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Framing Discourses on the Environment: A Critical Discourse Approach. Recensione

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(Article begins on next page)

Framing Discourse on the Environment, A Critical Discourse Approach by Richard J. Alexander. New York and London, Routledge, 2009, ISBN 978-0-415-99123-0 (hb), 978-0-415-88835-6 (pb), 978-0-203-89061-5 (ebook), 239 pp.

If CDA is “biased and proud of it” (Van Dijk, 2001: 96) the same can be said about Richard J. Alexander’s contribution to Michelle Lazar’s edited series, *Routledge Critical Studies in Discourse*. It is impossible for readers not to share the author’s sense of urgency about concern with the environment. *Framing Discourse on the Environment* is a long awaited book that guides its readers through a corpus-aided critical analysis of various texts related to ecology and the environment in different ways. The two aspects I appreciated most about the book are the sense of involvement Alexander conveys and the ability with which he provides the information a non-linguist would need without resulting didactic.

The book consists in eleven chapters. Excluding the introduction, the remaining ten chapters can be divided into five groups. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the issue of the integration of business and the ecological issue. In the attempt to establish how far examples of discourse initiated by ethical organizations are capable of counteracting the trend of business corporations and media towards greenwashing, chapter 3 analyses a speech by BP Chief Executive and compares it to the Body Shop Mission Statement. It must be said that the choice of the latter to represent “ethical business enterprises” might be considered a weak point of the book. Even if Alexander aptly discusses the intrinsic contradiction of promoting ethical issues and environment protection while subscribing to corporate free-market policies, he totally avoids referring to the acquisition of The Body Shop by L’Oréal in 2006. Many supporters of the Body Shop had not welcomed at all the company’s decision to sell. At the time it triggered an interesting debate over the potential positive effects of an ethical enterprise embedded in a multinational company – as argued by its founder Anita Roddick – against the feeling of total sell out felt by customers (Booth, 2006 and Cahalane, 2006). Alexander analyses a Mission Statement from 1994, hence recent events do not weaken his argument. Still, activists and committed consumers likely to read this book will probably be confused by the choice of picking The Body Shop as the best example of ethical company.

The six chapters that follow are, in my opinion, the best part of the book as they are the ones that concentrate on the main topic, that is the way in which a corpus-aided critical discourse approach can show how environmental discourse is constructed and how greenwashing strategies can be detected and resisted. Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to the analysis of communication coming from two large oil and energy companies: BP and Shell respectively. Chapter 4 analyses a speech given by John Browne, chief executive of BP, at Stanford University in 1997. Alexander observes several aspects ranging from cohesion, thematic structures, agency, up to nominalizations and lexicalizations. The fact that each of these concepts is briefly explained makes this chapter - and the book in general - interesting reading also for non-linguists and students. Chapter 5 focuses on two Reports from Shell, published in 1999 and 2000. Similarly to the previous chapter, quantitative and qualitative analyses are undertaken and the process is made clear for non experts. The goal of both chapters is to show how the capitalist logic of corporate PR is colonizing the discourse on the environment and ecology to promote its own business interests.

The 2000 BBC Reith Lectures are the object of chapters 6 and 7. The umbrella topic discussed by prominent scholars, practitioners, politicians and activists during the series was “Respect for the Earth”. Through a close quantitative and qualitative textual analysis, the author convincingly demonstrates that the lectures promoted a one-dimensional mainstream point of view, and even the presence of Vandana Shiva was absorbed and toned down in Prince Charles’ concluding speech which followed hers. The way in which Alexander shows his readers how discourse strategies and lexical choices can contribute to shift values is perfectly clear and can help anyone who wants to learn more either about environment-related issues or about corpus-aided critical discourse analysis.

The chapter that follows still reports observations concerning the Reith Lectures, but concentrates on Shiva’s speech in particular, and analyses the interesting match between her approach – which differs from that of the other five speakers – and her different use of language. Shiva is the only

one who also discusses the linguistic structure of the ideas she is criticizing: as Alexander aptly points out, her approach recalls Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work as she proposes a "restructuring of our worldview at the most fundamental level". In particular, Shiva deals with the problem of patents granted for seeds and plants and she deconstructs the values that business companies attach to such property: absurd claims are quoted and resisted such as "bees usurp the pollen" and "weeds steal the sunshine". Coherently with the book structure, chapter 9 is linked to chapter 8 as it focuses on 'agribusiness' and the commodification of food production. The case study consists in the inspection of two websites: Monsanto's and Pioneer Hi-Bred's, both involved in GM crops and seed commerce. Once again readers see how "purr-words" (the author effectively mixes academic terms and everyday expressions to help non-linguists) are employed to construct a perspective which results self-assured and practically incontestable.

The two closing chapters appear less convincing than the rest of the book, as the connection between chapter 10 and 11 and the previous ones is not always self-evident. Chapter 10 highlights the importance played by George Orwell's book *1984* and stems from what Noam Chomsky has referred to as "Orwell's problem". In the book introduction, Alexander explains that chapter 10 contains "a discussion of people's variable abilities to see through doublespeak and contest the discourse engineering that they experience in their working and non-working lives in society" (10) but I believe no definite answer is provided to help scholars establishing how to observe and understand such variable abilities, nor why they are prone to variation. The chapter also contains an interesting discussion about the connection between Chomsky political activism and his work as a linguist that many of his readers and many linguists find fascinating and even enigmatic. Alexander quotes a number of scholars – among whom Paul Chilton (1988) appears several times – who have written about what he describes as a "bifurcation in Chomsky's thinking" and I was surprised not to find reference to Chilton's 2004 book in which, I believe, the most convincing explanation of Chomsky's position is provided.

According to Chilton (2004) "the common ground between Chomsky's linguistics and his politics becomes clear when one notes that his political philosophy is essentially a form of anarchism" (24) In an illuminating chapter, which summary would go beyond the scope of this review, Chilton convincingly demonstrates that Chomsky's position as a scholar is not at odds with his activism and, at the same time, his approach cannot be assimilated to that of the 'critical discourse' school. The comparative reading Alexander presents in chapter 10 to show parallels between Halliday and Chomsky is interesting and fascinating, but rather than providing an explanation for the apparent bifurcation it leaves the reader even more confused, as Alexander shows how Chomsky appears to agree with Halliday. Readers who are familiar with Chomsky's work will know that his reiterated view is that "communication is only one function of language, and by no means an essential one" (Chomsky, 1975: 69), a position that certainly does not match Halliday's.

The closing chapter deals mainly with disinformation concerning the discourse of war and the semantic engineering forces at play. In this case the link between war and environmental problems is clearer; still I believe the connection could have been made more explicit. Drawing on some ideas from *1984* and Chomsky's work, Alexander refers to some contemporary films and documentaries that he believes may contribute to the enlightenment of the public. His closing chapter titled "Chomsky's intellectual self-defence kit" seems to reflect the bifurcation evoked earlier and appears contradictory at times. Kress and Hodge (1979: 150) are quoted, arguing in favour of the need for people to learn to interpret doublethink and the importance of education is proposed as the only solution to the problem of disinformation techniques, which are implemented to maintain the hegemonic order. On the same page, Chomsky's view that no scientific expertise is required and common sense is that all people need to protect themselves from obfuscation is also held as the answer to the problem. The reader, especially if a linguist interested in corpus-aided critical discourse, might wonder what the point of creating corpora and analysing them might be if common sense is all we need.

To conclude, I believe Alexander's to be an interesting, relevant and useful source of information and debate. Its clear and detailed methodological explanations make it precious for anyone who wants to approach critical discourse analysis, while his findings are valuable information for all

those interested in understanding what is wrong with today's environmental communication and how greenwashing strategies can be resisted. Notwithstanding the importance of common sense, this book provides its readers with a much more valuable approach that can only enrich and strengthen what they might sense instinctively. The survival of humanity depends on our ability to change the attitude most people have towards the environment and Alexander's work can help us follow the right direction.

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