Review of Ruth Wodak's (2011) The Discourse of Politics as Usual

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languages—with great sophistication. There are some cases where I would disagree
with the interpretation of data and contact scenarios that I am familiar with, but such
disagreements are the bread and butter of scholarly debate and to be welcomed.

The volume is located firmly within mainstream linguistics, and recent chal-

lenges from those advocating a more poststructuralist approach to language are
mentioned only in passing. For example, Ben Rampton’s work on language cross-
ing is discussed only briefly in Fought’s chapter and not listed in the index. A post-
structuralist perspective on language contact would also include Makoni & Pennycook’s (2006) work on disinventing languages, Blommaert’s (2010) socio-
linguistics of globalization, Creese & Blackledge’s (2009) discussion of trans-
languaging, Backhus (2006) and other’s work on linguistic landscaping, and
Bailey’s (2007) approach to code-switching as a form of Bakthinian heteroglossia.
This, however, would probably need a separate volume. Hickey has certainly done
an excellent job in establishing a base line for future research and discussions by
bringing together a wide range of studies focusing on the structural consequences
of language contact, that is, on contact explanations of linguistic form.

REFERENCES


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In *The discourse of politics in action*, Ruth Wodak succeeds in providing an important critique of “politics as usual.” The analysis focuses on two key themes. First, she investigates the way politicians “do” politics in the micro-level interaction of day-to-day work within the halls of the European Parliament. Second, she examines the way fictional dramas—such as the American television show, *The West Wing*—represent the behind-the-scenes business of politics. By focusing on the backstage aspect of politics, Wodak’s analysis not only provides fascinating insights into, for example, the daily life of a Member of European Parliament (MEP), but also holds implications for the way we might reconceptualize politics and counter political disillusionment.

In Ch. 1, Wodak lays out the key themes of the book. Centrally concerned with politics in action, Wodak situates her study within the field of political linguistics (*Politolinguistik*) and the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—specifically, her signature brand of CDA known as the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). Wodak stays true to CDA/DHA’s interest in bridging the micro and macro processes of social interaction by bringing a diverse array of social theoretical ideas to bear on the analytic framework. Wodak as bricoleur draws from a wide list of social theorists, including Goffman, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Weber, among others. In addition, she argues for the importance of ethnographic methods as an important accompaniment to discourse analysis.

Of the various social theoretical ideas Wodak draws upon, Goffman’s dramaturgical model for the way identities are performed is perhaps the most salient—in particular, Goffman’s distinction between frontstage and backstage. “Frontstage is where the performance takes place and the performers and the audience are present” (9). This is the realm of political stagecraft, where the politician develops and enacts a public persona, or political image. In contrast, the audience/public is not privy to what takes place backstage, “where performers can step out of character without fear of disrupting the performance” (10). Crucially, both the frontstage and backstage involve performances in the presentation of the self. Wodak is particularly interested in the backstage interactions where identities shape and are shaped by the process of politics. Here, she makes the case for integrating Bourdieu’s notion of habitus with Goffman’s presentation of the self, as well as Lave and Wenger’s concept of a community of practice. In effect, the presentation of the self occurs within a community of practice where habitus is formed. Wodak is interested in understanding the way backstage forms of behavior are internalized and enacted by MEPs as part of what it means for them to “do politics.”

Ch. 2 effectively acts as an extended introduction to the book, revisiting many ideas outlined in Ch. 1 (e.g. presentation of self, habitus, power-knowledge) and covering new ones (e.g. Weber’s legitimacy/authority, Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, Gramsci’s hegemony). Here, Wodak also introduces in more detail key ideas from linguistics and discourse analysis that factor into her later analysis (e.g. presupposition, intertextuality, genres, rhetorical fallacies). Paralleling Grice’s distinction between conversational implicatures and conventional implicatures,
Wodak makes a similar distinction between conversational presuppositions and conventional presuppositions. Whereas conventional presuppositions arise from the semantics of a sentence based on the rules of logic, conversational presuppositions “are context-dependent, triggered by contextual factors and ‘interests’ (i.e. organizational/political knowledge and strategies)” (48). It is the conversational presuppositions that Wodak is particularly interested in exploring in the discourse of the MEPs. After all, she wants to understand the way insider knowledge allows these politicians to effectively manage knowledge and perform politics.

With the theoretical framework in place, Ch. 3 delves into the analysis of interview data that Wodak and colleagues collected by talking with MEPs. The analytic focus of the chapter centers on the way identities emerge through these discussions. Central to the chapter are Goffman’s notion of footing, along with the role of narrative in allowing social actors to shift among different interactive frames to variously position themselves as Europeans, citizens of a particular nation, members of a political party, and residents of a local region or particular city. Often, multiple identity categories are explicitly invoked and used in narratives of the self. In this way, “MEPs consistently linked their nationality/citizenship with their European-ness” (107). A key contribution of the chapter is to highlight the diversity of perspectives and identities among MEPs, calling into question the notion of a singular European identity. As for what Europe represents when contrasted with the out-group consisting of the United States and Japan, MEPs emphasized the social aspect of public policies such as employment. Through metaphors of a family living under the “European roof,” Europe was positioned as “an economic entity with a social conscience” (111).

Ch. 4 highlights the book’s ethnographic contribution. The analysis closely examines one day in the life of an MEP (pseudonym “Hans”) that a member of Wodak’s research team shadowed during his activities in the European Parliament. In the course of doing politics, MEPs such as Hans interact in a variety of communities of practice where they must perform, more or less automatically, according to these communities’ norms. Of particular interest are the interactions between the MEP and his assistant, a crucial figure in the backstage of politics. Wodak characterizes the interactions as rapid-fire exchanges. “The quick turn-taking illustrates the shared routines of their small community of practice, and they do not interrupt each other but automatically sense when transition-relevant points occur or when support is needed to reassure the other” (125). Overall, such backstage interactions are as central to “doing politics” as the more obvious frontstage moments of which we are typically aware (e.g. speeches in parliament, addresses to public audiences, media appearances). Since the public is absent from the backstage moments, we are left “with a rather distorted, over-simplified and often over-sensationalized impression of this highly complex profession” (p. 127). Wodak makes the case that demystifying the backstage of politics might help counter the phenomenon of “depoliticization” and provide ways for people to get more involved in the political process.
Ch. 5 is perhaps the most fascinating chapter of the book. Here, Wodak explores the way politics is portrayed on television, providing an interesting contrast to the previous chapter’s examination of everyday politics in real life. In particular, she focuses on the American serial drama, The West Wing, which features Martin Sheen in the heroic role of a popular president. Drawing upon the archetype in American cowboy westerns, the fictional President Bartlett embodies the traits of a wise, judicious hero. Wodak claims that fictionalized representations such as these provide the public with models for how politics does/should operate and how politicians do/should act. Indeed, as Wodak points out, journalists in the New York Times and elsewhere have referred to “Bartlett’s policies as a good model to be followed” and have mentioned “characteristics of President Bartlett which the presidential candidates Gore and Bush ‘would be wise to copy” (167).

Certainly, political pundits often talk about whether or not a candidate appears sufficiently “presidential.” Both the portrayals of presidents on television and the expectations of candidates in presidential races draw upon the American myth represented in the cowboy westerns “where the good win and the bad lose” (166). Such myths are vital tools for making sense of the world even as they simplify the complexities of real-life politics and provide tidy endings to open-ended problems. The fictionalized world in The West Wing constructs “a reality the audiences would like to believe in, precisely because complex problems find a solution, through seemingly wise politicians who adhere to values which are deemed positive by hegemonic elites as well as by the general audience” (160). It represents a model of politics that stands in stark contrast to the one that unfolds in the everyday life of MEPs, as detailed by Wodak earlier in the book. The everyday life of MEPs “illustrates that the life of politicians is not organized into stories with clear-cut beginnings and endings, isolated units and plots” (184).

In the concluding chapter, Wodak draws out the implications of her analysis. As she argues, the public’s exclusion from the backstage of politics—that is, the mundane social and discursive practices that make up day to day politics—leads to disillusionment with politics and calls into question public support for democratically elected leaders. The fictionalization of politics, she claims, acts as a means for overcoming this disillusionment. Through fictionalization, an ideal (and simplified) world of backstage politics can be constructed that adheres to the overarching cultural myths in line with dominant ideologies. By investigating the backstage of politics, Wodak aims to demystify the workings of “politics as usual” in an effort to make nonfictionalized politics more accessible to the general public. While it remains to be seen whether a greater public understanding of the reality of politics will strengthen democratic institutions, Wodak certainly provides something to think about in this book—from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

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