" nature of her text.

Let's turn now to the level of connections across sentences (*the discourse level*). The college professor uses a chain of names and pronouns for social but abstract agents, all of which basically co-refer to each other and, thus, actually constitute but one entity; however, what or who this agent is in concrete terms is left rather vague: *the society* (4) ... *we* (5) ... *the leadership* (6) ... *this country* (6) ... *they* (7) ... *they* (8) ... *they* (9) ... *they* (10) ... *our leadership* (13) ... *those in power* (14). Note how "we" comes to mean

"us as part of an abstract agent", and how "we" becomes "they", even when the actual speaker opposes this agent and its deeds.

The middle school teacher chains pronominal agents across her sentences in subject position (the normal position in colloquial speech): *we* (1, meaning "the school"), *we* (3), *I* (5), *we* (6, meaning teacher and kids), *I* (7), *I* (8), *I* (9), *they* (10, meaning the kids), *I* (11), *I* (13), *I* (15), *I* (17). This chaining effectively equates the "we" of the "the school" with the "I" of the teacher and the "we" of her and her kids as collective actors enacting the script of the school.

The college professor talks of herself as a thinker (she uses "I think" five times) and hedges her claims, that is mitigates, softens, or "adjusts" them ("could answer", "don't want to say this in a way that sounds like a conspiracy", "basically", "really doesn't", "really gonna", "you know", "just"). This gives her text the overall feel of a "reasoned argument", a feature that is strongly supported by the *overall discourse design* of her text, which I represent below:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Stanza 1: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. generalization (variety of levels) 2. at first level (macro level): 3. hedge (not a conspiracy) 4. main claim (people of color irrelevant) 5. reason for main claim (not needed for the economy) |
| Stanza 2. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. example of main claim (don't care if they shoot each other) 7. example of main claim (let drugs into ghetto) 8. example of main claim (let people shoot each other) 9. example of main claim (a police force that doesn't work) 10. example of main claim (cut programs) |
| Stanza 3: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. meaning of main claim at deeper level (irrelevance manifested as hatred) |

12. evidence for hatred (cutbacks)
13. evidence for hatred (viewed as expendable by leadership)
14. rephrases whole argument

We can also note that the college professor uses a set of specific lexical and syntactic resources to create the idea that something "hidden" and "deep" is nonetheless apparent to those who have eyes to see (unnamed people, but, we assume, people like herself who speak the particular sort of social language she is speaking): *on a variety of different levels, at the most macro level, it's manifested at the most structural level as, it's shown in, it's reflected in*. When, in line 14, the college professor says "I see" we can get the implication that it is people like her to whom such things are "manifested", "shown", or "reflected".

The middle school teacher uses "say" instead of "think", does not hedge any of her claims, and uses her lexical resources and syntactic resources to enact a little piece of theater, a mock IRE-like dialogue directed at her none too wealthy students. Her text has a much different *overall design* than that of the college professor:

- | | |
|-----------|-------------------|
| Stanza 1: | What We Do (List) |
| Stanza 2: | Example Dialogue |
| Stanza 3: | Example Dialogue |
| Stanza 4: | Example Dialogue |

So, we end up with two different social languages enacting two different socially-situated identities. In the one case, we get a reasoner making claims about a social, but

abstract and vague agent, an agent that acts at a deep or hidden level in ways that become manifest to certain sorts of people or from a certain sort of abstract or distanced viewpoint. In the other case, we get a teacher-mentor and parent-surrogate using rhetorical questions to morally exhort children to disown one identity (i.e., that of their local neighborhood) and take on another (i.e., that of a "white middle class brought up person", see line 2).

The middle school teacher (here) speaks a colloquial, "everyday", locally-based language closely connected to the people and events of which it speaks. The college professor (here) speaks a more formal, more "specialist" and global language distanced from actual people and events. Through their different social languages they position themselves in the world in different ways. We can also note, as will be mentioned again below, that the interviewer's questions invite and co-construct these different social languages and related identities.

4. Situated Meanings

Within social languages, words do not have general meanings (the sorts of things we find in dictionaries). Rather, they have meanings that are specific and situated *in the actual contexts of their use*. Context refers to an ever-widening set of factors that accompany language in use: the material setting, the people present (and what they know and believe), the language that comes before and after a given utterance, the social relationships of the people involved, and their ethnic, gendered, and sexual identities, as well as cultural, historical, and institutional factors.

Words, phrases, and utterances in use do not, then, have fixed meanings, rather, they act as "clues" or "cues" that guide active construction of meaning in context. For example, if I say "The coffee spilled" when there are grains all over the floor, you get a broom, but if I say the same thing when there is brown liquid all over the floor, you get a mop. "Coffee" has different situated meanings in these different contexts.

An example of situated meaning at work in our data is the way in which, in the college professor's text, "people of color" comes, through its association with talk of "ghettos" in Stanza 2, to be weighted towards meaning something like "poor urban African-American people". It is typical of much academic work that poor urban African-Americans come to serve as the prototype of "minorities" or "people of color". As result, such work often reasons about issues of diversity in almost exclusively black-white terms (which, I might point out, is different from how the middle school teacher views diversity--for her, given her interview as a whole, diversity means new and brown immigrants coming into a city built on white immigration at the turn of the last century, as well as poor whites who have lost their hold in the industrial middle class).

The most interesting issue of situated meaning in the college professor's text involves trying to understand what her words for the social but abstract agents she so emphasizes might mean: words like "society" (which can find certain sorts of people "irrelevant", line 4), "the leadership" or "this country" (which can "not care", line 6, and view certain sorts of people as "expendable", line 13), or "people in power" (which can have a "point of view", line 14). The situated meaning of these terms seems to be something like a "deep, hidden, and all powerful structural agent, operating at a national

or global level, that operates behind the scenes to cause effects on local circumstances whose real significance is not readily apparent".

In the middle school teacher's text we might consider what situated meanings can be attributed to words and phrases like "job" (line 4), "white middle class brought up person" (line 2), and "low income things" (line 6). Given her talk about the letter to Ann Landers (which I summarize in the transcript above), it is clear that "job" here means something like "low, entry-level service job". "White middle class brought person" does not seem to mean only white people, but people who, in situations where power and status are at stake, "play the game". Coupled with "job" as "service job" here, it seems to mean also "people who behave subserviently even in lowly positions in something like a Horatio Alger way". "Low income things" seems to mean, in the context of this text, "the sorts of non-middle class behaviors and neighborhood settings that lead one to be rejected by middle class people as untrustworthy and undeserving".

5. Cultural Models

The situated meanings of words and phrases within specific social languages trigger specific cultural models in terms of which speakers (writers) and listeners (readers) give meaning to texts. *Cultural models* (Strauss & Quinn, 1997) are everyday "theories" (i.e., storylines, images, schemas, metaphors, and models) about the world. Cultural models tell people what is "typical" or "normal" (not universally, but from the perspective of a particular Discourse--see the next section).

For example, certain types of middle class people in the United States (Harkness, Super, & Keefer, 1992) hold a cultural model of child development in terms of which a

child is born dependent on her parents and grows up by going through (often disruptive) stages towards greater and greater independence (and independence is a high value for this group of people). On the other hand, certain sorts of working class families (Philipsen, 1975) hold a cultural model of child development in terms of which a child is born unsocialized and with tendencies to be selfish. The child needs discipline from the home to learn to be a cooperative social member of the family (a high value of this group of people).

These different cultural models are not "true" or "false". Rather, they focus on different aspects of childhood and development. Cultural models are partially in people's minds (by no means always consciously) and partially in the objects, texts, and social practices that surround them. For example, many "guide books" supplement and instantiate the above middle class cultural model of childhood and stages. On the other hand, many religious materials supplement and instantiate the above working class model of childhood.

The college professor applies a widespread academic cultural model in terms of which actual behavior or events ("the appearances") follow from larger, deeper, more general, underlying, and hidden causes. This model, in fact, is at the foundation of many of the sciences. Appearances are deceiving and a deeper, truer reality lies behind the appearances. This deeper reality (the "real" reality) is discoverable only by people with special knowledge, tools, or insight, not by "common" ("everyday", colloquial language speaking) people. Plato's myth of the shadows in the cave is one early instantiation of this cultural model in Western culture.

The middle school teacher applies a widespread cultural model in terms of which people's problems flow from their own behaviors as individuals, and it is through "correct" behavior and "proper" appearances that one achieves "success". In terms of this model, "victims" are responsible for their own problems, which they bring on themselves by their own refusal to behave properly (i.e., like a middle class person). This cultural model has long roots in Anglo history, where the model citizen is someone who owns enough to be motivated to behave in such a way as to uphold the social and political structures that protect his or her property (John Locke is a key figure here).

Ironically, the college professor's cultural model is almost the inverse of the middle-school teacher's. In terms of the college professor's model, people's actual behavior and interactions are really the effect of deeper and hidden causes over which they have little control. In terms of the middle school teacher's model, people's poverty and powerlessness is not due to the workings of power and the forces of politics, but rather to their own attitudes and behaviors. I might point out that these two models clash constantly in the public sphere of our political life.

I should also point out that, in this paper, I do not myself assume the college professor's cultural model. As far as I am concerned, the meanings of language and interactions are in "the appearances" and open to everyone, whether or not they choose to use a technical social language (mine or anyone else's). At the same time, such meanings are "hidden", since we all (myself included, of course) choose not to look at the full array of what is there to be seen when it seems not to be in our "interest" to do so.

Some examples of such "oversights" might be the middle school teacher's failure to see that one reason there are more broken-down cars in poor neighborhoods than in

rich ones is because the broken-down cars from rich neighborhoods are hidden away in repair shops. Or another example of "oversight" might be the college teacher's failure to see that the refusal of people (like her) to live or shop in the center of her city (rather than in their elite suburbs) left the center's stores and residential neighborhoods to decay economically (this is something of which many of the teachers in the city are well aware, since they have lived in the city for several generations, do not see it simply as a place from which to launch into a better job elsewhere, and view its now decaying "center" as its once and possibly future unifying factor).

6. Discourses

A person cannot enact a particular kind of person all by themselves and by using only language. Enacting and recognizing kinds of people is a dance in which other people must participate and more than language is at stake. Let me, then, use the notion of a "Discourse" (with a big "D" to distinguish it from "discourse" as I have used the term above) to try to capture something of what this dance involves. A *Discourse* is a distinctive ways of using language *integrated* with "other stuff" so as to enact a particular type of (however negotiable and contestable) socially-situated identity (type of person).

What is this "other stuff"? It is: distinctive ways of thinking, being, acting, interacting, believing, knowing, feeling, valuing, dressing, and using one's body. It is also distinctive ways of using various symbols, images, objects, artifacts, tools, technologies, times, places and spaces. Think of what it takes to "be/do" a "tough-guy detective" (in the Philip Marlowe mode, say), a traditional Catholic nun, or a Gen-X e-entrepreneur in the "New Economy" (magazines like *Fortune* regularly discuss the details

of this latter Discourse). As you mentally fill in the language and non-language details you are specifying (recognizing) Discourses.

Discourses are always defined in relationship to other Discourses. For example, the Discourse of Los Angeles African-American teenage gang members exists and has changed through history in reciprocal relations with the Discourse of Los Angeles policemen, as well as a good many other related civic, community, and church related Discourses. So, too, the Discourse of neo-Darwinian biologists exists and has changed through history in reciprocal relations with various religious Discourses, including the Discourse of American creationists (which only really started in the 1950's).

We have no space here to do justice to all the elements involved in the professor's and teacher's respective Discourses. Let me, then, consider just one example here of how language relates to or aligns with non-language stuff. The middle school teacher's text aligns her with her *local* area and her specific classroom. The college professor's text aligns her with the *national-global* world. As I pointed out above, the interviewer co-constructs this alignment, always forming her questions and responses to the teacher and professor so as to assume and invite these orientations, orientations that neither interviewee ever rejects or attempts to break out of.

Both the middle school teacher and the college professor are, of course, speaking out of "professional" Discourses. However, the middle school teacher enacts her expertise in terms of a colloquial ("everyday") social language and in terms of the actual dialogues and procedures of her day-to-day work. Thus, her "expertise" is aligned not only with the local, but with the "everyday" and with her specific actions as a teacher. The professor enacts her expertise in a specialist, non-colloquial language and in terms of

distanced viewpoints, not in terms of the actual dialogues and procedures of her day-to-day work.

We can note, too, that the teacher's Discourse is aligned with the local and colloquial, in part, because of the ways it is currently, and has been historically, positioned in terms of status and power in relation to the professor's Discourse and in relation to other Discourses, such as those of professors in Schools of Education (which mediate between non-educational specialist Discourses and the multiple Discourses of teachers and schools). This is not to say, by any means, that one or other of these Discourses is always and everywhere the more (or less) politically powerful one.

To see that power can run in both directions, one need only look at the current stance of many neo-liberal politicians (e.g., George W. Bush). On the one hand, such politicians tend to privilege certain specialist Discourses (e.g., in testing and reading instruction) over teacher Discourses in determining curricula, pedagogy, and accountability. On the other hand, they tend to consider academic Discourses like that of our college professor as elitist viewpoints in relation to the "everyday" and "populist" wisdom of the teacher's colloquial language and cultural models (models that hold that anyone can "make it" if they just behave "correctly").

In the end, then, I would argue that critical literacy involves using discourse analysis in such a way that we see that language is always fully situated in social and political contexts. It is always caught up with the ways individuals must, in using language, give voice to Discourses in interaction, now and throughout history, with each other. These interactions are the sites where power operates. They are also the sites at which humans can make and transform history.

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