

BACKGROUND AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: A RESPONSE TO JAN BLOMMAERT

Dariusz Galasiński

1. Introduction

Jan Blommaert (*Pragmatics*, this issue) addresses a number of important and interesting points in his comments on my paper, at the level of both the particular case study and methodology in general. As I understand it, Blommaert's position can be summarised as follows. Discourse analysis, while being critical in the sense of unravelling ideological framings of discourse practices, suffers from taking on board a host of unquestioned and "ideologically neutralised" assumptions related to discourse and discourse practice. Providing the 'background' facts, discourse analysts do not stop to question the perspective of the background they propose, undermining in this way their own analyses. More particularly, in my paper, providing the historical background for the texts I analysed, I drew upon historical interpretations offered by anti-Communists and did not mention those offered by the other side: Soviet and/or Russian historians. Furthermore, argues Blommaert, CDA in general (and my paper in particular) tends to be based upon "linguistically identifiable" data, leaving out wider textual and intertextual, as well as cultural and political contexts of the analysis. Blommaert's solution, following Hymes, is to "redefine the object of inquiry", opting for interdisciplinarity, not at the level of how we analyse, but at the level of *what* we analyse.

I have no clear-cut answers to Blommaert's critique; it seems to me, however, that what he proposes is not unproblematic. Thus, my response will take the form of questions for further discussion rather than proposals for ready-made analytical templates.¹

2. What background?

Blommaert's question of whose background was adopted in my paper can be answered quite simply: my background. I am Polish, I was born and (up to my doctorate) educated in Communist Poland. I remember being taught that the

¹ My discussion of Jan Blommaert's points has been influenced by a debate on an earlier version of his paper during a workshop organised within the International Conference 'Frame and Perspective in Discourse' at the University of Groningen, November 1996. I am also grateful to Carol Marley for discussing the issues raised by the paper with me. Any shortcomings and flaws in my reasoning are, however, my own.

Warsaw Uprising had been a militarily insignificant lunacy of the London government, and on the other hand hearing for example on Radio Free Europe that it had been an all-important attempt to assert Poland's claim for independence. After 1989 I also remember Polish history becoming a little bit more complex and problematic. Moreover, I cannot think of the Warsaw Uprising in the same way I can think for example of the battle of Verdun, or bombings of London in 1940. My thinking of the Yalta deal (I was on its 'receiving end') or the Katyn massacre (where 15,000 Polish officers, including my grandfather, were killed) is also likely to be different from that of my Western European friends or colleagues.

There are two questions I would like to ask with regard to that 'confession'. What, as a discourse analyst, can I do with it? And, secondly, does it all matter?

2.1 *What do I do with my background?*

Setting out to write my paper I faced the problem (how realistic it was is a different matter) of trying to tell my audience what the two speeches I was going to talk about were referring to. As my audience was to be primarily Western, even though highly educated, I assumed minimal or no knowledge of Polish history and/or culture. Could I tell them about all my thinking about the Uprising? Of course not. What I decided therefore was to tell them the 'established facts' and I chose the perspective mainly because I was familiar with it. And contrary to Blommaert's suggestion, I think that the perspective is quite overtly signalled in the introduction (cf. words such as *crush* or *demolish*), and there is hardly anything which would suggest a stance on my part that this was the only "politically correct" account of history. Moreover, the background was the one I could operate within, aiming for an account **coherent** with what comes later in my analyses. A "Zhukov account" coupled with the analysis I present could quite easily be accused of incongruity. Extending the argument, I think it would be at least problematic to offer a background which has no points of contact with those 'established facts' or the collective memory of the event. If neutrality is not a viable option, then perhaps it is coherence that one can only strive for.

The problem was not that of giving a **full** account of what happened, nor was I aiming to give the reader an account of the history of what happened then and there. Just a 'briefing' for my intelligent audience, assuming that they will assume precisely that: I am not writing a historical paper. My discourse-analytical attempt did not include an attempt at history-writing. Should it, though? I shall return to the problem later on.

Now, Blommaert suggests that the Soviet side should also be heard. Why? Because they present a different interpretation of the story. Blommaert proposes that Marshall Zhukov's account makes the event at the very least ambiguous. While I do not want to question the claim that historical accounts show events from a particular perspective, I would still like to think that some accounts are more credible than others, and not only because some of them are published by Western publishers, at least relatively independent of governments. Soviet publishers, indeed Eastern European in general, were closely scrutinised by censorship authorities (cf. Schöpflin 1983). To say something against party policy would have been almost impossible. Moreover, Zhukov's "exclusively military reasons" also seem to be

incredible, given the 20 million Soviets killed, the killers also being NKVD officers shooting soldiers who, for military reasons, wanted to retreat.

Note that I am not saying that some historical accounts are more truthful than others, but that there are some that are more **coherent** with primary sources, witness testimonies etc. After all, a historian claiming that on 1 September 1939 it was Poland that launched an attack on Nazi Germany, rather than the other way around, would not be treated seriously. Similarly, one cannot claim that it was President Reagan who imposed the martial law on the territory of Poland in December 1981. Such 'background facts' would not make sense at least in view of other accounts.²

Still, the primary question which I would like to raise here is: How do I get rid of my background in an attempt to analyse linguistic data. My cultural background (note for example a number of works devoted to the Uprising in Polish literature!) and biography (I personally know people who fought in the Uprising) suggest a host of other perspectives, backgrounds, experiences. In what way can I possibly deal with them when writing a paper like the one Blommaert comments upon? I do not think he provides an answer to this question.

2.2. Does it matter?

Does the background matter? Blommaert's answer to that question is affirmative. It frames the discourse-analytical efforts.

I think there are two issues here. It is because of my background that I have become interested in analysing the speeches and I agree with Blommaert's point that CDA needs to address the problem of the choice of what it takes on board. But would my analysis have been different, were I not Polish, had I put the Zhukov account in the background section of my paper? This is where I am not sure.

The lexico-grammatical analysis that I refer to, has at least one significant advantage: it is repeatable. If I had been a communist, I would hope that my analysis would have been similar to the one presented in the paper. The fact that there is no explicit reference to Nazi forces as the enemy of the insurgents in Wałęsa's speech, would have remained unchanged. The historical or cultural perspective has little to do with that finding. What might have differed is the interpretation of the fact. As a supporter of the version offered by Berezhkov, I might have said that Wałęsa fell victim to his bourgeois aides, but still I would have had to say that he does not attribute agency to Nazis. Does my background (or the one I offered in my paper) matter, then?

3. What analysis?

Finally, what do I analyse? Is the historical account of an event part of the analysis

² It is noteworthy that public support of the so-called *Auschwitz Lüge* is forbidden by law in some European countries, precisely because it has been taken as an 'established fact' that Auschwitz was a concentration camp where a few million people were killed.

of a speech referring to it? Again, I do not think the answer is as simple as is suggested in Blommaert's paper. Although his urge to take background into account more critically and in a more conscious way seems plausible and well-taken, I am not sure that mere enlargement of the context or its analysis is the solution.

What are the limits of entextualisation? When does an analysis become justifiable or plausible? Is the background to my paper sufficient when the Zhukov book is taken into account? Military commanders, politicians of the time (both Polish and Soviet, also British or American), inhabitants of Warsaw or finally soldiers, some of them barely in their teens at the time, all have their perspectives on the Uprising. Also those on the other side of the barricade, in *Wehrmacht* or *Waffen SS*. They are also absent voices, their perspectives are as valid as those of historians. And what about the contemporary German accounts (or, perish the thought, neo-Nazi versions) - Blommaert does not even mention them, even though Nazi forces are explicitly present in Filatov's speech. Or perhaps I should have also considered the Polish (and Russian?) collective memory, or perhaps also the educational discourse on the Uprising (I was taught quite different things in my primary and secondary education from what was taught at the university)? All those discourses are likely to have influenced the speakers (writers) and their speeches. Moreover, to make things worse, all those choices on my part are ideologically loaded and motivated and the mere proliferation of objects of analysis does not change the fact. And, finally, would the inclusion of the Soviet/Russian account have made my text any more 'neutral', any more objective? If anything, it would have been an exercise in a pretence of neutrality.

Is a discourse analysis of a speech invalidated by the emergence of new facts? How do I weigh all those accounts, carrying themselves ideologically loaded linguistic choices, and politically determined contents. Furthermore, how do I deal with the fact that those accounts are likely to draw upon other discourses (also not neutral) and try to make sense of how their own sources make sense of events? Finally, do I, as a discourse analyst, always take the whole lot on board, the entirety of the background, or perhaps, do I make choices depending on the analysis, and the audience? After all preparing a paper on the mythological framing of Wałęsa's speech (Galasiński 1996), I provided quite a detailed account of the romanticist tradition of the Messianic hero in Polish culture. Yet, I decided that the reader of the paper in this issue does not need it and Blommaert does not argue for the inclusion of that particular part of the background. Moreover, if I had written my paper in Polish for a Polish linguistic journal, the introductory section is very likely to have been different. And finally, what is the status of what I set out to analyse (the speeches) in relation to the background - now part of the object of analysis?

4. Conclusions

I think Blommaert is right in drawing attention to the problems of how to contextualise one's analysis. I think he is also right in saying that all too often discourse analysts (including myself) do not stop to question what it is that they use to anchor their analyses, nor do they question the analytical choices they make. I am not sure, however, about the solution he offers: the multi-perspective anchorage and the incorporation of the background into the object of analysis. The former because

it is impossible to offer all the perspectives, the latter because of the unclear range of the background to be incorporated, leading, *inter alia*, to a postulate of a 'never-ending holism' in analysis. All that topped with the problem Blommaert sets out to alleviate, the choices will still be ideologically influenced. Interestingly, a solution which would have those influences ostensibly neutralised would make them more clandestine and difficult to deal with.

As I said at the outset, I cannot offer constructive alternatives to Blommaert's stance. The thrust of this response was to ask questions rather than to provide solutions. However, what I tentatively tried to argue for is a sort of 'flexible critical arbitrariness'. A discourse analyst has to make choices as to the background s/he is invoking, making them flexibly dependent on the analysis to be carried out, while being aware of the choices made and signalling them sufficiently for the reader to be aware of them.

References

- Galasiński, D. (1996) The Polish Messiah: Myth and political discourse. Paper presented to the International Conference 'Frame and Perspective in Discourse'. Groningen, November, 1996.
- Schöpfli, G. (ed.) (1983) *Censorship and Political Communication in Eastern Europe: A Collection of Documents*. London: Frances Pinter, in association with Index on Censorship.