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Review of Paul Chilton's (2004) Analysing Political Discourse

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teachers, and learners. The comprehensiveness of the book will significantly increase the audiences this book can reach. Although this book, as its title indicates, addresses approaches to developing language learners’ ability from advanced or superior to near native, it will benefit language program developers, teachers, and learners at lower levels as well. As one of the first dedicated books on this topic, it will serve as a master reference to language professionals at all levels.


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In his latest book, Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice, Paul Chilton situates the study of language and politics within the framework of cognitive linguistics in a move towards a theory of language and political behavior. The grounding of the book is clearly in linguistics, but the scope encompasses social theory to create a merger between critical linguistics and cognitive science. The social phenomenon of political discourse is examined from a mentalist perspective, and Chomsky’s notion that language is a window on the mind is given new impetus in Chilton’s call for using political discourse as a tool to understand the human mind in society. As Chilton asks, “What does the use of language in contexts we call ‘political’ tell us about humans in general?” (xi).

As the title indicates, the book covers both theory and practice. Part I lays the theoretical groundwork for the data analyzed in parts II and III. Part II deals with data taken exclusively from the domestic arena, and Part III the global arena. The concluding thoughts in Part IV synthesize the analytical notions examined throughout the book and adumbrate several propositions regarding political discourse necessary for formulating a theory of language and politics.

Chilton explores two broad theoretical roles, or complementary dimensions of language: interaction and representation. Socio-political interaction primarily relies upon linguistic action, i.e. discourse. Drawing on Aristotle’s ideas in The Politics, Chilton highlights the importance of language in the promotion of individual and group representations of the world. “It is shared perceptions of values that defines political associations” (5). Thus, representations become shared representations through social interaction, which takes place primarily via language.

In Chapter 3, Chilton covers interaction and moves from Gricean pragmatics to Goffman’s face-threatening acts (FTAs) to Habermasian validity claims in
an iteration between linguistic theory and social theory that cuts to the heart of key aspects of political language, such as credibility, lying, and deception. Underlying the concepts that span this range from interactional pragmatics to universal pragmatics are the notions of cooperation and communicative competence involved in the joint construction of meaning. Yet, as Habermas observes, “most communication is distorted by the interests of participants, whether individuals or groups” (43). The juxtaposition of Grice’s cooperative principle with Habermas’ validity claims provides a theoretical look into how communication can work, as well as the socio-political conditions under which it takes place.

The primary role of linguistic interaction ultimately deals with “communicating representations of the world” (48). Chapter 4 deals with representation and adapts major ideas from cognitive linguistics to the analysis of political discourse. The notions of frames and conceptual metaphor are combined with the spatial dimensions of deixis to describe the types of “discourse worlds” speakers and hearers create when engaged in the joint construction of meaning.

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) observation that time and relationships are at least partially “conceptualized in terms of space” (57) is extended to the positioning of political actors and entities in the mental models constructed in the minds of interlocutors. In addition to time and social distance, Chilton proposes a third axis roughly corresponding to “modality” that plays into the spatial representation in discourse. This modal axis encompasses the “epistemic true and the deontic right,” and positions truth and rightness near the self, and falsity and wrongness at the opposite end of the scale near the Other (59). Chilton sums up a diagram of this notion as follows:

The underlying principles seem to be, in crude terms: Self is always right or in the right, the Other always wrong, or in the wrong. […] many instances of political discourse seem to build meanings that closely associate the Self with truth and righteousness, the Other with their opposite. (60)

In addition to this spatial framework for understanding linguistic representation, Chilton discusses discourse features that create inexplicit meaning, such as entailment and presupposition. In a unique look at Bertrand Russell’s famous sentence, the king of France is bald, where the existence of a king of France is presupposed, Chilton discusses Lewis’ (1979) principle of “accommodation.” When a hearer is faced with a presupposition in a sentence such as Russell’s, but lacks the requisite background knowledge to recognize it as anomalous, the hearer may make “unconscious cognitive adjustments” (64) and add the existential proposition to memory “as a ‘fact’ of reality” (63). Chilton explains, “It takes effort to retrieve, formulate and challenge a presupposition—the effort being both cognitive, and, since a face-threatening act is involved, also social” (64). Thus, the use of presuppositions often allows the speaker to avoid challenge or rejection and lay the foundation for shared constructs if they do not already exist. As Chilton states, “Presupposition is at least one micro-mechanism in language use which contributes to the building of consensual reality” (64).
The strength of the book lies in the two full sections dedicated to putting theory into practice by sketching out concrete examples of political discourse analyses. Within the domestic arena in Part II, institutions of talk, such as political interviews in the media and parliamentary language in the British House of Commons, are examined along with the strategies involved in discursively identifying and expressing attitudes towards the Other.

Throughout the analyses, Chilton juxtaposes pieces of data to provide a look into how meanings are represented from various perspectives. In Chapter 7, the infamous 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech given by Conservative MP Enoch Powell in a reaction to immigration is contrasted with a conversation that took place nearly thirty years later by a group of young men suspected of a racially motivated murder. Interestingly, Enoch Powell is alluded to in the later conversation as an icon that represents the young men’s own beliefs about “foreigners.” In the Powell speech, Chilton analyzes two types of legitimizing: (1) epistemic, where the speaker appeals to notions that he possesses better knowledge, and (2) deontic, where moral rightness is conveyed. In the later conversation, Chilton explores the tactics used by the young males to legitimate their own group’s identity and Powell as an authority figure for that group, along with the legitimization of violence carried out by the group. Both pieces of discourse are examined through a methodological grid that takes into account such notions of legitimization, as well as coercion and representation.

In the realm of international politics in Part III, discursive self-legitimization is explored. Under the rubric of the global arena, Chilton examines President Clinton’s speech to justify military intervention in Kosovo, reactions by both President Bush and Osama bin Laden after the September 11, 2001 events in the United States, and the role of religion in communicating representations of the world. Spatial conceptualizations of time, geography, and relationships are emphasized in this section to provide a novel application of Fauconnier’s (1985) work on mental spaces to the analysis of political discourse.

Chapter 9, appropriately titled “Worlds apart,” deals with post-September 11, 2001 discourse and provides an intriguing juxtaposition between the representations created in the discourse of Bush versus the discourse of bin Laden. Chilton’s three-dimensional diagram of time, space, and modality maps the different “discourse worlds” established by both speakers, providing alternate glimpses at how socio-political realities diverge and interact from the perspectives of different actors. As in the example of the Enoch Powell speech and concomitant conversation studied in Chapter 7, Bush creates a representation using more implicit language while bin Laden utilizes more explicit language to create the representation. Yet, “in some respects the two conceptualizations are mirror images of one another” (172). Throughout the building of the representations from both perspectives, Chilton explicates the spatial dimensions in the conceptualization of morality and lawfulness.

The depth of understanding that results from these close examinations is certainly enlightening given the recentness of the events. Striking, but not sur-
prising, is the chasm that exists between the two views and the way a mutual lack of understanding shapes each actor’s (counterproductive) reaction to the Other that furthers the divide. It leaves one pondering what effect discourse analysts could potentially have on world affairs. Chilton states at the beginning of the book, “I do not know if discourse analysts can have any serious impacts on the genocides, oppressions and exploitations we are still witnessing” (x). Yet, to be optimistic, the possibility nevertheless remains open, furthered by theoretical understandings and practical tools such as those provided in Analysing Political Discourse. Overall, Chilton provides an innovative contribution to an understanding of language and politics, and lays out numerous directions for exploration by scholars interested in not just political discourse, per se, but language, cognition, and human nature, more broadly.

References