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DISCOURSE IN LATE MODERNITY: RETHINKING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

By Lilie Chouliaraki & Norman Fairclough. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999; pp. 224.

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Critical Discourse Analysis

I first became aware of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or Critical Linguistics as a student of linguistics in the early 1990s. I found myself attracted to the political claims of critical linguists about the relationship between language and the social practices of society. The critical linguists whose work I read at the time (Fairclough, 1989; 1992; Kress, 1993; Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew, 1979; van Dijk, 1985; 1993; Wodak, 1989) presented a view of language as encoding ideological perspectives which conferred legitimacy on the social inequalities and differential power relations of society. It seemed to me then, and this remains true now, that this was not just a useful intervention in linguistics, but an exciting one too. CDA, Critical Linguistics and Critical Language Awareness suggested an approach to language study which was not only multidisciplinary, combining linguistic analysis with sociological analysis for example, but also held out the prospect of making a 'critical' contribution to social change and enhanced human understanding. The parallels with the objectives of much intercultural communication teaching and research are obvious and explains why *Discourse in Late*

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Modernity is a book which may be of interest to teachers and researchers in this area. Another reason for considering this book is the involvement of Norman Fairclough, who over the past 10 years has developed a considerable reputation as a leading authority on CDA. This added to the fact that the book is presented as a rethinking of critical discourse analysis, makes it essential reading for anyone interested in critical approaches to the study of language.

Theoretical conversations

Discourse in Late Modernity is not a book about any one subject. It is not a book of language analysis, it is not a book about culture either, nor is it strictly a book about linguistics or even discourse analysis. It is all of these things and much more. For anyone familiar with Fairclough's previous work on CDA, the book does come as something of a surprise. It is a very different book to for example *Language and Power* (1989) or *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), with a greatly expanded theoretical base. The principal thematic in these earlier works is Marxism complemented by an adapted Foucaultian understanding of the operation of power and discourse in society. On the side of linguistics and discourse analysis, these works are oriented in large part to the critical as well as practical analysis of (mainly written) texts.¹ Discourse in Late Modernity differs from these earlier works in the principal respect that it is almost entirely theoretical. The book is best characterised as a series of theoretical 'conversations' or 'dialogues'. These 'conversations' (the authors use the term themselves) take in Marxism (Gramsci, 1971; 1988; Althusser, 1971; Poulantzas, 1978), Critical Theory (Habermas, 1987; 1989), contemporary sociology (Bhaskar, 1986; Bourdieu, 1991; Bernstein, 1996), theories of

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late modernity (Harvey, 1989; Giddens, 1990; 1991), poststructuralism and postmodernism (Foucault, 1972a; 1972b; Lyotard, 1979; Baudrillard, 1993; Derrida, 1976; Jameson, 1998; Rorty, 1989; amongst others) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Hasan, 1989). The range of theoretical references and associated theoretical terms can be rather overwhelming. This makes the text rather hard going and Chouliaraki and Fairclough are aware of this, but justify this in the following terms. They declare that “this is a theoretical book directed at an academic readership” and that “theoretical practice has its own logic and its own preoccupations, and needs its own literature” (p. 17). While it is possible to respect the fact that this is not intended to be an introductory work, the level of abstraction is nevertheless a drawback to a full appreciation of the book, because in one important respect it *is* introductory: as a transdisciplinary ‘exotopia’ or dialogue. This is likely to be new to some readers and it is also one of the principal themes of the book.

Transdisciplinarity depends on theories being ‘exotropic’, i.e., being open to dialogue with other theories. This depends on how a theory defines its ‘problematic’ (Hasan) and, within it, its ‘object of research’ (Bourdieu). For instance, CDA is exotropic in that it defines its object of research (discursive aspects of contemporary social change) within a problematic shared with other theories (p. 113).

The other drawback with the book’s theoretical abstraction is that some readers in disciplines unfamiliar with CDA, may become frustrated with ‘the dialogue’ the authors are trying to establish and lose interest. My main purpose in this review will be to summarise what I see as the major themes of the book in order to orient readers to the principal arguments they will find there as well as to the chapters where these are discussed.

¹ Language and Power more so than Discourse and Social Change.

Late modernity and the theorisation of CDA

The authors begin by sketching in the preface an outline of their view of the contemporary condition of the present era, which after the sociologist Anthony Giddens they term late modernity.² They note a move to knowledge based economies in which the goods that are produced have an increasingly linguistic character (p. vii), that language has become part of 'the service' in service economies, and that this is marked by an aestheticisation of language to make language more 'attractive' and marketable. The interests which are served in this process are economic, organisational and political, the principal objectives being increased profit and improved performance. This establishes a justification and need in their opinion for a critical perspective on discourse and also sets the political tone of the rest of the book, that theirs is a 'committed' discourse analysis which has a social agenda.

This is to some extent the secondary motivation of the book however. The primary motivation is that in its development CDA has been undertheorised, most crucially, according to the authors, with regard to its relationship to critical and post-structuralist social theory. They observe that "the theories it (CDA) rests upon and the methods it uses have not been explicitly and systematically spelt out as they might have been" (p. 1). This is a moot point. A theorisation of this relationship is indeed overdue.

Critical social research and dialoguing across difference

Chapter 1 represents 'in miniature' a summary of the main arguments of the book. For this reason I propose to use this chapter as a guide to the remaining chapters. This chapter is

² Although they do have problems keeping to the term. Variations include modernity (23) and (late) modern society (sic, 37)

principally concerned with demonstrating how CDA can contribute to critical social research. A key issue for the authors is the desirability of not tying CDA down to any one theory in particular but allowing it to range across “a field of critical research” (p. 3). This is important because, as becomes clear in chapters 4 and 5, the authors wish to promote the view that CDA can be used to fill the methodological and epistemological gaps which they believe exist in many of the theories and ‘narratives’ they discuss. In this way according to the authors the analytical capacities of the different theories may be extended and enriched.

The authors characterise late modernity as post-Fordist and based on flexible accumulation and transnationalisation, in contrast to the mass consumption and ‘mono-nationalist’ orientation of industrial economies in the immediate post-war era. They argue that under these conditions meaning has become unhinged and less fixed (cf. Baudrillard, 1993) and that democratic political action in this context requires a respect for difference as a counterpoise to late modern processes of transnationalisation and globalisation. In their words, today increasingly “effective political intervention by citizens depends upon dialogue across difference at local, national and international (global) levels” (p. 6). The expression ‘dialogue across difference’ is repeated on many occasions in the book and is central to the perspective the authors are arguing for. In this perspective dialogue has a dual meaning. On the one hand it refers to the Habermasian view of the public sphere as a necessary focus for democratic discussion and debate (chapter 5), although Chouliaraki and Fairclough conceptualise this as multiple public spheres in contrast to Habermas’s unitary one. On the other, this refers to the transdisciplinary dialogue noted earlier

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in which the authors 'dialogue' across different disciplines and fields of research with the aim of creating new theoretical synergies and alliances.

The key debate here is realism versus relativism. We argue ... that although epistemic relativism must be accepted – that all discourses are socially constructed relative to the social positions people are in – this does not entail accepting judgemental relativism – that all discourses are equally good. (p. 8)

This view is developed in chapter 7, not chapter 6 as is stated in the book.³ This is a defining moment because this statement determines the dialogic character of the discussion in the remaining chapters. An important question is whether this is a sustainable theoretical position. The problem which immediately presents itself is whether it is possible to do modernism from a postmodernist position, because this is what this appears to amount to. Is there any point at which a commitment to social transformation is compatible with a commitment to the differentiation of the postmodern? The answer to this question, at least in the authors' terms, would seem to be yes. And support may be found for this view. In accepting epistemic relativism and rejecting judgemental relativism Chouliaraki and Fairclough appear to align themselves with what has been called 'reconstructive' postmodernism (Best and Kellner, 1997), in which "substantive criteria are employed to judge the adequacy of scientific knowledge, while truth and objectivity remain guiding norms" (Best and Kellner, 1997, p. 241). The difference with Chouliaraki and Fairclough is that it is social scientific knowledge which is under scrutiny.⁴

³ This is not the only numbering error. The reference at the start of chapter 6 to moving from chapter 4 to chapter 5 is an error. It should read 5 to 6.

⁴ Best and Kellner identify Bohm, Griffin, Haraway, Harding and Prigogine as postmodern reconstructivists of this kind. Reconstructivism may be contrasted with the 'deconstructionism' or radical postmodernism of theorists like Feyerabend, Derrida, Baudrillard and Lyotard, who emphasise contingency, indeterminacy, incompleteness, ambiguity and chaos (Best and Kellner, 1997).

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In rejecting extreme relativist positions, Chouliaraki and Fairclough not surprisingly take with issue other postmodern interests like Heideggerian gaming (chapters 1 and 7), the Lyotardian notion of the metanarrative (chapters 1 and 7), Rorty's 'playful redescriptions' (chapters 1 and 2) and the Derridan emphasis on the contingency of social structures and practices (chapters 2 and 7). The counter-arguments are well known and tend to centre on the performative fallacy at the centre of much postmodernist literature: using critique to denounce critique, adopting metanarration to denounce the metanarrative, the presentation of contingency as totality ('totalising contingency'). The supposed absolute contingency of the social is rejected in favour of a view of social structures and practices as 'relative permanencies' (chapter 2). In the authors' view social structures and practices are subject to change, and this is possible because critical social science maintains a weak boundary between its theoretical practice and the analysis of social practices. In other words it has an investment in the complexion of the social, which it seeks to influence through its theoretical practice. It is thus committed to 'critical' as opposed to strictly 'objectivist' social research, in which description is paramount. Unlike critical social research, objectivist social research maintains a strong boundary between its theoretical practice and the social practices it studies. This may seem contradictory in terms of the value placed on objectivity in postmodern reconstructionism. I believe that the latter is principally an objectivism in the service of equal access to debate and not an objectivism in the service of positivism.

Combining theoretical insights from Harvey (1989), Foucault (1991), Gramsci (1998), Volosinov (1973), Bakhtin (1968), Bourdieu (1991) and Bernstein (1996), among others, the

authors present a view of the social as dominated by social relations of power in which there are possibilities of dearticulation and rearticulation of structures and practices in the interests of social change. They reject both structuralism and rationalism in favour of a 'constructivist structuralism' (chapters 1, 3 and 8), a term which they attribute to Bourdieu. This binary construct combines the relative permanency of social structures and practices with the possibility to change them.

Political motivations

The authors derive their motivations from a disillusionment with globalisation and globalisation practices (chapter 2), and also from what they see as the decline of the university as a public sphere (chapter 1).⁵ Chouliaraki and Fairclough view universities as increasingly tied to the interests of the economy and reduced to the role of economic 'service providers'. They identify a pervasive economic and political philistinism amongst those in positions of power in government (and by association in universities) and see this as being at the heart of the problem. What is needed they argue is "a dialogue oriented to building an alliance for change" (p. 9). These observations on the state of higher education are pointed and are likely to strike a cord with anyone who has worked in the British system over the past 20 years or so.

They envisage CDA as having a crucial role to play in creating this dialogue, in opening up channels between the public sphere of the university and other public spheres in the Habermasian 'lifeworld' (the world of everyday life).

⁵ Also see chapter 5 for the discussion on Habermas.

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This involves recognising that critique (including critique of language) is not just academic, but a part of social life and social struggles, that critical social science is informed by and indebted to social movements and struggles, and that it can in turn contribute to them providing there is a real dialogue across the public spheres (p. 9).

For Chouliaraki and Fairclough democracy itself is at stake in this struggle.

CDA is a matter of democracy in the sense that its aim is to bring into democratic control aspects of the contemporary social use of language which are currently outside democratic control, to thematise language not only in the public space of the universities, but also within the dialogue across public spaces (p. 9).

They argue that critical language awareness is a central component of this project because it is not possible to reach an understanding of and hence control over your social circumstances without this awareness. It's worth adding that this would also seem to entail having the right to make a judgement as to your relationship to dominant modes of social practice (in the economy, in the workplace, and in society at large) and whether you wish to conform to them or not.

Commodification and instrumental rationality

Chouliaraki and Fairclough illustrate their view of the aestheticisation of language practices via the discussion of an advertisement about homelessness (chapter 1). They note that the design of language is increasingly important in late modernity and that this design principle has transferred itself to the social and political texts of society, the advertisement being one example, in order to make them more appealing. They adopt a Habermasian theoretical framework in identifying the commodification of language as a primary instance of instrumental rationality in late modernity. Instrumental rationality refers to the systems and systematising tendencies of the

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state, the institutions of the state and of commercial capitalist organisations and businesses in the economy. It is a technocratic and mechanistic consciousness which delineates and determines the conventions by which work is done in society and in so doing stifles any reflective approach to the activities of individuals or to the problems of society, preferring instead to approach these as technical issues with (predictable) technical explanations and/or solutions (Held, 1997).

Following Habermas, the authors view the lifeworld and the discourses of the lifeworld as increasingly colonised by the instrumental rationality of the bureaucratising systems world. Central to this view is the belief that the spread of instrumental rationality represents a form of domination, and if people are to be freed from domination, it is necessary to struggle against this tendency and to preserve and maintain discursive spaces (public spheres) within the lifeworld where reflection, debate and knowledge acquisition for democratic understanding may be freely pursued. In universities for example.

Hybridity

Chouliaraki and Fairclough define instrumental rationality as,

making everything subservient to maximising the effectivity of institutional systems, whether it is a matter of maximally effective ways of producing or selling commodities, or maximally effective ways of organising or educating people (p. 12).

In opposition to this tendency, they advocate and observe counter-commodification strategies in language practices as a means of asserting particularity and individuality, and establishing

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“distinctive identities ... in the face of language practices which are increasingly homogenised and increasingly unavoidable” (p. 13). By homogenised, they seem to mean conventional.

Although the commodification of language is regrettable, the fact that it creates conventionally hybridised discourses and texts, for example in assimilating advertising discourse into political discourse, makes it possible to use hybridity as a weapon against hybridity in its most dominant commodified form. This is because discourses may be rearticulated in creative ways to produce what might be called ‘dissenting hybridities’, although they do not use this term.

The concept of hybridity is an important one for the authors, and is a recurring theme (see chapters 7 and 8 especially). As well as being a characteristic of late modernity, hybridity, difference, eclecticism are of course also characteristics of the postmodern. It is also the central point of contention in their dialogue with systemic functional linguistics (chapter 8).

The authors’ maintain that there are diverse interpretations of texts. They argue that interpretation requires the reader to bring different discourses to the reading of a text. To read is to create a new text, a ‘hybrid’ text, which combines the discourses of the text being read with those brought to the text by the reader (p.14). In their view this, combined with the social fragmentation of late modern society makes it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain “the characteristic earlier modern view that meaning resides in texts ... So the homogenisation of the spread of advertising goes along with the heterogenisation of meaning” (p. 15) but not without limit, endless interpretations are ruled out. The implication that this condones a Derridan infinity of meanings is thus denied.

For Chouliaraki and Fairclough, the spread of instrumental rationality and language commodification within the structures and practices of late modernity does not imply that they view the reification of the social world with the same pessimism as did the Frankfurt school pre-Habermas. They argue that strategic action is possible, that it is possible to take positions and “to use knowledge about social life to transform it” (p. 15). They label this ‘reflexive modernity’ and argue that such reflexivity is a characteristic of the late modern era.

As far as systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is concerned, hybridity is a dimension of the ‘dialectics of the semiotic’ which in the authors’ view SFL has considerable difficulty accommodating (chapter 8). They argue that where SFL has attempted this, it has been largely unsatisfactory. This is because SFL cannot accommodate things that do not fit into the genre being analysed. Chouliaraki and Fairclough use the example of an SFL analysis of a dissertation defence which includes a confrontation about alleged sexual bias in academic life (p. 143). In the SFL analysis this is seen as a separate text running parallel to the discourse of the dissertation defence, whereas the authors see this as an example of hybridity related to the way in which this social practice is structured and organised. The problem according to Chouliaraki and Fairclough is that genre is too narrowly defined in SFL as being a property of the semiotic. It does not recognise as does CDA “the discursive structuring or ordering of social practices”, and which they term the ‘order of discourse’ after Foucault (p. 145).

A genre itself is an articulatory device which controls what goes with what and in what ordering, including what configuration and ordering of discourses ... Genre therefore needs to be understood in a more abstract way than in SFL as the ordering and the regulative facet of discourse, and not simply used for the staged structuring of relatively permanent types of discourse such as the dissertation defence (p. 145).

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In focusing on language, SFL thus neglects the social dimension in 'the dialectics of the semiotic' and is therefore unable to account satisfactorily for instances of hybridity when they arise. Put another way, SFL is too 'one-sided'.

Dialectics and the critical project

In the course of the book Chouliaraki and Fairclough establish a set of binary oppositions, or 'dialectics'. First, at the most general level, there is the dialectic between language and society (the semiotic and the social, text and context) referred to earlier, which is fundamental to both critical discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics. In this dialectic language is viewed as both structured and structuring of social practices. Second, and closely related to the first, there is the dialectic between the structural reification of the lifeworld by instrumental reason and the agency of dissenting hybridities. Third, and also closely related to the other two, there is the dialectic between the homogenisation of discourses and the proliferation of languages (perspectives and interpretations). Fourth, there is the dialectic between critical social science and postmodernism/post-structuralism.

we see ourselves as working within a post-structuralist perspective, but without adopting either post-structuralist reductions of the whole of social life to discourse, or post-structuralist judgemental relativism (p. 32).

It is precisely this which makes difference and dialogue extremely important to their narrative.

This also has the effect of redrafting modernity's emancipatory critical project (Habermas,

1987). There is a tension in the book between the authors evident identification with the critical

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project (via Habermas, Harvey and Gramsci) and the postmodernist rejection of it which their own reconstructivist position via Haraway (1990), Kristeva (1986) and others implies. This fundamental tension is never really resolved (can it ever be?) and explains the importance they place on the dialogue across difference. This has the added consequence of redefining the rationale for doing CDA.

CDA is best seen as one contributory element in research on social practices – in this sense, it should be seen as working in combination with other methods in social scientific research (p. 16).

To me this represents a decisive break with the articulations of CDA offered by critical linguists in the past, Fairclough in particular.

This book is about language and power, or more precisely about connections between language use and unequal relations of power, particularly in modern Britain. I have written it for two main purposes. The first is more theoretical: to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power. The second is more practical: to help to increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation. (Fairclough, 1989, p. 1).

Consciousness or awareness are dialectically related to practice and ... struggle. The point of language education is not awareness for its own sake, but awareness as a necessary accompaniment to the development of the capabilities of children as producers and as interpreters of discourse. I am referring here not just to developing the capabilities of each individual child, but also to developing the *collective* capabilities of children from oppressed social groupings. I would regard this as the primary emancipatory task of language education: critical language awareness is a facilitator for 'emancipatory discourse' ... which challenges, breaks through, and may ultimately transform the dominant orders of discourse, as a part of the struggle of oppressed social groupings against the dominant bloc (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 239-240).

As we have seen, *Discourse and Late Modernity* argues cogently for social change. It is viewed as both desirable and necessary. The difference is that the Marxist discourses of the earlier work are now less apparent. Emancipation, for example, does not seem to have the same resonance it once had. This is not a criticism, but an observation. Its relevance lies in the fact that it marks a major change in perspective on the part of one of CDA's most prominent thinkers.

In place of the Marxian emancipation problematic, Chouliaraki and Fairclough introduce Habermas's concept of the emancipatory knowledge interest, which they see as central to critical social scientific research. The emancipatory knowledge interest is an interest in reason, in a human being's capacity to be self-reflective and self determining (Held, 1997). It is an interest "to free oneself from ideologically frozen relations of dependence which can in principle be transformed" (Habermas, cited in Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 29). The reason there is a weak boundary between theoretical practice and social practice in critical social science is due to the existence of this interest.

It seems to me that there are two ways the emancipatory knowledge interest may be realised. Firstly, it may be realised in a rearticulation of the social structures and practices of the public sphere in which the spread of technocratic consciousness to the lifeworld is weakened; or secondly, it may be realised in a radical rearticulation of structures and practices in which technocratic consciousness is fatally undermined. In the latter instance capitalism would be dissolved and its imprint on society erased. This does not seem to be the theoretical trajectory of *Discourse in Late Modernity*. The authors' interest in dialoguing across difference, the preservation of public spheres and the extension of democratic control over language and social

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practices all suggest the contrary. There is not a Marxian providentialist view, but a postmodern reconstructive one. Social change and transformation, while very necessary and worth fighting for, are gradualised in this perspective. Change is achieved through the development of self-reflective consciousness and the rearticulation of the variety of elements (moments) which constitute structures and practices (chapter 2). In keeping with Habermas, the emancipatory knowledge interest does not have a vanguard (Held, 1997), it is a web of strategic alliances, and the social changes these produce remain interwoven with the transnationalist and globalised market practices of late modernity. In short, the emancipatory knowledge interest is 'within' rather than 'without'.

'Post-Critical' Discourse Analysis

Discourse in Late Modernity is an impressive synthesis of critical social theory with critical discourse analysis. A new kind of CDA, one based on dialogue, is produced in the process. In addition to reinventing CDA, the book provides well-considered rebuttals of many of the more nihilistic postmodernist positions while assimilating much that is insightful and 'reconstructive' about postmodernism and post-structuralism generally. It is because of their post-structuralism and reconstructivism, with its emphasis on dialogue and difference, that I have decided to characterise this approach to CDA as 'Post-Critical'. I would summarise the principal interests of Post-Critical Discourse Analysis as being:

1. a 'reconstructive' postmodernist/post-structuralist dialogue across difference;
2. the furtherance of dialogic democracy via the public spheres of the lifeworld;

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3. the dearticulation and rearticulation of social structures and practices;
4. the articulation of dissenting hybridities as a strategy and focus for counter- hegemonic struggle;
5. the introduction of CDA into competing schools of social scientific research, both as a necessary addition to their theoretical practices and as a mediator between their collective emancipatory knowledge interest and the underdeterminism of radical postmodernism.

Thus, chapter 3 builds on the dialectical linguistic theories of Volosinov and Bakhtin, and the 'intertextuality' of Kristeva; chapter 4 builds on Bhaskar's 'explanatory critique'; and chapter 5 on the 'late modern' social theory of Harvey, Giddens and Habermas, and the 'politicised' postmodernism of Jameson and Haraway. CDA also enriches the sociology of Bourdieu and Bernstein (chapter 6), plugs the gaps in the postmodern 'radical democratic politics' of Laclau and Mouffe (chapter 7), and corrects the dialectical imbalance of systemic functional linguistics towards the semiotic (chapter 8).

If there is a theoretical 'absence' in this book, it is that a gap remains in the theorisation of the relationship between CDA and social theory, specifically at the level of social theories of emancipation and what emancipation in CDA is supposed to mean. Put another way, has the critical project of modernity as it applies to CDA changed to such an extent that radical social transformation is now precluded? If so, Chouliaraki and Fairclough could be more explicit about this because at least some part of the rationale for doing CDA hinges upon this question.⁶ That

⁶ I have written elsewhere about this, specifically in terms of the ways in which emancipation appears to be theorised in CDA. I characterise the different perspectives on emancipation in terms of Hegelian and Marxist paradigms of social change. My paper entitled 'Revolutions in Consciousness: a Study of the Emancipation Problematic in Critical Discourse Analysis' will be included in the forthcoming conference proceedings *Revolutions*

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said, this book is a timely addition to the ongoing theoretical debate about the nature of the social world today and ought to be of considerable interest to teachers and researchers in linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, education and politics, as well as intercultural communication.

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