

Critical analysis

Positioning

As we have seen in the last chapter, communication is not only a matter of the parties concerned finding a form of words which will serve most efficiently to indicate what reference and force they intend. It also involves finding words that will have the desired effect—that is to say, words which are tactically effective in regulating the position of self in relation to the other. For all communication, to a greater or lesser extent, is an exercise in control, an attempt to assert one's own position and to persuade the other to accept it. When somebody says, or writes, something it is with the intention of getting the addressee, the second-person party to think or feel or act in a certain way, and the maxim violations we considered in the last chapter can be seen as tactics that are used for the purpose.

Such tactics are not, however, confined to negotiations in the face-to-face interaction of conversation. They find expression in a number of ways in all language use, and it is the purpose of this chapter to see whether we can track some of them down. We can begin by returning to the text that was first discussed in Chapter 2:

At the height of the Kosovo crisis in May 1999, Tony Blair was on his way to Bucharest, the Romanian capital, to drum up local support for Nato's high-risk confrontation with Serbia. The Prime Minister astonished his advisers by suddenly announcing on the aeroplane that he was going to promise Romania early membership of the European Union in return for its continued backing.

Terms of reference

The point was made in our earlier discussion that, if you have the required schematic knowledge, you will understand the expression *The prime minister* as an alternative term for *Tony Blair*. The quite different wordings have the same referent. But then, we might ask, why not just use one of them? Why the variation, and what motivates the choice of one wording rather than another? One explanation might be that the writer wants to keep to the quantity maxim by avoiding redundancy and not saying the same thing twice, thereby avoiding a possible implicature: the reader might infer some significance in the repetition. But then, why not use the pronoun *he* to make a normal anaphoric link? The expression *The Prime Minister* refers not to the person but to the position of Tony Blair and one might suggest that in using it, the writer is giving deferential recognition to his official status. The simple anaphoric pronoun would, of course, have no such significance, and nor would another alternative *Mr Blair*, which, though suggesting respect, still relates to person. And had the writer used the expression *Tony* here, this would have been suggestive of a kind of personal familiarity with no sign of respect at all.

We can locate these different terms of reference on a scale of increasing deference or respect.

Tony—Tony Blair—Mr Blair—The Prime Minister

But this does not exhaust the number of terms that might be used in reference to Tony Blair. Even less respectful terms might be *our Tony* or an expression like *Bush's Poodle*, which plainly flouts the quality maxim. Seemingly more respectful expressions would be *The present incumbent of 10 Downing Street*, *The head of Her Majesty's government*. However, they may be only seemingly more respectful—for if they were to be used in this particular text, these expressions could be taken as flouting the maxim of quantity (they give more information than is needed here) or the maxim of manner (they are over-elaborate) and in this case they would give rise to implicatures that indicate irony and the very opposite of respect.

The general question that arises from this discussion is what motivates the use of one expression rather than another. And we

are not only talking about the kinds of terms of reference we have just been examining in this particular text. Every use of language involves selection and so every text can be rewritten in other terms—terms that could have been chosen, but, for one reason or another, were not. For one reason or another. What, then, might these reasons be?

Alternative wordings and persuasive purpose

Let us first note that, as pointed out in the discussion of thematization in Chapter 5, a language will always provide the resource for alternative wordings: there will always be different grammatical structures and different lexical items available for referring to the 'same' thing in a variety of ways, thereby allowing for the expression of attitude, personal evaluation, point of view. In some cases, such expression is allowed for by different connotations that are assigned to lexical items by convention. Thus we can find in English terms that correspond in denotation, but are marked for negative or positive evaluation. For example, adjectives like *idealistic*, *single-minded*, *self-assured* are generally taken as positive, whereas the corresponding words *doctrinaire*, *narrow-minded*, *cocky* are generally taken as negative. The verbs *withdraw*, *decline*, and *negotiate* are usually positive, *retreat*, *refuse*, and *haggle* negative. The nouns *gathering* and *colleague* are usually positive, *mob* and *crony* negative. And so on. It might be supposed, then, that if you want to indicate attitude, the lexical means are available to you to do so. So if you were to tell me about a doctrinaire, narrow-minded, cocky politician and his mob of cronies, I will be in little doubt about what view you take of this person (who I, as one of his colleagues, may have always considered idealistic, single-minded, and self-assured).

But things are not so straightforward. To begin with, the vocabulary of English is not all conveniently marked for attitude in this way. And anyway, words are not put to use in isolation but are incorporated into lexical and grammatical patterns in texts where, as we have seen, they are acted upon by other words in complex and unpredictable ways. And the texts themselves contract complex and unpredictable relations with context. So what words mean by convention (as recorded in a dictionary) and

what people mean by them on a particular occasion of use are two quite different things. People do not keep to the Gricean maxims, and they do not keep to semantic convention either. What they mean is not always apparent from what they say. This being so, we obviously cannot infer an underlying attitude or point of view directly from the wording in a text.

And yet there must surely be something in texts that provides evidence of such attitude. There is no doubt that every text, spoken or written, is composed of variants which could be replaced by alternative wordings. For every text that is composed there are other texts that could have been composed but were not. We have argued too that texts are composed to realize a discourse by bringing about a schematic convergence of minds. The convergence, as we have seen in the last chapter, is subject to continual and contested negotiation with both parties seeking to control the common ground—in other words, seeking to get their message across, to get their own discourse accepted. So a particular textual choice must surely be motivated by this persuasive purpose.

Critical discourse analysis

It is just such a conviction that informs work that has been done in the name of **critical discourse analysis (CDA)**. Those who follow this approach are particularly concerned with (and concerned about) the use (and abuse) of language for the exercise of socio-political power. In the first chapter of this book, it was noted that what somebody might mean by producing a text could be related to broader issues of ideology and social belief, and it is these issues that CDA is concerned with. What its proponents are interested in is **discourse** in a rather different sense from that we have been discussing in this book: for them, discourses are kinds of genre, institutionalized modes of thinking and social practice, and those who compose texts are taken to be not so much individuals as socially constructed spokespersons or representatives of discourse communities. So critical discourse analysts enquire into the role played by schematic knowledge, as we have done in earlier chapters of this book, but the schemata they focus on have to do more with socio-political values and beliefs, not

only with ideational but also ideological representations of reality, not only with cultural constructs of how the world is, but also with political constructs of how it should be. And in their view people are not only influenced by ideology but they actually construct it in what they say, and in ways that are most likely to persuade others to comply with it.

The task that CDA sets itself is to discover traces of ideological bias in texts. They undertake this not just as an academic exercise in analysis but as a campaign against what is seen to be a stealthy undercover operation by those in power to control opinion to their own advantage. CDA is critical in the sense that it calls into question ideas and assumptions that have become taken for granted as self-evidently valid on the grounds that they actually preserve a status quo which in effect sustains inequality and injustice by privileging the elite and the powerful at the expense of everybody else. So CDA is committed to a cause and puts its own ideological agenda up front. Its proponents are not simply analysts but activists. The question arises, however, as to how far these two roles can be reconciled.

Identifying the significance of textual choice

CDA, then, adopts the position that particular textual choices are motivated and focus attention on those which are ideologically motivated, and more particularly when the ideology acts against the interests of the deprived and the oppressed. Now one might raise the question at this point about what it means to say that the choice of a particular expression is motivated. Does it mean that the choice is deliberate? How do we know that unless we consult the person who composed the text? This we usually cannot do, and even if we could, we might not get a straight answer. Perhaps the writer is not aware of making any choice at all, but is simply using different expressions in free variation. In this case, surely, nothing of any significance attaches to the use of one rather than another. Not necessarily, though, one might argue: for the choice of a particular expression may well be made subliminally, below the level of conscious awareness, and so can still be taken as evidence of an underlying ideological attitude, all the more insidious, indeed, for being instinctive. Writers, and speakers,

might be unaware of the underlying ideological significance that lurks in the textual variants they produce. Similarly, readers, and listeners, may be unaware of the indoctrinating effects these variants have upon them. This, the argument runs, is why we need critical analysis: to reveal to the unwary language user the ideological influences they may be unwittingly subscribing to.

Implicatures and lexical choice

How then might such a critical analysis be conducted? We can begin by considering again the possible implicatures that arise from maxim violations. To take a simple lexical example. Suppose that in reading a newspaper article about immigration, I come across the expression *an army of refugees*. Here, as indeed with any metaphor, we have a clear denial of the quality maxim. It is not true that these refugees are an army, so why has the writer chosen this expression rather than, for example, *a large number of refugees* or *a crowd of refugees*, both of which would adequately indicate that there are a lot of them? One answer might be that in choosing the word *army*, the writer indicates not only that these refugees are numerous, but that they are dangerous, thereby signalling a negative attitude to them. What about other features embedded in the word? An army is dangerous because it is armed, organized, disciplined, controlled by some central command. Is there an implication here that the refugees resemble an army in these respects as well? Perhaps not. But then how do we know? A metaphor recategorizes something as something else, but only in certain respects. But in which respects in this case? Refugees are categorized as an army. But which features of the word *army* are activated when it is used here in reference to refugees? Just the general feature of it being dangerous, we might say, and not other features. But why not the other features? And why is the feature of being dangerous activated in this case? It is easy enough to find other expressions where this feature is not activated at all. Thus a sampling of the British National Corpus of English will reveal armies of earwigs, weeds, chickens, fans, helpers, supporters, shoppers, and little boys.

Implicatures and grammatical choice

Clearly there are difficulties in inferring significance by focusing on particular lexical items. We might then turn our attention to grammar. Here too, as we saw in Chapter 5 in the discussion of thematization and information structure, the language provides abundant resources for composing alternative expressions, and therefore, one might suggest (if critically inclined) of indicating attitude, of giving what is said a particular bias. Let us suppose that in our newspaper text on immigration we read the following:

The refugees were driven back and many of them were injured.

Here we have a passive structure with a deleted agent (*were injured (by ?)*). What then, we might ask, motivates the deletion? The use of this construction can be said to go against the quantity maxim in that information has been withheld. Who did the driving back and injuring? The police perhaps? We are not told. Is there then some attempt here to gloss over the responsibility? If the alternative, full, form of the passive had been used, there would have to be some specification of agent:

The refugees were driven back by the police and many of them were injured by the police.

With the passive, the grammar does not constrain you to provide an agent. The active alternative, of course does:

The police drove back the refugees and injured many of them.

But there is, as we noted in Chapter 5, another feature of the active alternative. The agent as grammatical subject becomes thematized, and so now, we might suggest, agency (and so responsibility) is foregrounded as the topic, so if you wanted to play down the active role of the police, you would presumably want to avoid using this construction.

There are then three grammatical alternatives here and we might propose that which is used depends on the writer's take on this event. If the intention is to represent it as something that just happens to the refugees, then the structure to go for would be the passive with agent deleted and the refugees as theme. This choice would then indicate an attitude favourable to the police. In the

case where, for one reason or another, the writer felt reluctantly obliged to mention the police at all, reference could be tucked away in a prepositional phrase in the rheme. But if, on the other hand, the writer wanted to focus on what the police did to the refugees, then the preferred structure would be the active variant with the police thematized, thereby reflecting an unfavourable attitude to them.

But, again, things are not that straightforward, for the simple reason that these inferences of significance are, again, drawn from language items in isolation—in this case structures rather than words—without regard to the co-textual relations they contract with other parts of the text. Only when we look at textual continuity can we decide on whether or not the writer is conforming to the quantity maxim. Let us, for example, suppose that there is some text that comes before the structure we started with:

Hundreds of protesting refugees then began to move in the direction of the parliament buildings, where the police confronted them. The refugees/They were driven back and many of them were injured.

One cannot reasonably argue that to use the agentless passive here would be to withhold information about agency, for this information is already given, explicitly provided in the preceding sentence. As was indicated in our discussion of cohesion earlier, how a particular part of a text is understood depends on its connection with what has gone before. So it is that we understand the pronoun *them* in the second sentence of this text as referring anaphorically to the refugees (and not to the parliament buildings). There is no need to spell this out. And similarly there is no need to spell out the agency role of the police in the last sentence. Indeed, to do so would run the risk of violating the quantity maxim by giving *too much* information. As was pointed out in Chapter 5, the cohesive devices we considered there follow a *least effort principle*. As such they serve an essentially co-operative purpose, for their function is to regulate information in relation to what is already given or known to make it easier to process.

There is a related point to be noted about the phrase *The refugees* in the second sentence. Occurring as the first constituent,

this is theme, and there is something odd about it. Now as was pointed out in Chapter 5 a theme can either serve as topic (what P₁ is talking about) or given (what P₂ already knows). The refugees have already been referred to in the noun phrase that appears as theme in the first sentence (*Hundreds of protesting refugees*), and here it seems reasonable to interpret it as topic (since there is no preceding text to refer to). But since this topic has already been established, this would surely incline us to interpret the occurrence of *The refugees* as theme in the second sentence as given. That being so, it would seem normal to minimize the reference and use a pro-form, and indeed, on the evidence of the reaction of a number of informants, the text would be more natural if the second sentence were to read *They were driven back ...*

This is not to say that a particular thematization or the selection of the agentless passive, or any other structure for that matter may not be ideologically significant, or be indicative of a particular position that P₁ wants to impose on P₂. But the point is that we cannot tell from the simple fact of its occurrence in a text. The structure alone does not signal its own significance.

Conclusion

Clearly language is widely used, and abused, as a means of control and persuasion, and it is one of the main purposes of discourse study (perhaps indeed the primary purpose) to develop a well-grounded understanding of how this is done. But just as clearly, it makes little sense to assign ideological significance to the occurrence of lexical and grammatical features as such without regard to the co-textual relations they contract with other features. Some of these were discussed in Chapter 5 when we looked at cohesion. Developments in corpus linguistics over recent years have revealed other kinds of co-textual connection. What these are, and how far they contribute to a better informed and more critical understanding of discourse are matters taken up in the next (and last) chapter of this book.