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In *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, Jan Blommaert attempts to transcend the textual bias of discourse analysis and shift its emphasis to an explanation of society. The strands of social thought woven together in the book speak to a broad audience of researchers and lay the groundwork for a truly interdisciplinary ‘social science of language-in-society’ (p. 235).

The critical focus in the book targets the discursive production of inequality; but the critical focus also recognizes the need ‘to reconfigure our own discipline in a permanent process of self-critique’ (p. 238). It is this type of critical attitude offered by Blommaert that does justice to Michel Foucault’s (1984) call for a ‘permanent critique of ourselves’ (p. 43).

As Foucault (1984) has said, criticism ‘consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits’ (p. 45); and in this spirit, Blommaert provides a useful analysis and reflection upon the limits of the field to date. He starts in Chapter 1 by expanding the source of inspiration for ‘critical approaches to language and society’ (p. 6). The ‘critical pool’ he draws from includes the rich traditions of scholarship in American linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics (p. 5). From the Boasian paradigm in anthropology, we have gained a way to critique our own society through the lens of different cultures. From sociolinguistics, we have gained a ‘concern with the nature and distribution of linguistic resources in societies’ (p. 10; italics in original). By digging deeper into the critical pool than Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has previously gone, Blommaert provides a much desired synthesis of ideas that American researchers have long acknowledged but the European tradition of CDA has often overlooked.

Continuing with the spirit of self-critique in Chapter 2, Blommaert lays out what he sees as three limitations to CDA: its bias towards linguistic over social analysis, its inapplicability to societies outside ‘the core of the world system’ (p. 35), and its failure to fully develop understandings of the historical processes behind the origination of power regimes. Blommaert sets out to overcome these limitations
and broaden the scope of analysis to include all forms of semiotic behavior in our globalized world.

He begins tackling these goals in Chapter 3 by examining the issue of context and shining a spotlight on the contextual aspects of linguistic resources as a source of power. This focus carries forward to Chapter 4’s examination of inequality. Central to the discussion is the concept of voice, which Blommaert defines as ‘the ways in which people manage to make themselves understood or fail to do so’ (p. 68). Voice not only depends upon the linguistic resources a speaker possesses, but the value of those resources in differing economies.

Questions of political economy are intimately tied to social structure, which is the focus of Chapter 5’s discussion on choice and determination. Here, Blommaert draws upon Michel Foucault’s (1969, 2002 [1972]) notion of the archive and Raymond Williams’ (1965, 1973, 1977) concept of creative practice. The origins of social practice are explored in Chapter 6 with a focus on history and process. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus and John B. Thompson’s (1990) ideas on ideological circulation anticipate Chapter 7’s discussion on ideology, where Blommaert dissects the concept from various angles to provide a concise introduction to the topic. James Scott’s (1990) notion of hidden transcripts adds to an insightful look at the way hegemonies are enacted within society.

Finally, Chapter 8 provides an overview of the performative aspects of identity (compare with Butler, 1990; Hall and Bucholtz, 1995) and emphasizes the importance of ‘spatial anchorings’ (p. 222) as social actors position themselves in relation to others. Discourse is not only ‘a discourse from history’ (p. 136; italics in original) as discussed earlier in the book, but Blommaert also stresses that ‘[p]eople speak from a place’ (p. 223; italics in original).

In a short review, it is difficult to mention, let alone do justice to the myriad of ideas Blommaert synthesizes in this potent monograph. His engagement with diverse thinkers across the social sciences results in an important blueprint for any discourse analyst interested in incorporating social analysis into their work.

REFERENCES


This new edition of Researching Society and Culture (2004) provides a multi-method overview and methodological contextualization of research for students of sociology and other disciplines. The collection contains 34 commissioned chapters subdivided into an introduction, research contexts (10 chapters), doing research (20 chapters), and case studies (three chapters); the collection closes with a section of workshop and discussion exercises. Although most chapters are written as individual single contributions, some authors (the editor Clive Seale with eight chapters, in particular) are represented more than once in areas, e.g. coding and analyzing data, secondary analysis, where one might have expected an alternative author. Notwithstanding, the range of issues dealt with and the methodological and representational contextualization of research methods in social research is thorough. I believe the text offers a good selection of readings if one’s aim is to expose novices to the range of techniques and theories of potential relevance to research without precipitously foreclosing on possibilities students may want to consider.

In addition to changes to chapter content from the 1998 edition, the new edition integrates follow-up readings from Seale (2004), revises activities for students, and provides links with follow up web sources on relevant issues (http://www.rscbook.co.uk/). The text adopts the same pedagogic approach as other Sage texts, such as Silverman and Seale (2005), of commissioned chapters, discussion questions and tasks for the student.

In his introduction Seale claims the text avoids the pitfalls of toolbox methods book approaches by addressing both methodology and method and also interlinking this discussion with philosophy, theory and practice in the social sciences. Reflexivity is addressed in the attention to writing practices and representation specifically in the final three chapters of case studies. The catholic inclusion of quantitative and qualitative methods is clearly intended to reflect the critical realist stance Seale (1999) has elsewhere promoted as a pragmatic epistemology for social research. This stance and the recent pragmatist rationale for mixed methods in sociology and allied disciplines is currently in vogue and attempts to strike a middle road between formerly antagonistic paradigm wars (Creswell, 2003; Daly et al., 1997; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).