

Finding Hidden Meaning in Mass Media through Critical Discourse Analysis and Implications for Language Teaching

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Abstract

The following essay contains analysis of the use of hidden meaning in mass media using Critical discourse Analysis. It includes a review of the relevant literature that shows a well-documented history of the mass media choosing words and phrases specifically designed to mislead or deceive the public. This is followed by analysis of interviewers from three television programs from different networks questioning the same controversial character during the same time period. The paper closes with suggestions of how CDA can be applied in the Language classroom to help students improve their English.

Introduction

Every news magazine in the United States, as well as many in other parts of the world, has run at least one article in the past few years addressing the perceived bias of the media. Most of these articles have focused on overt biases, opinions expressed by on air pundits, articles written and printed in support of, or opposition to, a particular issue. But most of these have failed to address a more dangerous root part of the issue. That is the news organizations are perceived to be unbiased, the places that people go in hopes of finding the truth. They are perhaps the best examples of what Emily Dickinson once wrote, "Tell the truth, but tell it slant." How does the presentation of news affect peoples opinions, and does it do so without their knowledge?

What I mean to say is, people expect Fox News to be in favor of the conservative point of view, just as they expect National Public Radio (NPR) to be in favor of the liberal point of view. But they also expect Cable News Network (CNN), the American Broadcast Company (ABC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and the other major news networks, to be neutral. And on the surface they are. But will this appearance of impartiality hold up to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)? I am going to analyze several instances of reporting, including interviews of controversial figures, in an attempt to discover what, if any, hidden meaning is contained therein. Based on this exercise, I hope to draw some implications for language teaching and learning.

Hidden Meaning in Mass Media

Cameron (2001) offered this guideline about doing CDA, "The purpose of analysis is to show how discourse in its first sense (language in use) also functions as discourse in its second sense (a form of social practice that 'constructs the objects of which it purports to speak')." In this section, I will discuss and exemplify a few common ways that "language in use" in media may be used to "construct the objects about which it purports to speak." I will focus on balance, perception, and the loaded question.

One of the principal arguments against the often subtle methods designed to convey a hidden meaning for the purpose of forwarding one's own agenda, is that it eliminates the balance necessary to deliver news and information. This is misleading, however. While balance in and of itself seems like a good idea, after all, when making a decision you would like to learn the positives and negatives of both options, there is a Catch-22 aspect to it. Many news outlets have substituted balance for honest, truly informative reporting (Smolkin & Groves, 2007). This is especially true for emotional debates, such as those on abortion or gun control, where either side may argue that lives are at stake and if the time devoted to either point of view is not exactly even down to the second, the presenting media organization will come in for severe criticism.

I have a personal experience relating to this so-called balanced presentation of events. In April 2004 I went to Washington D.C. and attended a protest march and rally

to support a woman's choice to terminate her pregnancy if she so desires. This march was massive. Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN), a non-profit, cable industry funded network that broadcasts congressional proceedings as well as other political events around Washington D. C., estimated the attendance at over one million people. C-SPAN, primarily because it carries no advertising, is a model of non-bias reporting. Individual editors and producers at C-SPAN may have personal bias, this is impossible to legislate for, but there is no institutional bias. Combined with the fact that C-SPAN has no paid commentators providing opinion or analysis, this makes the network the closest news outlet available to complete impartiality. Along the route taken by the march, at the side of the street, there were a few dozen people with signs stating they were against the idea of a woman having the right to terminate her pregnancy. Nobody amongst the marchers really paid any attention to them, since their numbers were so inconsequential when compared to the amount of people attending the march itself. That night, at my hotel, I turned on Microsoft-National Broadcast Company (MSNBC), a news channel that I had always considered to be impartial. In the hourly news update, they devoted about 2 minutes to the march, then, to my surprise, they spent an additional two minutes talking about the anti-choice protesters at the march, as if both sides had equal representation at the event. But both sides did not have equal representation at the event, so in striving for balance, the news people at MSNBC actually distorted the truth. This distortion compromised the ability of observers who were not present at the event to determine its significance.

In this instance, the subject of the report itself, and the amount of time allotted, shows a distortion of the facts. More important, is when the language itself is used to shape the viewers interpretation of the facts. This is a popular device of dictatorships, or unpopular military regimes.

The following example is from South Africa during the time of Apartheid. There was a demonstration against Apartheid at a

soccer match. Kress (1990) used the transcript of a news report to show what he called "transactive clauses" portraying the causal role of the demonstrators.

The report portrayed the demonstrators in a violent way, as "protesters" who "chanted slogans, ...blew whistles," and even tried to " ...disrupt the match, ...invade the pitch." In another incident, "the demonstrators stormed the fence," and even began "tearing the fence down." (Dellinger, 1995)

Thus, the news report used the transactive clauses to blame the demonstrators for the actions that were taken against them, or as Dellinger (1995) put it, "The demonstration, therefore, which against a particular injustice, was in fact portrayed by the media as having been somehow caused by the actions of the demonstrators." This is a popular way to assign blame for negative events, whether that blame is deserved or not. This apartheid example is from many years ago, but this method of reporting is still widely used today. It is especially popular when it comes to reporting events in the Israeli occupied territories of Palestine. On this, Kress (1990) wrote:

The mode in which an action is presented, either as transactive or as nontransactive, is not a matter of truth or of reality but rather a matter of the way in which that particular action is integrated into the ideological system of the speaker, and the manner in which such an action is therefore articulated in a specific discourse. (p. 86)

What he meant was, simply, how you feel about an event determines how you describe it. But this may also extend to how your boss feels about an event, or how you are *supposed to feel* about an event. Fox News Channel, a 24-hour cable news channel that has chosen to align itself with the conservative Republican Party, has thousands of employees, and it is doubtful that every one of them shares the conservative view of events that is presented on the air. But all

of them know the accepted viewpoint of the organization is conservative, and they act accordingly.

I will focus specifically on what is generally known as a *loaded question*. A *loaded question* is a question that is difficult to answer without implicating oneself in one way or another. The most famous example of this, “Are you still beating your wife?” first appeared in *Legal Laughs: A Joke for every Jury* (Edwards, 1914, as cited by Goodnough, 1999), but has roots going back much further than that. A version of this loaded question first appeared around 300 BC, when the Megarians, a group of philosophers founded by Euclides (a student of Socrates), asked, “Do you still beat your father? Answer yes or no.” (Logic, 2007).

Thus far I have discussed how news reporting can use hidden meaning to influence people. Another way to impart influence is through interviews. When someone appears on an interview show, be they an author, a TV personality, a politician, or some other public figure, they are in many ways at the mercy of their questioner. How a question is phrased can have a heavy influence on the answer or determine if it can be answered. Since the questions are generally written in advance, the specific choice of the interviewer or editor to use, for example, a transactive or a nontransactive clause, is definitely not a matter of chance, but a matter of design (Dellinger, 1995).

Hidden Meaning in Television and Radio Interviews: The case of Christopher Hitchens

In this section, I examine several interviews with the same writer, Christopher Hitchens, in the months following the publication of his book, *God is not Great: How Religion Poi-*

sons Everything. I hope to apply CDA to show how the interviewers shaped their loaded questions to express their opinion about Hitchens and his work, while simultaneously making it difficult for Hitchens to defend his own beliefs.

All of these interviews took place in the spring of 2007. I collected the data from the Hitchens interviews by viewing streaming video of each interview on-line. I then transcribed the first 60 seconds of each interview and compared them.

Background on the interviewee

Christopher Hitchens is a writer, editor, and book reviewer for several publications. He makes frequent television and radio appearances on a variety of news and entertainment shows. In 2007 he published *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. One of the major themes of this book is that there exists no higher power, be it called God or anything else. Hitchens himself had always been a controversial figure, due in part to his manner of speaking, but this took peoples opinions of him to an entirely different level. Hitchens was born and raised in the UK and has a rather posh accent. Many who hear him speak consider him to be quite arrogant and off-putting. He expresses his opinions boldly and unapologetically.

Interviewer 1: Lou Dobbs (CNN)

Lou Dobbs is an economist with a financial news show on CNN. He also discusses several other issues and most would consider him to be right of center politically, that is, to hold conservative views on most matters. When Hitchens appeared on his show, Dobbs introduced him (Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1

- 1 Dobbs: And ((waves open hand and smiles)) ↑I can imagine our viewers, right now,
- 2 ((puts open hand over heart)) I’m going to be very honest, .hh watching us right
- 3 now, are going to be saying, ((looks from camera to Hitchens)) ↑↓WHAT is
- 4 ↓Dobbs DO-ing, talking to Hitchens, what is Hitchens ((gestures towards
- 5 Hitchens with open hand)) thinking about taking on God?”

In line 1, Dobbs starts his turn with a smile, even a bit of a chuckle, as if he and Hitchens are friends and he is giving Hitchens a fair chance to defend himself. What Dobbs is really doing is marginalizing Hitchens, making him appear to be on the fringes of society when it comes to religious matters, and maybe all matters. When Dobbs says, “I can imagine our viewers right now” (line 2) he is telling the viewers what they think. He has dictated the tenor of the interview. Having said “WHAT is ↓Dobbs DO-ing?” (lines 3-4) with the emphasis on the question word and the verb, Dobbs is informing the viewers that he is crazy for having Hitchens on his show. But the way this turn is formulated, Dobbs has not said it, the viewers have thought it, so their mind is already made up for them. If Hitchens decided to challenge Dobbs on this matter, it is likely that Dobbs’ defense would be that he was just expressing his audience’s general belief.

Then there is the last part of Dobbs’ statement, the question that Hitchens is actually expected to answer (lines 4-5). Dobbs could say “What inspired you to write this book?” or “Why did you feel the state of religion in the world was an important subject to write about?” But he does not. He says, “What is Hitchens thinking about, taking on God?” This question implies that Hitchens is out of his mind to take on God. Thus, the first time he addresses Hitchens, Dobbs has already discredited him. “...taking on God” implies that

God exists, that there is indeed such a figure for Hitchens to take on. Also notable is the choice of the phrase *take on*. This phrase is most often used when fighting against tremendous, if not impossible, odds. So Dobbs has not only verified for his audience that a god figure exists, but he has implied that Hitchens has challenged this figure, which he has little or no chance of defeating. It does not matter how Hitchens answers this loaded question, the audience has already been told that Hitchens has no credibility, because his thesis has already been discredited before the interview has even begun. The interview continues and concludes in this same vein, with a bemused Dobbs appearing to give Hitchens his say, but not really giving him any credibility, instead, tolerating it for as long as he must.

Interviewer 2: Sean Hannity (Fox News)

Sean Hannity is a conservative television pundit; he hosts a show on Fox News with another individual, named Alan Colmes, who serves as his liberal foil. Hitchens also appeared on this show after his book was released, and was subjected to an overtly hostile line of questioning. Dobbs did not treat Hitchens poorly, he wanted to appear to be a fair journalist, willing to give this fringe figure a chance to illustrate his points, as absurd as they may be. Hannity had no such concerns, as evidenced by his first statement to Hitchens, which can be seen in Excerpt 2 below.

Excerpt 2

- 1 Hannity: ((Looking down and reading)) You describe yourself as a devout
- 2 ((looks up at camera)) ANTITHEIST ↓and you’re ((gestures towards
- 3 Hitchens with open hand holding pen)) an atheist. >Explain.<

Introductions before television and radio interviews are fairly uniform. In my observation, the interviewer often builds up the interviewee by talking about his or her accomplishments, along with any plaudits they may have received from respected figures in their field. In his interview with Hitchens, Hannity accomplishes this by beginning his turn with “You describe your-

self...” (line 1). However, this introduction is not done in the usual way. Hannity is implying that no one else can be bothered to describe Hitchens, that he must describe himself. Thus, Hannity is introducing Hitchens as a stand-alone figure (and thus different from the population). The alternative grammatical construction, “you are described as...” conjures up the image of

Hitchens being viewed by some other people (thus not standing alone and thus not marked, not different). The local context of this sentence makes more sense when one considers the larger context of the interview. Fox News conservative viewers, at least those who were aware of Hitchens, probably already considered him to be a fringe figure, and considering that an overwhelming majority of people from the USA belong to some sort of religious group, maybe he is a fringe figure. Just as Dobbs did, Hannity was immediately attacking Hitchens' credibility. The hidden meaning was clear in this case.

The way Hannity describes Hitchens (lines 2-3) is not very common. Antitheist is an academic description of a person who is against religion. Antitheist is not a common word, so most of Hannity's viewers are probably not going to know the definition, and therefore they are probably not going to completely understand the meaning of the word, or at least have the impression that Hitchens belongs to an elite class who has lost touch with the common people. Hannity's usage of the word *antitheist* here deserves further discussion.

As mentioned above, Hannity is a conservative, and conservatives, like most other social, religious, and political groups, have codes, or registers, which members use amongst themselves. One must approach a television or radio show such as Hannity's with knowledge that "Social practices presuppose vast amounts of socio-cultural and group specific beliefs or social representations, such as knowledge, attitudes, norms, values, and ideologies" (van Dijk, 1998). If one is unfamiliar with the codes of conservative culture, it is similar to being unfamiliar with Vietnamese culture or Jewish culture, and presents many of the same difficulties and misunderstandings.

One aspect of these conservative codes is that anything involving great academic achievement is elitist. A conservative prefers to describe himself or be described by others, as a man of the people, even if he is not. This is why it is seldom mentioned, at least by conservatives, that President Bush got his undergraduate degree from

Yale University and his MBA from Harvard. In conservative code, this would brand him as an elitist. And Hannity, just by using the word *anti-theist*, had branded Hitchens an elitist. Hannity was well aware of the demographics of his viewers, and he hoped to reinforce their stereotypes.

The second sentence of Hannity's address towards Hitchens (line 3) was a command. He had just called his guest an atheist, and then he ordered him to "explain." The implication here was that Hannity's position, as a Christian, was infallible, but Hitchens' position, as an atheist, needed to be explained. In fact, Hannity implied that Hitchens himself needed to not only explain his beliefs, but justify them as well, and maybe even defend his right to hold these beliefs. When one watches the Hannity hosted program one sees the obvious "adoption of a particular ideological-discursive structure on the part of the journalist" (Dellinger, 1995). Instead of presenting the news impartially, Hannity has chosen to represent an ideological system. "Fair and balanced reporting" (the motto of Fox News) is obviously not the goal here.

Many reports that exhibit bias use military metaphors to do so. Kress (1990) observed that "one side is cast by the journalist as *enemy* and the other as *friend* or *protector*" (original emphasis, p. 87). The *friend* or *protector* is from then on referred to as *us*, and the *enemy* as *them*. "In this way," wrote Kress (1990, p. 87), "the newscast audience's perceptions or readings of the text are structured so that they will not only regard the report as 'simply reporting the facts as they were' but will also structure their interpretation of the relevance of the text overall."

Interviewer 3: Jon Stewart (The Daily Show)

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart is a self-proclaimed "fake" news show that appears on Comedy Central. The host got his start as a stand-up comedian but is now considered more of a political satirist as well as a liberal. His interview with Hitchens had a much lighter tone than the others and was handled very differently overall.

First, conforming to the usual pattern, Stewart's introduction of Hitchens listed his positions and previous publications, thus granting him a level of credibility rather than questioning it. Stewart also personally greets Hitchens and shakes his hand, which none of the other interviewers did. His

opening address towards Hitchens follows a similar pattern to Dobbs', but with a completely different hidden meaning. Excerpt 3 shows the beginning of the interview (after the handshake).

Excerpt 3

- 1 Stewart: ((picks up book and shows cover to the camera)) God is NOT Great,
- 2 ((nods head)) ↓it's one of those books, uh, with a title >where you
- 3 really say to yourself< ↑↓what's he trying to get at?

In his use of the pronoun *you* (lines 2 - 3), Stewart, just as Dobbs did, is aligning himself with his audience. But Stewart, and by extension, his audience, did not attack Hitchens, or put him on the spot, as the other interviewers did. In fact, the signal for Hitchens to speak, "...what's he trying to get at?" (line 3) gives Hitchens an opportunity to outline his conclusions, rather than being commanded to justify them, as Hannity did, or explain why he even wrote the book, as Dobbs asked him to do. The very phrase Stewart uses, *getting at*, implies that Hitchens has a point, and Stewart is giving him a chance to make that point. This is in direct contrast to the use of the phrase *taking on*, which Dobbs used.

Unsurprisingly, Stewart opens with a joke regarding the radical title of the book (lines 2 and 3). By marking the book title as radical, and then inviting Hitchens to talk about it, Stewart is implicitly indicating that he embraces controversial topics. This is partly dictated by the type of show Stewart hosts, and partly by his liberal ideological position.

To summarize, moving along the continuum of atmosphere created by the interview, Stewart's opening is perhaps the lightest in tone. Dobbs is next. While Dobbs does not make a joke, as Stewart did, he chuckles and attempts to keep the mood somewhat light. Hannity, much further down the continuum, makes clear from the outset that he wants a serious confrontation, some would say argument, with Hitchens. All three interviewers come in with an agenda. What is impossible to know is if

that agenda is their own or has been dictated to them by their network.

Conclusion and Implications for Language Teaching

It is hard to say if balance and truth are mutually exclusive, but they are certainly in conflict at times when it comes to reporting news. I would say that there are three varieties of news agencies currently at work in the US. There is a liberal news media, a conservative news media, and a neutral news media. Covert and Wasburn (2007), through formal content analysis, determined that "Data provide little support for those claiming significant media bias in either ideological direction." But I do not believe this tells the whole story. Let us say there is a scale and we have three weights. One weight is The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, another is Hannity & Colmes, and a third is Lou Dobbs Tonight. The Daily Show is on the left side of the scale, Hannity & Colmes is on the right side of the scale, and Lou Dobbs Tonight is in the middle. It is all balanced, so there is no ideological bias. But these are just individual news programs. Fox News has several shows that fall on the right end of the continuum. CNN has other programs that fall in the middle, like Dobbs, and then a few programs that fall to the right. Comedy Central has one other news program that falls to the left. Suddenly the right side has more weight.

There is not enough data available for me to emphatically state whether or not there is an ideological media bias, but it is very easy to see that the programs I ex-

amined are using their discourse to influence their audience. Whether it be word choice or tone, the line of questioning in interviews, and reporting in general is carefully designed to steer the viewer towards one of three ideological positions: liberal, conservative, or neutral.

As a language teacher, I have to be concerned with hidden meaning when teaching my students. Many students use television and radio to help themselves learn the language, particularly through the internet, where there is such a large variety of English language programming available. Language learners, particularly those at the beginner or intermediate level, will often

miss this richer context within programs. They will not have the background knowledge to understand much of the implication present. For example, the conservative demonization of academic pursuits and positions as “elitist” would be unknown to most immigrants to America, even those with a high functional level of English. I suspect it is probably impossible to teach students every type of hidden meaning in the English language, but that is not going to be a teachers’ goal. What is most important, in my opinion, is knowing that hidden meaning does exist, and having the analytical tool to uncover them in context.

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