"TENSED" AND "BUMPERED" IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: THE CASE FOR THE INTEGRATION OF CRITICAL LINGUISTICS INTO LANGUAGE PROGRAMMES.

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The title of this paper has its origins in observations made by a black, first year, woman student which have become a touchstone in my thinking about critical linguistics and its role in language programmes. She had enrolled for a first year, credit-bearing course which is available to second language speakers on the Pietermaritzburg campus and as their first assignment, one group of students was asked to investigate any aspect of the university environment they chose. They decided to interview Deans of Faculties or other senior members of the administration about the university's admission policy, most especially as it pertained to black students. The purpose of this activity was to develop the linguistic and personal confidence and competence of these new students by creating what Bryce-Heath and Branscombe have termed "crises in communication" (1985: 31) -- contexts in which they were involved in relatively high risk situations, which would challenge them to use all the linguistic, sociolinguistic and strategic resources [1] at their disposal. It was also hoped they would experience, as interviewers, even in this rather unusual context, a position where they were potentially in control of some of the encounter.

High risk communicative tasks however, can have counter-productive and demoralising effects, and adequate initial preparation was an essential part of the process. Students worked in groups of two or three and spent considerable time carefully defining their purpose, making the necessary appointments (itself a completely new experience), learning about appropriate formats for later written and oral presentation and role playing potentially difficult situations. They discussed various interviewing strategies and attempted to anticipate potential obstacles to what, in any event, was an undeniably daunting task. Once the interviews had been completed, they were required to present their findings individually as formal written discourse and then to pool information by reporting back orally to the rest of the class.

The final section of the written report consisted of a personal evaluation of and response to the interviewing experience. The student mentioned above had this to say:

> What I learnt from the interview was that things didn't occur as I expected them. I was so tensed since it was the first time that I had to interview a white man. What I discovered was that he appeared to be a kind somebody. While I was fighting with my monitor[2]trying to construct sentences for introducing ourselves, the man asked if we would like to have a cup of coffee. I was surprised by the question to the extent that I hardly trusted my ears that he really meant it. I responded with yes but still felt hesitation so I said no. He himself provided me with coffee. Still asking myself why he was lowering himself like that, the man bumpered us with answers of the unasked questions. He talked a non-stop speech of about one and a half hours. By the time he stopped, he expected questions from us. I was amazed and it was difficult to know which questions were answered and which were not...Being bewildered, I asked fumbling questions just to console myself that I can ask a question. Still the man responded to them nicely.

> To me the interview was absolutely wonderful. It changed my conclusions about the whites whom I regard as superior. I was brought to the conclusion that some are just like myself, willing to help and to socialize.

This response highlights several intermeshing, at times conflictual facets of the complex social and educational context which contribute to the total experience of the university environment and which need to be accounted for in the development of South African language curricula. As a young black women, this student had to manage and to some extent overcome a wide range of her life experiences which interacted to constitute her "tensed" and "bewildered" response to the situation. Firstly, the racial divisions and stereotypes which characterise this country are clearly evident. Secondly, and crucially, interacting with the racial dimension, are the traditional and unequal gender relations, which are so stringently defined within many black communities (Ramphele and Boonzaier 1988). The fact that she was both black and female, in addition to being a first year, second language student, positioned her in a specific and complex way and served to make her task all the more taxing.

Her responses themselves give some evidence of this complexity. Most interesting here, are the contradictions that permeate her discourse. Two broad and apparently conflicting strands of the experience clearly emerge. On the one hand, she discovered that, contrary

to her "tensed", socialised fear about interviewing a white male and to other expectations, the "white man...appeared to be a kind somebody" who she was amazed to find "lowering" himself to make coffee for her and who was prepared to respond "nicely" to her "fumbling" questions. Importantly, like her, he was also "willing to help and to socialise" and his friendly, informal manner was certainly an unexpected aspect of the experience which, at this level, was a pleasant realisation for her.

On the other hand, and in sharp contrast to the positive aspects of her experience, are the considerable confusion, the element of mistrust and lack of control of the interview that emerge in her discourse. The fact that "things", as she says, "did not occur as I had expected them", served to disempower her in this context. If one observes, with Shipman, that

> "interviews not only depend on the quality of the questions asked, but on the awareness of, and control over, the interaction involved (1973: 84), or accepts Cannell and Kahn's definition of an interview as "a two person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information" (quoted in Cohen and Manion 1980: 291),

then it is evident that she was not engaged in an interview at all. No amount of forethought and anticipation could have prepared her for being "bumpered ... with the answers to the unasked questions"; and few definitions of an interview as a specific genre would concede that it could consist of "a non-stop speech of about one and a half hours," most particularly before any questions had been asked. At different points during the interview she describes herself as "fighting with her monitor", feeling "bewildered" and, in the end, being able to ask only "fumbling questions" in order to "console" herself that she was capable of asking a question at all.

The positive and pivotal aspects of this encounter appear to be based on an unexpected, courteous and informal welcome from a white male and his making her a cup of coffee. There is no evidence that she had, at any level, control of the situation nor the means, after setting up the meeting, to take even a little of the initiative.

What is of note here are the various ways in which this student was constructed and positioned in the situation - by the Dean, by the institution and, indeed, by herself. The competing interpretations of the encounter (the difference between her construction of meaning and mine) especially in the light of the current discussions around the notion of "otherness" (Ellsworth 1989; Weiler 1991) is also significant. The difference between her subjectivities, as a black, first year, female, second language student and mine as a white, female, feminist, academic are clearly evident and, in any further discussion, the creation of a forum in which these differences could be constructively articulated would be essential. The plurality of meaning needs be incorporated into any discussion of the event. What is crucial is that her feelings and experience should be seriously acknowledged (Ellsworth 1989; Weiler 1991) and not undermined by what may be constructed as the more rational, "experienced" or "academic" perception. Her overriding impression, at this time in her life, is extremely positive. She found that she **could** interact with him and that she could, despite her confusion, ask some of the necessary questions. The fact that, for her, "the interview was absolutely wonderful" and that "it changed [her] conclusions about whites" indicates that she felt that she had experienced important perceptual shifts and these are likely to have increased her confidence in other, later encounters.

The situation described above is a single example of the multifaceted nature of the experiences facing students, particularly black students, coming to the university for the first time. It has been discussed here, not as a reflection of the experiences of all students, nor because it captures the total complexity of this one encounter. It does, however, help to identify several broad contextual considerations especially those pertaining to race and gender. Then, within this broad socio-political context, it also generates some of the key pedagogical questions which currently challenge curriculum developers and language teachers. How, for example, can we facilitate in students a deeper understanding of the power relationships which shape our educational institutions and which would arguably provide access to other ways of understanding the encounter described above? To what extent can or should the teacher encourage students to move beyond acceptance of traditional conventions and the awareness of their social construction to oppositional practice? Should we, as teachers take some responsibility for the oppositional responses which may result from increased understanding? In other words, what are the implications of making the power relationships more transparent for the teacher and the learner? How

do we accommodate in our classrooms competing interpretations of the same situation? How, in practice, in multi-lingual classrooms do we deal with "otherness"? How can we better understand why the same student is passive and silent in some situations and yet confident, verbal and challenging in others?

I am convinced that critical linguistics can provide an analytical framework in which these questions can be usefully addressed. Before turning to specific key features of this approach to language teaching, however, central underlying assumptions about language as discourse, the plurality of meaning and the construction of subjectivity need brief explanation.

The notion of language as discourse is central to post-structuralist thinking. It stands in sharp contrast to the idea that language reflects pre-existing reality and is a system defined relationally in terms of the signs that constitute it. Weedon summarises the position, claiming that within poststructuralism

> language is not transparent as in humanist discourse, it is not expressive and does not label a "real" world. Meanings do not exist prior to their articulation in language, and language is not an abstract system, but is always socially and historically located in discourses. Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power. The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist. (1987: 41)

Discourse in this context, then, is not defined as it is in socio-linguistics as "a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence" (Crystal 1980: 114). Instead, Kress, drawing on Foucault, speaks of discourses and defines them as

> systematically-organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension - what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution... A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. In that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions. (1985: 7)

In these terms, educational discourse, and particularly that of the university, ranges from what is said, allowed to be said, and left unsaid in lecture halls, classrooms, residences and tearooms. It includes what is written in every sphere of academic life, from official university discourse, to admission forms and codes of conduct, to student publications from a wide range of perspectives, to the choice of textbooks and the textbooks themselves, the construction of course curricula and class handouts. Most educational discourse is articulated through speech and writing though Macdonell claims that "whatever signifies or has meaning can be considered part of discourse." (1986: 3-4) She appropriates the work of Foucault who argues that meanings are

> embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms. (Quoted in Macdonell 1986: 4)

If this is accepted, then a range of other practices contribute towards the meaning of university discourse as "systematically organised set of statements" which could include, for example, the ways in which volumes in the library are classified and displayed, the organisation and running of student residences and the meaning of student protest marches in particular contexts.

It is crucial to note that discourse is not randomly constituted. In the university context underlying social conventions, guide, for example, the formulation of academic arguments, the construction of teachers' directions and students' responses. It is often invisible rules which help to shape the discursive practice which produces a specific discourse. Again, Foucault's insights are illuminating. He views discursive practice as

> a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function. (Cherryholmes, 3, quoting Foucault 1972 :117)

Post-structuralist claims pertaining to the plurality of meaning should be assessed within the context of language as discourse. Weedon points out that the poststructuralist approach to the plurality of meaning and change is to

question the location of meaning in fixed signs. It speaks instead of signifiers in which the signified is never fixed once and for all, but is constantly *deferred.* (1987: 25)

The term deferral or differánce is one used by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who objected to Saussurean logocentricism and has provided the most sustained and complex critique of the unified linguistic sign. *Differánce* foregrounds the importance of the signifier and fundamentally undermines the idea of pre-existing, fixed and transcendental signifieds. Its sense is located somewhere between the French verbs "to differ" and "to defer." Derrida explains further that *differánce*

> is a structure and a movement no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Differánce* is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive... production of the intervals without which the "full" terms would not signify, would not function...Differences are the effects of transformations, and from this vantage the theme of differánce is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of structure. (1972: 388)

The crucial implication of this is that there can never be any fixed relationship between signified and signifier, that there is a continual disjunction, breaking apart and reconstellating in new combinations of the two and that there is no possibility of a final signified which is not in itself a signifier. As Burbules and Rice point out

> any particular formalisation is for Derrida nothing more than the momentary crystallization and institutionalisation of one particular set of rules and norms - others are always possible. (1991: 400)

Meaning then, is endlessly postponed or deferred, with every articulation of a signifier carrying with it what Derrida terms a "trace" of all previous articulations and impacting on future ones. The sign must be studied as constantly "under erasure," always in some sense inhabited by another sign or signs which in fact are never fully evident. Sarup summarises the position thus:

> One signifier relays me to another; earlier meanings are modified by later ones. In each sign there are traces of other words which that sign has excluded in order to be itself. And words contain the trace of the ones that

have gone before. Each sign in the chain of meaning is somehow scored over or traced through with all the others, to form a complex tissue which is never exhaustible. (1992: 36)

Meaning, therefore, is always dispersed throughout a whole chain of signifiers: it is never fully present in a single sign and can therefore be seen as "a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together" (Sarup 1992: 36).

In poststructuralist thinking the notion of subjectivity is central. It is defined by Weedon as a term used to

refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world.
(1987: 32)

As opposed to the humanist view of a transcendental, unified and fixed subject which awaits articulation and expression, poststructuralism posits a fragmented, decentered subjectivity "which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak." (Weedon 1987: 33) The significance of the decentering of the subject is that it allows for possibilities of change: it acknowledges that subjectivity is historically produced rather than pre-existing and essential and that its forms change in shifting discursive contexts. It is therefore also possible that an individual can be the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity. As Belsey explains

the subject is...the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation.

The implications of these claims are significant in the context of this paper. A black, first year female student, for example, may be a submissive daughter in the context of a rural black family and a student activist in the university context. A white male student may be dominant in the context of his family and his personal relationships, yet submissive and disempowered in the context of a university residence. In the construction of student behaviour or responses within university discourses, these are crucial considerations.

Student silence, for example, could well be the result of a choice not to speak to particular lecturers rather than the outcome of authoritarian educational structures which have "silenced" the students. It also impacts on the way in which oppression is constructed because it is possible for one individual to be oppressed in some contexts but not in all. A black, first year women student may be disempowered in most situations, in relation to her father, lover and the church, for example, as well as in the society at large. She may, however, be the acknowledged leader in a specific university society or club or adopt a central and shaping role in her rural home where male members are absent and women take up powerful domestic and social positions. She is constituted and constitutes herself in different ways depending on her particular discursive conditions. And crucially, her subjectivities are constituted in language. Belsey, drawing on the work of Emile Benveniste argues that

> it is language which provides the possibility of subjectivity because it is language which enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as "I", as the subject of a sentence. It is through language that people constitute themselves as subjects.

Benveniste develops the argument further, returning to Saussure's definition of language as a system of differences with no positive terms and contending that, if this is the case, then it follows that the "I" can refer only to the subject of each separate utterance. This implies that subjectivity is constituted in discourse every time an individual speaks. Derrida too, recognises the implications of Saussure's claim arguing that

> the subject...is inscribed in language...he is a function of the language. He becomes a *speaking* subject only by conforming his speech...to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences...(1973: 145 - 146)

It is important to note that while subjectivity is constituted in language and can only have meaning in specific, historical discourses, language itself is dependent for its effects on the actions of individuals who take up particular subject positions and act on them. It is important to acknowledge with Weedon that

> the individual is both the site for a range of possible forms of subjectivity and, at any particular moment of thought or speech, a subject, subjected to the regime of meaning of a particular discourse and enabled to act

accordingly. The position of subject from which language is articulated [and appears] to originate, is integral to the structure of language and, by extension, to the structure of conscious subjectivity which it constitutes.

Critical linguistics is an approach to the learning and teaching of language compatible with the theoretical concepts outlined above and should be understood and evaluated within these terms of reference.

The term "critical linguistics" was used for the first time by Fowler *et al* (1979) and by Kress and Hodge (1979). The approach has added an important new dimension to language teaching and has been substantially developed in recent years. (Kress 1985; Chilton 1985; Steiner 1985; Fowler 1985; 1991; Janks 1987; 1989; 1990; Ivanic 1989; Fairclough 1989; Wodak 1989; Menz 1989). It is primarily engaged in the formulation of a principled account of the relationship between language, power and ideology and with the way in which texts, through the selection of specific linguistic structures and lexical items, encode these relationships and reflect the interests of particular groups of people, most especially the dominant and powerful. For Fowler

> Critical Linguistics seeks, by studying the minute details of linguistic structure in the light of the social and historical situation of the text, to display to consciousness the patterns of belief and value which are encoded in the language - and which are below the threshold of notice for anyone who accepts the discourse as "natural". (1991: 67)

It is in terms of the hiddenness of and the (often unconscious) attempt to naturalise specific ideological positions that the term "critical" is defined in this context. Fairclough explains that it is used

> ...in the special sense of aiming to show up connections which may be hidden from people - such as the connections between language, power and ideology...(1989: 5)

And Wodak expands this notion when she describes the critical linguist as attempting to

> ... uncover and de-mystify certain social processes in this and other societies, to make mechanisms of manipulation, discrimination, demagogy, and propaganda explicit and transparent [and] ...to understand how and why reality is structured in a certain way. (1989: xiv)

It would be misguided to claim, however, that the uncovering of hidden ideological assumptions underlying a given text, is in itself sufficient to counteract the subtle and manipulative influence of a particular ideological position. In this regard, Menz provides cautionary comment:

> The exposure of ideological linguistic use does not automatically eliminate the effect of ideologies and myths, but in making them explicit it is possible to make them visible to everybody and thus encourage a conscious, i.e. critical, debate about them. (1989: 233)

It is precisely in making hidden meaning explicit, in showing "how the detailed structure of a language silently and continuously shapes the ideas presented" (Fowler 1991: 231), that critical linguistics can make a significant analytical contribution. The initiation of critical debate implies at least that the "effect of ideologies" is rendered visible and brings with it the possibility, within determining social and historical constraints, of previously unseen options. It implies that if the construction and intention of dominant conventions and practices can be better understood, they can also be critiqued and either accepted or rejected.

Like other critical disciplines, critical linguistics insists that any enquiry is placed within an evolving historical context. It is acknowledged that while language shapes society, it is itself powerfully shaped by socio-historical conditions. In this, it both complements and moves beyond the notion of communicative competence, a concept developed by Hymes against Chomsky's claim that

> Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly....(1965: 3)

Hymes argues that

> We have...to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where in what manner. (in Brumfit and Johnson: 15).

Part of a language teacher's role is certainly to expose students to the appropriate and traditional conventions accepted within various social and educational institutions.

Crucially, however, that role extends also to a critique of those conventions (Norton-Peirce 1989) and, as a result, increased self-reflection and the development of the confidence to make better informed choices about their intentions and value. Critical language study provides linguistic procedures which can assist in this process.

This approach to language, especially in its earlier formulations (Fowler *et al 1979*), has been sharply criticised by Thompson. He argues that

> ...their analyses frequently presuppose a specific account of relations between, for example, different races, classes or sexes; but they provide no systematic discussion of these relations and no sustained justification of this account. Instead they tend to assume that by attending to linguistic processes, one can discern, through the deceptive veil of surface forms, the underlying social reality. (1984: 124)

Work done since the publication of *Language and Control* (1979), however, has taken serious cognisance of this objection. Fairclough (1990), for example, insists that the understanding and analysis of linguistic constructions in a given text must always be understood within the context of broader discursive practice and that it is only one of three components required for critical discourse analysis. The linguistic description of a text must always be undertaken in conjunction with an interpretation of the interaction between the text and the processes of its production and interpretation and an explanation of that interaction and the social context. Fowler himself, having claimed, with Kress, that meanings are carried and expressed in the syntactic forms and processes, and that the analyst can "read off" meaning from the syntax (1979: 197), now argues that it is "a fundamental principle of critical linguistics that there is no invariant relationship between form and meaning" (1991: 99) and that

> The significance of discourse derives only from an interaction between language structure and the context in which it is used: so the discourse analyst must always be prepared to document the circumstances in which communication takes place, and consider their relevance to the structure of the text. (1991: 90)

It is crucially important that the linguistic dimension of critical analysis which has often been neglected should be a component of the analysis of social phenomena. At the same

time, however, linguistic analyses of texts should always be read and interpreted within their broader social and discoursal contexts. It is equally important that language learners of all ages are exposed to the notion of social construction and to how lexical choices and linguistic structures, the use of the passive voice, for example, are implicated in this.

It is necessary now to return to the questions posed earlier And to consider the role that critical linguistics can play in beginning to answer them. I am convinced that it can, at all levels, facilitate in learners a deeper understanding of power relationships which could, in turn, lead to a more critical interpretation of interactions like the one described at the beginning of this paper. Discussion around the process of naming, for example, or the importance of the language or languages spoken by learners can provide useful starting points for discussion of subject positioning or the relative power of different groupings in educational and social contexts. In relation to the implications of making power relations more transparent, there are some who claim that the insights gained are politically dangerous. Even if this claim was found to be justified, however, the positive elements outweigh it. Learners have potentially far more power to control their own lives and to make critical, informed decisions about whether or not to contest conventional practice and what the consequences of this might be.

The question of how precisely to deal with competing interpretations of the same situation and the notion of otherness is complex and far from clear and I make no claims here to any conclusive answers. It is certainly not enough to uncritically celebrate plurality and difference. At the same time, it is crucial that we really make possible the emergence of multiple meanings in our classrooms and that we acknowledge differences openly without running for the cover of a consensus view which inevitably favours the dominant group. Certainly, a critical awareness of how language constructs and positions subjects can provide us with one means of understanding these realities more fully.

Critical linguistics is about power and it is about the possibility of change. Within the South African context these issues could not be more relevant or topical. Our language classrooms need to take very serious cognisance of this. We need to uncover and acknowledge the power relationships which have all too often been glossed in the interests of skills-based

learning and we need to do this in the interests of all our learners findings new ways of integrating themselves critically and effectively in to every facet of their lives.

FOOTNOTES

1.   Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) argue that communicative competence includes four broad areas of knowledge - grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic. Grammatical competence refers to familiarity with the formal rules of the language which includes vocabulary, word formation and syntactic structure. Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts while discourse competence is the capacity to combine sentences to form coherent and cohesive spoken or written text. Strategic competence (for example, the use of gesture or of the first language) are the measures adopted by learners either to improve communication or to compensate for its failure. It should be acknowledged that Canale and Swain do not make claims about **how** these components interact but simply identify **what** they consider to be the minimum requirements for communicative competence. It should also be noted that they adopt an uncritical view of the notion of appropriacy. (cf Fairclough 1992).

2.   Krashen (1982), unlike many other theorists (for example, Ellis 1985; 1990) distinguishes between language acquisition and language learning. *Acquisition*, he argues, is a subconscious process similar to the development of competence in the first language. *Learning*, on the other hand, refers to the conscious knowledge of a second language when the learner is aware of some of the formal grammatical rules and is able to recall and   discuss them. Conscious reference to the rules of a language is the basis of his Monitor Hypothesis in which he claims that acquisition and learning processes are used in quite distinct ways and the only function of learning is as monitor or editor. For Krashen

> learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our
> utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system. This
> can happen before we speak or write, or after (self-correction).

This student had been involved in tutorial discussions about this claim, hence her reference to "fighting with my monitor".

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