

H. G. WIDDOWSON. *Text, Context, Pretext: Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis* (Language in Society, 35). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 185 pp. Hb (0631234519) £50.00/Pb (0631234527) £16.99.

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Being 'critical', Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) itself 'is being attacked every now and then by its detractors' (Rajagopalan 2004: 261), and one such detractor is undoubtedly H. G. Widdowson, who, after life-long consideration (see the Preface), has developed his critical discussion into the present new book: *Text, Context, Pretext: Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis*. This book consists of ten chapters, the first five being concerned with critical issues in the enterprise of discourse analysis in general, and the next five addressing specifically the work of CDA.

Widdowson begins the first chapter with his concerns about the relationship between text and discourse. 'Unless it is activated by this contextual connection, the text is inert. It is this activation, this acting of context on code, this indexical conversion of the symbol that I refer to as discourse' (p. 8). Thus, the relation between discourse and text is that of process and its product. By identifying the distinction and relation between text and discourse, Widdowson actually groups two sets of concepts involved in the book, one including text and co-text associated with 'analysis', the other including discourse and context associated with 'interpretation'.

In Chapter 2, the author develops his discussion of text in relation to Systemic Functional (S/F) grammar. This grammar, unlike Chomsky's Transformation Generative grammar, accounts for textual relations, but, to Widdowson's disappointment, it never goes beyond a model that 'classifies and categorizes, makes divisions and distinctions which separate aspects of language out from each other' (p. 26). One of the difficulties about this model identified by Widdowson is its two levels: the level of *understanding* and the level of *evaluation*. For example, understanding the text 'CLOSED' in a shop window does not require a linguistic analysis (p. 23), but, as Widdowson argues, this does not preclude the text from being evaluated.

Another difficulty is with the model's *textual* metafunction. Considering theme and rheme, Widdowson recognizes that the organization of information in the clause can be motivated either by ideational or interpersonal purposes. This challenges S/F grammar's categorization of the three metafunctions as distinct and separate strands. Another weakness identified in S/F grammar by Widdowson is that it cannot account for actual language use. The point being made is that analysis is confused with interpretation in S/F grammar: the process of identifying what semantic features are made manifest in a text is treated without any difference from the process that involves recognizing how a text functions as discourse by discriminating which features are pragmatically activated and how.

In Chapter 3, Widdowson critically reviews various studies of context. For example, Firth's schematic construct, like Malinowski's 'context of situation', is not seen as clearly distinguishing the notions of *context* and *situation*. Equally unsatisfying is context as a psychological construct (as in the work of Hymes, and Sperber and Wilson), which turns out to be a mere inferential process whereby contextual effects are derived from given contextual assumptions. Instead, Widdowson proposes that context be taken as an unfixed, schematic construct, whose socio-cultural conventions provide the basis for the online pragmatic processing of language. In this way, Widdowson sets up interaction between text and context.

In Chapter 4, the author distinguishes co-text from context. 'The inspection of co-text involves a consideration of the textual product as such without regard to the discourse that gave rise to it' (p. 58). Thus, co-textual relation is associated with text while contextual relation is associated with discourse. In his examination of Halliday and Hasan's exhaustive compendium of devices which 'relate text to general features of the language', Widdowson makes the point that semantic features, 'are relevant only to the extent that they have pragmatic point, their co-textual patterns only relevant to the extent that they key into contextual factors' (p. 69). In this way, it is emphasized that 'a text only exists for the user in association with discourse. It has no reality otherwise' (p. 68). If one isolates a text and analyses it as a linguistic object, notes co-occurrences and traces co-textual semantic connections, then the text ceases to be a product of discourse.

In Chapter 5, Widdowson introduces an additional factor in the general interpretative process – pretext, which generally refers to ‘an ulterior motive: a pretending to do one thing but intending to do something else’ (p. 79). In dyadic communication, the recognition of the writer’s/speaker’s purpose largely depends on contextual factors that regulate the focus of attention of the reader/listener. In situations where a third party (e.g. an analyst) is involved, Widdowson believes the recognition of the writer’s purpose depends not only on contextual factors, but also on pretextual factors. These pretextual factors regulate the analyst’s focus of attention on the textual features to be analyzed and the contextual factors to be considered.

The notion of pretext actually serves as a starting point for the author’s criticism of CDA. In Chapter 6, Widdowson argues that it is precisely out of its socio-political pretext that CDA makes the expedient selections of textual features for analysis. A possible solution to this partiality seems to be corpus analysis, which is the focus of Chapter 7. Corpus analysis aims to find patterns of systematic co-occurrences across a range of texts, but it is not without its problems for CDA. As examined by Widdowson, Fairclough’s and Stubbs’s corpus analyses of textual features are not systematic, and, in addition, corpus analysis does not account for context. As argued by Widdowson, ‘corpus linguists cannot read process from product in an analogous manner: they cannot, as we have seen, directly infer contextual factors from co-textual ones, and use textual data as conclusive evidence of discourse’ (p. 126).

In Chapter 8, Widdowson brings into focus the distinction between analysis and interpretation, and emphasizes his point that CDA, whether it is Wodak’s version or Fairclough’s, is not an analysis of textual features and contextual factors, but interpretation regulated by pretextual socio-political commitment. It is argued that CDA, like its precursor literary criticism, does not result in precise linguistic analysis. Even where contextual factors are taken into consideration, as in Wodak’s discourse-historical approach which is centrally concerned with the ‘contextualizing and historicizing’ of texts (p. 138), there is no ‘specification of setting and context as a necessary precondition on interpretation, but ready-made interpretations which, in effect, serve as a kind of pretextual priming, designed to dispose us to read this text in a particular way’ (p. 142). Similar criticism is repeated in Chapter 9, but this time in terms of approach and method, where Widdowson argues that CDA, ‘is not actually a method of analysis but an approach to interpretation’ (p. 159). It is not a method simply because of what Widdowson believes to be the shortage of explicit demonstration of how the abundant references to theories and models in CDA literature are drawn on in any principled way.

Text, Context, Pretext covers much ground in discourse analysis ranging from its early precursors (e.g. B. Malinowski, Z. Harris) to its contemporary practitioners. The notion of pretext provides a new approach to the discussion of critical issues in (critical) discourse analysis. However, CDA work selected for critical comment in this book comes mainly from the 1990s and, as

observed by Blommaert (2005: 22), 'there is always a danger of objectification when we discuss a dynamic and developing movement such as CDA as a "school", locked in time and space'. This reader would have also appreciated a greater emphasis on more positive suggestions. At present, they are only formulated as brief proposals made in passing in the concluding Chapter 10.

REFERENCES

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