

Discourse as social practice

This chapter gives a general picture of the place of language in society, which is developed in more specific terms in later chapters. It is most closely linked to Chapters 3 and 4, which elaborate this general picture in terms of, respectively, the relationship between language and power, and the relationship between language and ideology. Together, these three chapters present the main elements of the position which I am adopting in this book on the place of language in society: that language is centrally involved in power, and struggles for power, and that it is so involved through its ideological properties.

Let me summarize the major themes of Chapter 2 under its main section headings:

- **Language and discourse:** the conception of language we need for CLS is *discourse*, language as social practice determined by social structures.
- **Discourse and orders of discourse:** actual discourse is determined by socially constituted *orders of discourse*, sets of conventions associated with social institutions.
- **Class and power in capitalist society:** orders of discourse are ideologically shaped by power relations in social institutions and in society as a whole.
- **Dialectic of structures and practices:** discourse has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change.

AN EXAMPLE

As I said above, this chapter will be discussing language and society in relatively general terms which will be made more specific in later chapters. It does not lend itself as easily to textual

illustrations of points as chapters 3 and 4 do, and it will therefore perhaps be helpful to have a concrete example which can be used to give a preliminary illustration of some of the main themes, and which we can also refer back to later in the chapter.

This text is part of an interview in a police station, involving the witness to an armed robbery (w) and a policeman (p), in which basic information elicitation is going on. w, who is rather shaken by the experience, is being asked what happened, p is recording the information elicited in writing.

- (1) p: Did you get a look at the one in the car?
- (2) w: I saw his face, yeah.
- (3) p: What sort of age was he?
- (4) w: About 45. He was wearing a . . .
- (5) p: And how tall?
- (6) w: Six foot one.
- (7) p: Six foot one. Hair?
- (8) w: Dark and curly. Is this going to take long? I've got to collect the kids from school.
- (9) p: Not much longer, no. What about his clothes?
- (10) w: He was a bit scruffy-looking, blue trousers, black . . .
- (11) p: Jeans?
- (12) w: Yeah.

How would you characterize the relationship between the police interviewer and w in this case, and how is it expressed in what is said?

The relationship is an unequal one, with the police interviewer firmly in control of the way the interview develops and of w's contribution to it, and taking no trouble to mitigate the demands he makes of her. Thus questions which might be quite painful for someone who has just witnessed a violent crime are never mitigated; p's question in turn 1, for example, might have been in a mitigated form such as *did you by any chance manage to get a good look at the one in the* instead of the bald form in which it actually occurs. In some cases, questions are reduced to words or minimal phrases – *how tall* in turn 5, and *hair* in turn 7. Such reduced questions are typical when one person is filling in a form 'for' another, as p is here; what is interesting is that the sensitive nature of the situation does not override the norms of form-filling. It is also noticeable that there is no acknowledgement of, still less thanks for, the information w supplies. Another feature is the way in which the interviewer checks what w has said in 7. Notice finally how control is exercised over w's contributions: p interrupts w's turn in 5 and 11,

and in 9 p gives a minimal answer to w's question about how much longer the interview will take, not acknowledging her problem, and immediately asks another question thus closing off w's interpellation.

Would we be justified in saying that these properties are *arbitrary*? In one sense, they are, because they could be different. In another sense, however, they are anything but arbitrary: they are determined by social conditions, more specifically by the nature of the relationship between the police and members of the 'public' in our society, and indeed they are *part* of that relationship. If that relationship were to undergo dramatic changes – if members of local communities were elected by those communities to act as police officers on a triennial renewable basis, for instance – we can be pretty confident that police/'public' discourse would change too. This illustrates one major contention of this chapter – that social conditions determine properties of discourse.

Another is that we ought to be concerned with the processes of producing and interpreting texts, and with how these cognitive processes are socially shaped and relative to social conventions, not just with texts themselves. Consider for instance how w interprets the absence of any acknowledgement by the policeman of the information she supplies. If something similar happened in a friendly conversation, it would be experienced by participants as a real absence and a problem, maybe an indication of disbelief or embarrassment, and one would expect to find its problematical character reflected in formal features of the text (such as an 'embarrassed silence' or signs of hesitation). In the police interview, acknowledgement would I think not generally be expected, so its absence would not be experienced as a problem for someone in tune with the conventions for such interviews. This does indeed appear to be the case for w. The example illustrates that the way people interpret features of texts depends upon which social – more specifically, discursive – conventions they are assuming to hold.

Finally, in this chapter I shall be highlighting not only the social determination of language use, but also the linguistic determination of society. Thus, for instance, one wishes to know to what extent the positions which are set up for members of the 'public' in the order of discourse of policing are passively occupied by them. In our example, w does indeed seem to be a fully compliant witness. In so far as such positions are compliantly occupied, the

social relationships which determine them are sustained by the use of language. Conversely, in so far as dominant conventions are resisted or contested, language use can contribute to changing social relationships.

Think of cases where a feature of discourse may be interpreted in different ways depending on what social conventions people are operating with – like the example of *w*'s interpretation of the lack of acknowledgements. Can people resist a particular set of conventions by insisting on interpreting features according to another set? Try rewriting the text with *w* in the position of resisting the conventions which the interviewer is operating with, specifically in respect of the lack of acknowledgement of information.

LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE

This section develops the argument that, for CLS, the conception of language we need is that of *discourse*, language as a form of social practice. Then term *language* has been used in a number of different senses, including the two which linguists have standardly distinguished as *langue* and *parole* (as mentioned in Ch. 1). Neither of these is equivalent to discourse, but a discussion of them may help to clarify some of the various conceptions of language, and how discourse differs from others.

Langue and parole

The distinction between *langue* and *parole* was made famous in the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. What I shall refer to is the way Saussure has generally been interpreted; his ideas are less clear and less simple than this might suggest, partly because published versions of his work were compiled posthumously by others.

Saussure regarded *langue* as a system or code which is prior to actual language use, which is the same for all members of a language community, and which is the *social* side of language as opposed to *parole*, which is individual. For Saussure, *parole*, what is actually said or written, is determined purely by individual choices, not socially at all. Linguistics, according to Saussure, is concerned primarily with *langue*, not *parole*.

Language use (*parole*) is, as Saussure was aware, characterized

by extensive linguistic variation, and it is the account of this variation given by modern sociolinguistics which has done most to undermine the Saussurean concept of *parole*. Sociolinguistics has shown that this variation is not, as Saussure thought, a product of individual choice, but a product of social differentiation – language varies according to the social identities of people in interactions, their socially defined purposes, social setting, and so on. So Saussure's individualistic notion of *parole* is unsatisfactory, and in preferring the term *discourse* I am first of all committing myself to the view that language use is socially determined.

But what about *langue*? Saussure understood *langue* as something unitary and homogeneous throughout a society. But is there such a thing as 'a language' in this unitary and homogeneous sense? It is certainly the case that a good many people talk and act as if there were – we are all familiar with 'the English language', or 'English', and there is an army of specialists who teach 'English', give lectures about 'English', and write grammars and dictionaries of 'English'. Similarly for 'German', 'Russian', 'French', etc.

A *langue* has been jokingly defined as 'a dialect with an army and a navy', but this is a joke with a serious undercurrent. Modern armies and navies are a feature of the 'nation state', and so too is the linguistic unification or 'standardization' of large politically defined territories which makes talk of 'English' or 'German' meaningful. When people talk about 'English' in Britain for instance, they generally have in mind British *standard* English, i.e. the standardized variety of British English. The spread of this variety into all the important public domains and its high status among most of the population are achievements of *standardization* (see Ch. 3) as a part of the economic, political and cultural unification of modern Britain. From this perspective, 'English' and other 'languages' appear to be the products of social conditions specific to a particular historical epoch.

But there is no historical specificity about the notion of *langue*; Saussure writes as if all language communities whatever their social conditions had their *langues*, and for him the possession of *langue* is a condition for the possession of language. Moreover, Saussure assumes that everyone in a language community has equal access to and command of its *langue*, whereas in reality access to and command of standard languages are unequal.

What is striking about the Saussurean notion of *langue*, as well as analogous uses of *langue* by English-speaking linguists, is its

similarity to some of the *rhetoric* of standardization. The real spread of a standard variety through a population and across domains of use is one aspect of standardization; rhetorical claims made on behalf of the standard variety – that it is the language of the whole people, that everyone uses it, that everyone holds it in high esteem, and so forth – are another. What these claims amount to is the transmutation of standard languages into mythical *national languages*. A political requirement for creating and sustaining a nation state is that its unifying institutions should have legitimacy among the mass of the people, and winning legitimacy often calls for such rhetoric. I am not suggesting that Saussure and other linguists set out to deliberately reproduce a politically motivated myth in their linguistic theory. But is it accidental that the emergence of the notion of *langue* occurred during a period when the myth of the ‘national language’ was at its height – the turn of the twentieth century?

Let me now relate this to my decision to focus upon *discourse*. I shall not accept the Saussurean concentration on language as opposed to language use; nor, on the other hand, shall I accept the individualistic notion of language use involved in *parole*. The emphasis should be on language use, but language use conceived of as socially determined, as what I call discourse. But part of Saussure’s *langue/parole* distinction is a general one between underlying social conventions and actual use, and this is a distinction which I maintain, though in different terms (see the next section). However, I don’t assume (as *langue* does) that conventions are unitary and homogeneous; on the contrary, they are characterized by diversity, and by power struggle. In so far as homogeneity is achieved – as it is to some extent in the case of standardization – it is imposed by those who have power. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed statement of this view.

Discourse as social practice

I have glossed the discourse view of language as ‘language as a form of social practice’. What precisely does this imply? Firstly, that language is a part of society, and not somehow external to it. Secondly, that language is a social process. And thirdly, that language is a socially conditioned process, conditioned that is by other (non-linguistic) parts of society. I shall discuss these in turn.

It is not uncommon for textbooks on language to have sections

on the relationship ‘between’ language and society, as if these were two independent entities which just happen to come into contact occasionally. My view is that there is not an external relationship ‘between’ language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship. Language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena.

Linguistic phenomena are social in the sense that whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects. Even when people are most conscious of their own individuality and think themselves to be most cut off from social influences – ‘in the bosom of the family’, for example – they still use language in ways which are subject to social convention. And the ways in which people use language in their most intimate and private encounters are not only socially determined by the social relationships of the family, they also have social effects in the sense of helping to maintain (or, indeed, change) those relationships.

Social phenomena are linguistic, on the other hand, in the sense that the language activity which goes on in social contexts (as all language activity does) is not merely a reflection or expression of social processes and practices, it is a *part* of those processes and practices. For example, disputes about the meaning of political expressions are a constant and familiar aspect of politics. People sometimes explicitly argue about the meanings of words like *democracy*, *nationalization*, *imperialism*, *socialism*, *liberation* or *terrorism*. More often, they use the words in more or less pointedly different and incompatible ways – examples are easy to find in exchanges between leaders of political parties, or between, say, the Soviet Union and the United States of America. Such disputes are sometimes seen as merely preliminaries to or outgrowths from the real processes and practices of politics. What I am suggesting is that they are not: they *are* politics. Politics partly consists in the disputes and struggles which occur in language and over language.

But it is not a matter of a symmetrical relationship ‘between’ language and society as equal facets of a single whole. The whole is society, and language is one strand of the social. And whereas all linguistic phenomena are social, not all social phenomena are linguistic – though even those that are not just linguistic (economic production, for instance) typically have a substantial, and often underestimated, language element.

Let us turn now to the second implication of regarding language as social practice – that language is a social process – and approach it through looking at what differentiates discourse from *text*. I shall be making extensive use of the term *text*, and shall use the term as the linguist Michael Halliday does, for both written texts and ‘spoken texts’; a spoken text is simply what is said in a piece of spoken discourse, but I shall generally use the term for a written transcription of what is said.

A text is a product rather than a process – a product of the process of text production. But I shall use the term *discourse* to refer to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part. This process includes in addition to the text the *process of production*, of which the text is a product, and the *process of interpretation*, for which the text is a resource. Text analysis is correspondingly only a part of discourse analysis, which also includes analysis of productive and interpretative processes. The formal properties of a text can be regarded from the perspective of discourse analysis on the one hand as *traces* of the productive process, and on the other hand as *cues* in the process of interpretation. It is an important property of productive and interpretative processes that they involve an interplay between properties of texts and a considerable range of what I referred to in Chapter 1 as ‘members’ resources’ (MR) which people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts – including their knowledge of language, representations of the natural and social worlds they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions, and so on.

However, no account of the processes of production and interpretation can be complete which ignores the way in which they are socially determined, which brings us to the third implication of seeing language as social practice: that it is conditioned by other, non-linguistic, parts of society. The MR which people draw upon to produce and interpret texts are cognitive in the sense that they are in people’s heads, but they are social in the sense that they have social origins – they are socially generated, and their nature is dependent on the social relations and struggles out of which they were generated – as well as being socially transmitted and, in our society, unequally distributed. People internalize what is socially produced and made available to them, and use this internalized MR to engage in their social practice, including discourse. This gives the forces which shape societies a vitally important foothold in the individual psyche, though as we shall see, the effectiveness of this

foothold depends on it being not generally apparent. Moreover, it is not just the nature of these cognitive resources that is socially determined, but also the conditions of their use – for instance, different cognitive strategies are conventionally expected when someone is reading a poem on the one hand, and a magazine advertisement on the other. It is important to take account of such differences when analysing discourse from a critical perspective.

Discourse, then, involves social conditions, which can be specified as *social conditions of production*, and *social conditions of interpretation*. These social conditions, moreover, relate to three different ‘levels’ of social organization: the level of the social situation, or the immediate social environment in which the discourse occurs; the level of the social institution which constitutes a wider matrix for the discourse; and the level of the society as a whole. What I am suggesting, in summary, is that these social conditions shape the MR people bring to production and interpretation, which in turn shape the way in which texts are produced and interpreted. (See Fig. 2.1.)

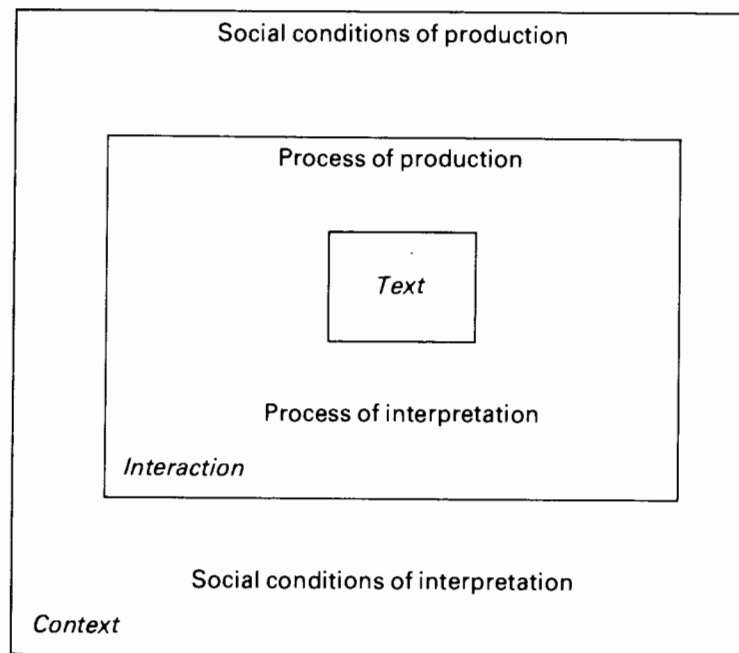


Fig. 2.1 Discourse as text, interaction and context

So, in seeing language as discourse and as social practice, one is committing oneself not just to analysing texts, nor just to analysing processes of production and interpretation, but to analysing the relationship between texts, processes, and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures. Or, using the italicized terms in Fig. 2.1, the relationship between *texts*, *interactions*, and *contexts*.

Corresponding to these three dimensions of discourse, I shall distinguish three dimensions, or stages, of critical discourse analysis:

- **Description** is the stage which is concerned with formal properties of the text.
- **Interpretation** is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction – with seeing the text as the product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation; notice that I use the term *interpretation* for both the interactional process and a stage of analysis, for reasons which will emerge in Chapter 6.
- **Explanation** is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context – with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects.

These three stages will be discussed in detail as parts of a procedure for doing critical discourse analysis in Chapters 5 and 6.

We can refer to what goes on at each of these stages as ‘analysis’, but it should be noted that the nature of ‘analysis’ changes as one shifts from stage to stage. In particular, analysis at the description stage differs from analysis at the interpretation and explanation stages. In the case of description, analysis is generally thought of as a matter of identifying and ‘labelling’ formal features of a text in terms of the categories of a descriptive framework. The ‘object’ of description, the text, is often seen as unproblematically given. But this is misleading, as spoken discourse shows particularly well: one has to produce a ‘text’ by transcribing speech, but there are all sorts of ways in which one might transcribe any stretch of speech, and the way one *interprets* the text is bound to influence how one transcribes it.

When we turn to the stages of interpretation and explanation, analysis cannot be seen in terms of applying a procedure to an

‘object’, even with provisos about the ‘object’. What one is analysing is much less determinate. In the case of interpretation, it is the cognitive processes of participants, and in the case of explanation, it is relationships between transitory social events (interactions), and more durable social structures which shape and are shaped by these events. In both cases, the analyst is in the position of offering (in a broad sense) interpretations of complex and invisible relationships.

Although I shall for convenience use a notion of description along the lines indicated above, it should be said that description is ultimately just as dependent on the analyst’s ‘interpretation’, in the broad sense in which I have just used the term, as the transcription of speech. What one ‘sees’ in a text, what one regards as worth describing, and what one chooses to emphasize in a description, are all dependent on how one interprets a text. There is a positivist (see Ch. 1 for this term) tendency to regard language texts as ‘objects’ whose formal properties can be mechanically described without interpretation. But try as they may, analysts cannot prevent themselves engaging with human products in a human, and therefore interpretative, way.

Verbal and visual language

Although the focus in this book will be mainly upon discourse which includes *verbal* texts, it would be quite artificial to conceive of discourse in exclusively verbal terms. Even when texts are essentially verbal – and I’m thinking here especially of spoken texts – talk is interwoven with gesture, facial expression, movement, posture to such an extent that it cannot be properly understood without reference to these ‘extras’. Let’s call them collectively *visuals*, on the grounds that they are all visually perceived by interpreters. Visuals can be an accompaniment to talk which helps determine its meaning – think for instance of the smirk which turns an innocent-sounding question into a nasty jibe. Or visuals can substitute for talk as a perfectly acceptable alternative; head-nodding, head-shaking and shrugging one’s shoulders for *yes*, *no* and *I don’t know* are obvious examples.

When we think of written, printed, filmed, or televised material, the significance of visuals is far more obvious. Indeed, the traditional opposition between spoken and ‘written’ language has been overtaken by events, and a much more helpful terminology

in modern society would be *spoken* as opposed to *visual* language. It is well known, for example, that a photograph is often as important in getting across the 'message' of a report in a newspaper as the verbal report, and very often visuals and 'verbals' operate in a mutually reinforcing way which makes them very difficult to disentangle. Moreover, the relative social significance of visual imagery is increasing dramatically – think of the degree to which one of the most populous and pervasive modern discourse types, advertising, works through visuals. For all these reasons, I shall assume broad and nonrestrictive notions of discourse and text. Even though, as I have said, my focus is very much on the verbal element, visuals will feature at various points in the following chapters.

DISCOURSE AND ORDERS OF DISCOURSE

This section looks at one aspect of the social conditions of discourse and the determination of discourse by social structures: the way in which actual discourse is determined by underlying conventions of discourse. I regard these conventions as clustering in sets or networks which I call *orders of discourse*, a term used by Michel Foucault. These conventions and orders of discourse, moreover, embody particular ideologies.

The terms *discourse* and *practice* have what we might call a 'felicitous ambiguity': both can refer to either what people are doing on a particular occasion, or what people habitually do given a certain sort of occasion. That is, both can refer either to action, or to convention. The ambiguity is felicitous here because it helps underline the social nature of discourse and practice, by suggesting that the individual instance always implies social conventions – any discourse or practice implies conventional types of discourse or practice. The ambiguity also suggests social preconditions for action on the part of individual persons: the individual is able to act only in so far as there are social conventions to act within. Part of what is implied in the notion of social practice is that people are enabled through being constrained: they are able to act on condition that they act within the constraints of types of practice – or of discourse. However, this makes social practice sound more rigid than it is; as I shall argue in the final section of this chapter, being socially constrained does not preclude being creative.

I shall use the term *discourse* to refer to discursive action, to actual talk or writing, and the term *practice* will be used in a parallel way. It can be used to refer generally to discursive action, or to refer to specific instances (*a discourse*, and similarly *a practice*). I shall also use *discourse* when there is no risk of ambiguity to refer to a convention, a type of discourse (e.g. the discourse of police interviews). Where the meaning may be unclear, I shall use instead *discourse type*, or *discourse conventions*.

I suggested earlier that even the intimate and private interactions which occur within the family are socially determined. Think of the most personal and individual discourse of yourself and people you are close to. Do you agree even in this case with the claim that discourse always implies discursive conventions?

Discourse and practice are constrained not by various independent types of discourse and practice, but by interdependent networks which we can call 'orders' – *orders of discourse* and *social orders*. The social order is the more general of the two. We always experience the society and the various social institutions within which we operate as divided up and demarcated, *structured* into different spheres of action, different types of situation, each of which has its associated type of practice. I will use the term *social order* to refer to such a structuring of a particular social 'space' into various domains associated with various types of practice. What I shall call an order of discourse is really a social order looked at from a specifically discursive perspective – in terms of those types of practice into which a social space is structured which happen to be discourse types. This is summarized in Fig. 2.2.

I referred above to social orders as *structured*: social orders will differ not only in which types of practice they include, but also

Social order	Order of discourse
Types of practice	Types of discourse
Actual practices	Actual discourses

Fig. 2.2 Social orders and orders of discourse

in how these are related to each other, or structured. Similarly, orders of discourse will differ in both discourse types, and the way they are structured. For example, we find 'conversation' as a discourse type in various orders of discourse, associated with various social institutions. That is interesting in itself. But it is even more interesting to see how orders of discourse differ in terms of the relationship (complementarity, opposition, mutual exclusion, or whatever) between conversation and other discourse types. For instance, conversation has no 'on-stage' role in legal proceedings, but it may have a significant 'off-stage' role in, for example, informal bargaining between prosecution and defence lawyers. In education, on the other hand, conversation may have approved roles not only before and after classes are formally initiated by teachers, but also as a form of activity embedded within the discourse of the lesson.

In addition to the order of discourse of a social institution, which structures constituent discourses in a particular way, we can refer to the order of discourse of the society as a whole, which structures the orders of discourse of the various social institutions in a particular way. How discourses are structured in a given order of discourse, and how structurings change over time, are determined by changing relationships of power at the level of the social institution or of the society. Power at these levels includes the capacity to control orders of discourse; one aspect of such control is ideological – ensuring that orders of discourse are ideologically harmonized internally or (at the societal level) with each other. See Chapter 3 for more details.

Let us relate this to the interview example introduced earlier. This is a discourse (or more precisely a part of a discourse) which draws upon a single discourse type of witness interviews, or more specifically, an information-gathering phase or episode of such a discourse type. The relationship between convention and practice, discourse type and discourse, seems quite straightforward – quite conventional – in this case; the features which I noted earlier strike me as predictable for this type. The discourse type is an element in the order of discourse associated with policing as a social institution. It contrasts with others, such as the discourses of making an arrest, or charging a suspect, and this episode is also in contrast with others in the discourse of interviewing a witness, such as interrogation, or questioning aimed at testing out a story. Although it is the prerogative of the more

powerful participants, in this case the police interviewers, to determine which discourse type(s) is/are the 'appropriate' ones to draw upon in a given situation, the choice positions all participants in a determinate place in the order of discourse and the social order of police work. It also positions them in terms of one of a number of procedures for dealing with cases, which are constituted by a series of discourse types in determinate orders: information gathering is likely to be followed by interrogation which may result in a charge being laid, for example. Thus even a small extract like this one implies not just a particular discourse type, but an order of discourse.

In saying that discourse *draws upon* discourse types (and practice upon types of practice), I have been trying to avoid any suggestion of a mechanical relationship between the two. Although we must have conventions in order to be able to engage in discourse, the latter is not simply a realization or implementation of the former. In fact, a particular discourse may well draw upon two or more discourse types, and the possible ways in which types may in principle be combined are innumerable. Rather than mechanical implementation, discourse should be thought of as the creative extension-through-combination of existing resources, with conventional cases of a discourse drawing upon a single discourse type as in the interview extract being thought of as limiting cases rather than the norm. See the section *Dialectic of structures and practices* below, and Chapter 7.

Think of your own current or former place of work or study in terms of its social practices, as a social order and an order of discourse. List some of the major types of practice, and try to work out how they are demarcated from each other – maybe in terms of the sorts of situation, and participant, they are associated with. To what extent are they discursive and to what extent are they non-discursive?

CLASS AND POWER IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

This section extends the discussion of the social conditions of discourse at the societal and institutional levels, suggesting how social structures at these levels determine discourse. The way in which orders of discourse are structured, and the ideologies which they embody, are determined by relationships of power in particular social institutions, and in the society as a whole. We therefore need

to be sensitive in critical language analysis to properties of the society and institutions we are concerned with. In what follows, I shall first identify, though only schematically, some basic structural characteristics and tendencies of British society; similar features are evident in comparable capitalist societies. I shall then point to ways in which characteristics of discourse in modern Britain appear to be determined by these features. Readers will find a more detailed analysis in these terms in Chapter 8. I should stress that the interpretation of British society which I give is not a neutral one – there are none – but one which reflects my own experience, values, and political commitments.

The way in which a society organizes its economic production, and the nature of the relationships established in production between social classes, are fundamental structural features which determine others. In capitalist society, production is primarily the production for private profit of commodities, goods which are sold on the market – as opposed to the production of goods for immediate consumption by their producers, for instance. And the class relationship on which this form of production depends is between a (capitalist) class which owns the means of production, and a (working) class who are obliged to sell their power to work to the capitalists, in exchange for a wage, in order to live.

But aren't a great many people in a somewhat tangential relationship to this production process rather than directly involved? This seems to be true of the increasing number who work in 'service' and 'leisure' industries, various categories of 'professional' workers and so on. Some of these people perhaps constitute minor classes; some of them (e.g. professional workers) are standardly assigned to a 'middle class' or *petit bourgeois* class. I shall refer rather loosely to a 'middle class', but I shall also assume that the working class is internally complex in modern Britain, and includes 'service', 'leisure', 'technical' and other groups of workers, as well as a 'core' of workers who produce commodities.

Economic, state, and ideological power

The relationship between social classes starts in economic production, but extends to all parts of a society. The power of the capitalist class depends also on its ability to control the *state*: contrary to the view of the state as standing neutrally 'above' classes, I shall assume that the state is the key element in main-

taining the dominance of the capitalist class, and controlling the working class. This political power is typically exercised not just by capitalists, but by an alliance of capitalists and others who see their interests as tied to capital – many professional workers, for instance. We can refer to this alliance as the *dominant bloc*.

State power – including Government, control of the police and the armed forces, the civil service, and so forth – is decisive in periods of crisis. But in more normal conditions of life in capitalist society, a whole range of social institutions such as education, the law, religions, the media, and indeed the family, collectively and cumulatively ensure the continuing dominance of the capitalist class. The people who have power in these social institutions often have very little in the way of direct links to the capitalist class. Think of the local education authorities, school governors and senior teachers who are responsible for most of what goes on in schools, for example. Nevertheless, analyses of the way in which education and other institutions train children to fit into and accept the existing system of class relations are very persuasive.

We can explain this partly in terms of the people with power in institutions mainly seeing their interests as tied in with capitalism. But a more significant factor is *ideology*. Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimize existing power relations. Practices which appear to be universal and commonsensical can often be shown to originate in the dominant class or the dominant bloc, and to have become *naturalized*. Where types of practice, and in many cases types of discourse, function in this way to sustain unequal power relations, I shall say they are functioning *ideologically*.

Ideological power, the power to project one's practices as universal and 'common sense', is a significant complement to economic and political power, and of particular significance here because it is exercised in discourse. There are (as mentioned briefly in Ch. 1) in gross terms two ways in which those who have power can exercise it and keep it: through coercing others to go along with them, with the ultimate sanctions of physical violence or death; or through winning others' consent to, or at least acquiescence in, their possession and exercise of power. In short, through *coercion* or *consent*. In practice, coercion and consent occur in all sorts of combinations. The state includes repressive forces which can be used to coerce if necessary, but any ruling class finds it less costly

and less risky to rule if possible by consent. Ideology is the key mechanism of rule by consent, and because it is the favoured vehicle of ideology, discourse is of considerable social significance in this connection. See Chapter 4 for a full discussion, but also further below.

Think again of your own workplace, place of study, or some other institution you know, in terms of the balance which exists between coercion and consent, force and ideology, in the maintenance of social control. Can you identify particular types of discourse which are important ideologically in 'rule by consent'?

Power relations, class relations, and social struggle

Power relations are not reducible to class relations. There are power relations between social groupings in institutions, as we have seen, and there are power relations between women and men, between ethnic groupings, between young and old, which are not specific to particular institutions. One of the problems in analysing contemporary capitalism is how to see the connection between class relations and these other types of relation. On the one hand, there is no simple transparent connection between them which would justify *reducing* these other relations to class relations, by seeing them as merely indirect expressions of class. On the other hand, class relations define the nature of the society, and have a fundamental and pervasive influence on all aspects of the society, including these other relations, so that it is not acceptable to regard gender, race and so forth as simply parallel to class. I shall regard class relations as having a more fundamental status than others, and as setting the broad parameters within which others are constrained to develop, parameters which are broad enough to allow many options which are narrowed down by determinants autonomous to the particular relation at issue.

Power relations are always relations of *struggle*, using the term in a technical sense to refer to the process whereby social groupings with different interests engage with one another. Social struggle occurs between groupings of various sorts – women and men, black and white, young and old, dominating and dominated groupings in social institutions, and so on. But just as class relations are the most fundamental relations in class society, so too is class

struggle the most fundamental form of struggle. Class struggle is a necessary and inherent property of a social system in which the maximization of the profits and power of one class depends upon the maximization of its exploitation and domination of another. Social struggle may be more or less intense and may appear in more or less overt forms, but all social developments, and any exercise of power, take place under conditions of social struggle. This applies also, as we shall see in Chapter 3, to language: language is both a site of and a stake in class struggle, and those who exercise power through language must constantly be involved in struggle with others to defend (or lose) their position.

Changes in capitalism

Capitalism has undergone many changes since the nineteenth century. Marx identified in his economic analyses a tendency towards *monopoly*, towards the concentration of production in an ever-decreasing number of ever-larger units. This tendency has become more pronounced with the passage of time, and the scale of concentration is now international: a relatively small number of massive multinational corporations now dominate production in the capitalist world.

At the same time, the capitalist economic domain has been progressively enlarged to take in aspects of life which were previously seen as quite separate from production. The *commodity* has expanded from being a tangible 'good' to include all sorts of intangibles: educational courses, holidays, health insurance, and funerals are now bought and sold on the open market in 'packages', rather like soap powders. And an ever greater focus has been placed upon the consumption of commodities, a tendency summed up in the term *consumerism*. As a result, the economy and the commodity market massively impinge upon people's lives, including, especially through the medium of television, their 'private' lives in the home and the family.

Another tendency which has been taking place in parallel with this is increasing state and institutional control over people through various forms of bureaucracy. On the one hand, the state has become increasingly interventionary to create the conditions for the smooth operation of the multinational corporations, in terms of

currency controls, control of inflation, constraints on wages and on the capacity of trade unions to take industrial action, and so forth. On the other hand, the reverse side of the benefits which people have gained from the welfare state is a sharp increase in the extent to which individual members of 'the public' are subjected to bureaucratic scrutiny.

Can you find examples of the expansion of the commodity? Look out particularly for cases where the language of commodities is extended to other domains (e.g. 'that's a great idea, but can you sell ideas like that to people? will they buy it, no matter how you package it?').

Analysis of society and analysis of discourse

I shall now suggest in broad terms some relationships of determination which might usefully be explored between these characteristics of modern capitalist society and characteristics of orders of discourse. In what follows, I have modern Britain particularly in mind.

I stressed the importance of ideology in the way in which various social institutions contribute to sustaining the position of the dominant class. Modern society is characterized by rather a high degree of integration of social institutions into the business of maintaining class domination. Correspondingly, one might expect a high degree of ideological integration between institutional orders of discourse within the societal order of discourse. And I think one finds this. There are for instance certain key discourse types which embody ideologies which legitimize, more or less directly, existing societal relations, and which are so salient in modern society that they have 'colonized' many institutional orders of discourse. They include advertising discourse, and the discourses of interviewing and counselling/therapy. Advertising, for instance, firmly embeds the mass of the population within the capitalist commodity system by assigning them the legitimate and even desirable role of 'consumers'.

I also suggested above a special relationship between ideology and the exercise of power by consent as opposed to coercion. I think that in modern society, social control is increasingly practised, where this is feasible, through consent. This is often a matter of integrating people into apparatuses of control which they come to feel themselves to be a part of (e.g. as consumers or as owners of

shares in the 'share-owning democracy'). Since discourse is the favoured vehicle of ideology, and therefore of control by consent, it may be that we should expect a quantitative change in the role of discourse in achieving social control. For instance, the constant doses of 'news' which most people receive each day are a significant factor in social control, and they account for a not insignificant proportion of a person's average daily involvement in discourse. But the increasing reliance on control through consent is also perhaps at the root of another, qualitative feature of contemporary discourse: the tendency of the discourse of social control towards simulated egalitarianism, and the removal of surface markers of authority and power. One finds this in orders of discourse as varied as advertising, education, and government bureaucracy. Detailed discussion and examples of the points raised in this section can be found in Chapter 8.

DIALECTIC OF STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES

The relationship between discourse and social structures is not the one-way relationship which I have suggested so far. As well as being determined by social structures, discourse has effects upon social structures and contributes to the achievement of social continuity or social change. It is because the relationship between discourse and social structures is dialectical in this way that discourse assumes such importance in terms of power relationships and power struggle: control over orders of discourse by institutional and societal power-holders is one factor in the maintenance of their power.

Let us begin from a more general consideration of the relationship of social practice and reality. Social practice does not merely 'reflect' a reality which is independent of it; social practice is in an active relationship to reality, and it changes reality. The world that human beings live in is massively a humanly created world, a world created in the course of social practice. This applies not only to the social world but also to what we normally call the 'natural world', for the essence of human labour is that it creates the means of life for people by transforming the natural world. As far as the social world is concerned, social structures not only determine social practice, they are also a product of social practice. And more

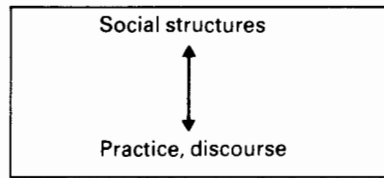


Fig. 2.3 Social structures and social practice

particularly, social structures not only determine discourse, they are also a product of discourse. This is represented in Fig. 2.3.

Example: Subject positions in schools

Let us make this claim more concrete by referring to an example of the social structure of a social institution: the school. The school has a social order and an order of discourse which involve a distinctive structuring of its 'social space' into a set of situations where discourse occurs (class, assembly, playtime, staff meeting, etc.), a set of recognized 'social roles' in which people participate in discourse (headteacher, teacher, pupil, prefect, etc.), and a set of approved purposes for discourse – learning and teaching, examining, maintaining social control, as well as a set of discourse types. Focusing upon 'social roles' or what I shall prefer to call *subject positions* (a term I shall explain shortly), there is a sense in which we can say that the teacher and the pupil *are what they do*. The discourse types of the classroom set up subject positions for teachers and pupils, and it is only by 'occupying' these positions that one becomes a teacher or a pupil. Occupying a subject position is essentially a matter of doing (or not doing) certain things, in line with the discursive rights and obligations of teachers and pupils – what each is allowed and required to say, and not allowed or required to say, within that particular discourse type. So this is a case where social structure, in the particular form of discourse conventions, determines discourse. But it is also the case that in occupying particular subject positions, teachers and pupils *reproduce* them; it is only through being occupied that these positions continue to be a part of social structure. So discourse in turn determines and reproduces social structure.

The 'subject'

However, what I have just described is a closed circle: discourse types determine discourse practice, which reproduces discourse types. The concept of reproduction is more complex and more socially interesting and significant than that. To see why, let us look at my choice of the term *subject (position)* instead of 'social role'. *Subject* has yet another of those 'felicitous ambiguities' we have already met with in *practice* and *discourse*, though of rather a different order. In one sense of *subject*, one is referring to someone who is under the jurisdiction of a political authority, and hence passive and shaped: but the *subject* of a sentence, for instance, is usually the active one, the 'doer', the one causally implicated in action.

Social subjects are constrained to operate within the subject positions set up in discourse types, as I have indicated, and are in that sense passive; but it is only through being so constrained that they are made able to act as social agents. As I said earlier, being constrained is a precondition for being enabled. Social agents are active and *creative*. Recall my insistence that discourse (and practice generally) *draws upon* discourse types rather than mechanically implementing them, and the suggestion there that discourses typically draw upon a combination of types. Discourse types are a resource for subjects, but the activity of combining them in ways that meet the ever-changing demands and contradictions of real social situations is a creative one. See Chapter 7 for a detailed argument to this effect.

The term *reproduction* requires some comment. Whenever people produce or interpret discourse, they necessarily draw upon orders of discourse and other aspects of social structure, internalized in their MR, in order to do so. Through being drawn upon, these structures are constantly being created anew in discourse and practice generally. Discourse, and practice in general, in this sense are both the products of structures and the producers of structures. It is this process of being produced anew (re-produced) through being drawn upon that I refer to as reproduction. But structures may be produced anew with virtually no change, or (through the creative combinations referred to above) they may be produced anew in modified forms. Reproduction may be basically conservative, sustaining continuity, or basically transformatory, effecting changes.

The relations of power which obtain between social forces, and the way in which these relations develop in the course of social struggle, are a key determinant of the conservative or transformative nature of reproduction in discourse. Thus I have been suggesting that orders of discourse embody ideological assumptions, and these sustain and legitimize existing relations of power. If there is a shift in power relations through social struggle, one can expect transformation of orders of discourse. Conversely, if power relations remain relatively stable, this may give a conservative quality to reproduction. However, this is not necessarily the case, for even if power relations remain relatively stable, they need to renew themselves in a constantly changing world, and transformations of orders of discourse may thus be necessary even for a dominant social grouping to keep its position.

Look for examples of the creative combination of discourse types. Advertising is a good source, in that many different types are exploited as vehicles for selling things.

Reproducing class: hidden agendas

But what about the case of more abstract and diffuse aspects of social structures, such as the relationship between social classes in a society? Class relations also determine discourse (and social practice generally) on the one hand, but are reproduced in discourse on the other. But class relations and positions are not directly expressed and reproduced in most practice. The connection between class relations and discourses is a mediated one, mediated precisely by the various discourse types of the social institutions in a society. In terms of reproduction, we can say that, for example, the teacher–pupil relations, and the teacher and pupil positions, embedded in educational discourse types are directly reproduced in educational discourse, while the same discourse indirectly reproduces class relations. The general point is that education, along with all the other social institutions, has as its ‘hidden agenda’ the reproduction of class relations and other higher-level social structures, in addition to its overt educational agenda.

Because they are indirect and ‘hidden’, neither the social determination of the discourse types of the various institutions (and thereby of discourse) by more abstract levels of social structure, nor their effect on these levels of social structure, are apparent to subjects in the normal course of events. In the words of Pierre

Bourdieu, ‘it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know’. This *opacity* of discourse (and practice in general) indicates why it is of so much more social importance than it may on the face of it seem to be: because in discourse people can be legitimizing (or delegitimizing) particular power relations without being conscious of doing so. It also indicates both the basis for critical analysis in the nature of discourse and practice – there are things that people are doing that they are unaware of – and the potential social impact of critical analysis as a means of raising people’s self-consciousness.

A word on the police interview extract in the light of these themes. Being a police officer or being a police witness is a matter of occupying the subject positions set up in discourses such as the discourse of (information-gathering in) interviews which is drawn upon in the extract. And it is only in so far as people do routinely occupy these positions that the conventional personae of police officer and witness are reproduced as a part of the social structure of policing as an institution. But mundane and conventional practice such as we have in the extract also indirectly contributes to the reproduction of the unequal social relations of our society, through naturalizing hierarchy, the routine insensitive manipulation of people in the interests of bureaucratic goals of efficiency, and the image of the police as helpers and protectors of us all (rather than an arm of the state apparatus). People who take part in such interviews, including police officers, are unlikely to be generally conscious of these reproductive effects.

Think about a social institution you operate within yourself in the light of what I have said in this section. What are the major *subject positions* occupied by people in discourse? Focus on one such subject position – maybe one you commonly occupy yourself: what is it that you are obliged or allowed to do or not do in discourse that distinguishes the subject position? And, finally, think about how the practice of this institution might be reproducing higher-level social structures such as class relations as part of a ‘hidden agenda’.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have suggested that CLS ought to conceptualize language as a form of social practice, what I have called *discourse*; and that correspondingly it ought to stress both the determination

of discourse by social structures, and the effects of discourse upon society through its reproduction of social structures. Both the determination of discourse and its effects involve not just elements in the social situations of discourse, but orders of discourse which are the discursual aspects of social orders at the societal and social institutional levels. People are not generally aware of determinations and effects at these levels, and CLS is therefore a matter of helping people to become conscious of opaque causes and consequences of their own discourse.

This chapter has laid foundations which will be built upon in subsequent chapters. A consequence of seeing discourse as just a particular form of social practice is perhaps that language research ought to be more closely in tune with the rhythms of social research than it has tended to be. In Chapters 7 and 8 I explore linguistic dimensions of social changes with a view to determining what part discourse has in the inception, development and consolidation of social change. But more immediately, I need to put more flesh upon the relationship between discourse, power and ideology which, I have suggested, is at the centre of the social practice of discourse. This is my objective in Chapters 3 and 4, which focus respectively on power and on ideology in their relationships to discourse.

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