‘Relatively benign corruption’?
Critical discourse analysis for media students

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ABSTRACT: Don Watson, in his book Death Sentence, claims that the way in which the media disseminate information and the way politicians manipulate this process have resulted in a kind of corruption. Assuming this is the case, I suggest in this paper that it is therefore useful to equip students in media courses with the skills of critical discourse analysis. A useful starting point for teaching these skills to undergraduates, I have found, is a newspaper article by Alexander Downer, excerpted from one of his speeches about the ‘war on terror’. Such a mediated political linguistic act as this will of course inherently involve power or resistance to power, and will contribute to the formation of a specific discourse community via strategies of coercion, resistance, opposition or protest, and dissimulation/de-legitimisation. This necessarily results in relations of struggle that are played out at the lexicogrammatical level, on which I invite students to focus. Such media texts, which represent and foreground starkly opposing ideologies, can be useful vehicles for teaching the concept of discourse communities, as well as the reading strategies of critical discourse analysis.

Don Watson has claimed that in Australia the media is at the heart of a democratic political process that works according to a system of ‘relatively benign corruption’—relative to an undemocratic process, that is’ (Watson, 2002). The corruption exists, he continues, ‘in the dissemination of information by the media and in the efforts of governments and oppositions to manipulate the process to suit themselves’ (p. 355). This is not to say, however,
that such a process is necessarily propaganda, because, as Watson goes on to argue, ‘for every opinion there is a countervailing one; for every lie there is at least an opportunity to correct the record; for every cover-up there is the prospect that the truth will be exposed’ (p. 355).

In my view, Watson’s ideas here can provide a useful starting point for developing undergraduate students’ skills in critical awareness of mediated linguistic acts emanating from governments or opposition parties. One way of developing a critical awareness is through the methodology of discourse analysis. The Anglophone variety of this method has been developed by Tuen A. van Dijk (1997, 1998), but informed by a wide range of influences and strands: the 2,500 year-old study of rhetoric, Foucault’s notion of ‘discourse formation’, semantic theory (Chilton & Shaffner, 1997, p. 211), linguistic analysis focusing on pragmatics and syntax, and empirical sociological study.

Mediatized political linguistic acts, due to their foregrounding of discursive struggle, would seem to provide suitable material on which students can cut their critical teeth. For this purpose, a useful definition of political linguistic acts, as proposed by Chilton and Shaffner (1997) is ‘actions … which involve power, or its inverse, resistance …’ (p. 212). Within this larger concept, Chilton and Shaffner construct three finer distinctions: first, ‘inner state’ discourse (that is, domestic); second, ‘internal political’ discourse (that is, politicians communicating with each other); and third, ‘external political’ discourse (politicians communicating with the public) (p. 214).

In this paper, I focus on a text that I have found useful in ‘teaching’ discourse analysis to first-year media students; it is a newspaper article excerpted from a speech by Australia’s Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, approximately a year into the Iraq war, in 2004. This is a text that was communicated via the media to the public, and, as such, conforms to the parameters of Chilton and Shaffner’s third group.

Texts such as Downer’s speech, and the ensuing newspaper article, constitute linguistic actions that by their very natures contribute to, or constitute, a specific discourse community—that is, a group adhering at least generally to a particular ideology or set of ideologies. Political texts do this, according to Chilton and Shaffner (1997), by way of four strategies: coercion; resistance, opposition, and protest; dissimulation; and legitimisation/delegitimisation (pp. 212-3). These strategies should not surprise us, since it is well-known that ‘power relations are relations of struggle … power is not simply exercised, it is also fought over in
discourse' (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 62). And these 'relations of struggle' begin by playing out at the lexicogrammatical level. It is this level on which students need to be taught to focus for the purposes of discourse analysis.

Downer's speech was delivered to the Canberra Press Club on April 13 2004 (Downer, 2004a), and a shorter version appeared the following day as an op-ed in the Melbourne broadsheet newspaper The Age (Downer, 2004b). As a mediated political text, this op-ed is significant for four reasons, all of which make it an ideal starting point for undergraduate discourse analysis: first, it is an intervention in an ongoing, and global, discursive struggle (the 'war on terrorism'); second, it is from Australia's Foreign Minister, a 'primary definer' (Hall, 1980), thus representing the 'official' argument of the Australian government in this global discourse of terror; third, it is a cut-and-paste job *par excellence*—a clear example of how newspaper prose, despite its 'smooth, unified surface ... conceals a motley of origins [because] many stories contain material selected and reworked from other documents generated by newsmakers or other media-reports ... speech notes ... press releases' (Bell & Garrett, 1998, pp. 41-2); and, fourth, because a text from a very influential politician can function as a synecdoche, enabling some insight into the strategies by which 'public officials argue through the media to [their] ... audiences' (Aden, 1994, p. 8).

Through a careful use of specific questioning that focuses on lexicogrammatical aspects of this text, as well as providing the students with contextual historical material, I encourage the performance of a reading of this text that makes explicit how this particular synecdoche functions strategically as a speech act. This will occur by way of some or all of the above four strategies: coercion; resistance, opposition, and protest; dissimulation; and legitimisation/delegitimisation. These strategies will contribute to or constitute a specific discourse community, adhering at least generally to a set of ideologies. For no speech act can be viewed as a vehicle of reflection of the real world, but rather as 'constructions of the real that reflect the interests of a speech community—or ... the interests of the dominant groups in a community' (Chilton & Shaffner, 1997, p. 221), in this case the Australian government, and its interest in strengthening links with the US government.

As van Dijk (1997) points out, context is an important consideration in discourse analysis, and 'may be as complex and multi-layered as that of text ... itself' (p. 4). Indeed:

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... utterances are only meaningful if we consider their use in a specific situation, if we understand the underlying conventions and rules, if we recognise the embedding in a certain culture and ideology, and most importantly, if we know what the discourse relates to in the past. Discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently. In this respect, we include intertextuality as well as sociocultural knowledge within our concept of context. (Fairclough & Wodak 1997, p. 276)

These notions of discourse connections, as well as intertextuality and sociocultural knowledge, are particularly apposite in performing a discourse analysis of the Downer text, as the following discussion will reveal. The text itself was part of a particular episode of the discursive struggles surrounding the ‘war on terror’, an episode that was initiated by the then Australian opposition leader Mark Latham in March 2004, when he promised that, if the Labor party won the imminent federal election, he would bring the Australian troops serving in Iraq ‘home by Christmas’ (Macey, 2004, p. 18).

The first key intervention in this new episode was made, as one would expect, by Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, another of the group of primary definers in this debate. Howard announced that ‘any talk of withdrawing or any weakening of resolve or commitment will only encourage a repetition and extension of this kind of behaviour’, the only response to terrorism being to ‘stand firm’ (Morris-Suzuki, 2004, p. 11). Interestingly, similar views to those of Howard were expressed by that other primary definer, US President George W. Bush who, at his April 13, 2004 Press Conference, made various declarations such as: ‘We must not waver’, ‘We must stay the course’, and ‘We’re not going to cut and run if I’m in the oval office’ (Bush, quoted by Garamone, 2004).

On the same day as Bush’s press conference, Downer delivered his Press Club speech, which I introduced above, entitled ‘Australia and the Threat of Global Terrorism—A Test of Resolve’ (Downer, 2004a). Excerpts of this speech appeared in the op-ed page of The Age the following day, April 14, under the title ‘Why We Can’t Cut and Run from Iraq Now’, (Downer, 2004b). Many readers of the op-ed would not have heard the longer speech broadcast on radio the day before, and would have consumed the newspaper article as a whole and unified text, as readers generally do (notwithstanding the line at the
bottom indicating that it was a version of the earlier speech), despite its being only one-quarter the length of the earlier speech, and now comprising mostly non-consecutive paragraphs taken from the longer speech, chosen and strung together by the Age’s then Acting Opinion Editor, Pamela Bone (Bone, 2004).

Such cutting-and-pasting is a common phenomenon, with journalists often functioning as compilers, as much as they do as creators of language, according to Bell (1991), with ‘a lot of the news consisting of previously composed text reworked into new texts’ (p. 41). Of course, this happens quite commonly in print media, with many speeches by politicians receiving similar treatment. However, it is not always possible to trace the process, as I have been able to with Downer’s, in order to read the excised material; so it is especially useful as a pedagogical exercise to be able to present to students the complete original text from which the reproduced part was taken, and to facilitate their analysis of the mediatised text in this context.

The first observable lexicogrammatical unit of the newspaper text is the title or headline, ‘Why We Can’t Cut and Run from Iraq Now’, which can usefully be broken down into its grammatical components of subject (we), verb (can’t cut and run), and object (Iraq). Taking the object first, it is relevant to note that seven of the 18 paragraphs reprinted in the article are from the original speech’s subsection titled ‘Iraq’. Because discourse segments such as headlines (especially in newspaper prose) typically ‘define the “overall” unity of discourse’ (van Dijk, 1997, p. 10) at the macro level, the content of this op-ed’s headline works discursively to construct a macroproposition. Students can be asked to suggest what this macroproposition might be reasonably construed to be. It is, of course, one that argues specifically against the withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq. This proposition was, however, only part of the larger argument of Downer’s original speech, an argument that had more to do with the maintenance of the discursive construction of ‘terror’.

If we look next at the verb, composed of the emotive phrase ‘cut and run’, chosen over synonymous verbs such as the more value-neutral ‘withdraw’, we can see an unmistakable connotation of cowardice. It was, interestingly, the same verb that George W. Bush had used in his speech on the same day, as mentioned above. The choice of the pronoun ‘we’ as the subject of this verb is significant, too, as it is a signifier of consensus, of what van Dijk (1998, p. 32) terms the ‘We-group’, functioning here to construct solidarity with all Australians. But
this pronoun choice also creates a certain ambiguity because it could also quite feasibly refer to all of 'us' who are citizens of countries with troops in Iraq. The 'strategic and manipulative way' in which politicians use pronouns so that they generate 'vague and shifting meanings' has been shown by Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 275) in their analysis of text generated by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. But they are not suggesting, they say, that '[politicians] are consciously planning to use we ... in these ways, though reflexive awareness of language is increasing among politicians. Rather, there are broader intended strategic objectives for political discourse ... which are realised in ways of using language' (p. 275).

At this point students can be questioned regarding which strategic objective (of the four strategies enumerated earlier) might be identified here...I would suggest that, despite some overlap of the strategies, coercion is the most discernible objective, since both Downer and Bone (the latter because of her choice of title, epigraph, and overall culling of certain paragraphs from the larger piece to form the op-ed) are attempting to compel assent to their view that Australian troops should stay in Iraq, imputing cowardice to any who do not share this view. And the first coercive move is the choice of the phrase 'cut and run' as the main verb in the title of the piece (although chosen by Bone, the phrase 'cut and run' was used by Downer as a verb in the original speech, but not until about halfway through, towards the beginning of a section titled 'Iraq'). As van Dijk (1998, p. 33) has noted, 'opinions need not always be explicitly expressed in a proposition but may be implied', as is the case here.

The opinion I am imputing to Downer and to Bone seems to be supported by the second lexicogrammatical unit of the op-ed, that of the epigraph, a line that editors often take from the text and reproduce as a clearly separate line in between the headline and the body text: 'Leaving Iraq now would have a severe consequence for the security of Australia' (Downer, 2004b). In my observation, more and more in the past decade, such pieces of text have functioned to amplify the title in summarising the content of the piece. I suggest that this is done in order that those people reading only the first few lines, variously estimated to be anything from two-thirds to three-quarters of readers, will receive at least the main proposition of the argument. Thus, only two lines into the op-ed and readers have already been given the argument and 'evidence', both constructed in this way not by the actual named author of the piece, even though most of the
actual words chosen do appear later in his text, but by the editor's paradigmatic and syntagmatic moves.

Another factor at work in the discursive struggle playing out in this piece is an example of what Aden (1994, p. 54) has described as the increasingly brief, condensed 'sound bite' arguments that have come to constitute the style of public figures' 'pronouncements' in an electronic age. Aden talks also of 'fragments' of language within reconstructed new arguments so that all audiences have to do is 'process new combinations of these previously articulated fragments' (p. 54). This is certainly the case with the two sentences that make up the first paragraph of the body of Downer's op-ed:

_The sad truth is that September 11 did change the world.
We are engaged in a war to protect the civilisation we have worked so hard to create—a civilisation founded on democracy, personal liberty, the rule of law, religious freedom and tolerance._

(Emphasis added) (Downer, 2004b)

There is no actual evidence given about how or why September 11 led to the current war in Iraq, but the use of the necessity modality 'did' in the first line implies that there was no other option. We 'find such use of necessity modalities quite often in strategies that limit the negative actions of the authorities of the We-group' (van Dijk, 1998, p. 32) which, in this case, is a group that includes the USA and Australia. Furthermore, the discursive struggle enacted in this paragraph by the unproblematised use of the 'hieroglyph' of September 11 has been articulated by cultural commentators such as John Frow (2003) to show the polarised readings of 9/11 as, variably,

... an incident without apparent precedent or cause [that] carries within it the principles of change in the course of history ... [or]
a confirmation of the wrongs of US foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East ... [or] something like: evil people are intent on destroying us ... [or] however bizarre it may seem ... a struggle between Islam and Christendom. (Frow, p. 16)

Bizarre or not, the final two readings have of course become the hegemonic ones, and were quickly used to justify two aggressive invasions to 'protect the civilisation we have worked so hard to create', the one they are apparently 'intent on destroying' (Downer 2004b, emphasis added). The strategy at work here is closely linked to the strategy of coercion employed by the lexicogrammatical choices in the title and epigraph 'because it establishes the right to be obeyed, that is

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“legitimacy”…’ (Chilton & Shaffner, 1997, p. 213). Here, one could ask what techniques are used to try and establish this ‘legitimacy’? First, it is the boast ‘we have worked so hard …’ that is, of course, a cliché, and typical of a ‘legitimacy’ claim. Another legitimisation technique is the claim about general ideological principles in the second sentence. The word ‘war’ is often a site of discursive struggle, and especially so here, used in the sentence ‘We are engaged in a war…’ (Downer, 2004b).

In the original, longer text, the speech (Downer, 2004a), the word ‘war’ had a slightly different meaning and did not appear until about halfway through the fourth paragraph, when the Iraq war had not yet been mentioned specifically, but only as the latest in a list of events—September 11, Bali, Istanbul, Riyadh, Madrid, Afghanistan, and Iraq. So the word ‘war’ has a very ambiguous function in the longer text—it clearly refers to a ‘campaign waged by the terrorists’, mentioned in the previous (Press Club speech) paragraph, but for most media consumers confronted daily by a plethora of reports and images of the Iraq war, it inescapably also evokes the current military engagement. By presenting the ‘war’ sentence as the second sentence of the op-ed, immediately after the argument-summarising headline and epigraph, the editor has strengthened the more literal evocation of the word, thus reinforcing the belief that she would expect or hope to be held by readers—that some or all terrorist events from September 11, 2001 onwards can be conflated and attributed to one homogeneous group intent on destroying the civilisation of the We-group; however, the original ambiguity is not closed off, since in the second paragraph Downer refers to ‘the war against terror’. Given the subject matter, a striking absence is any mention of the many terrorist events of the second half of the twentieth century. Any such event prior to September 11, 2001 has to be omitted here, if one is arguing from the perspective of the world-changing properties of this particular tragedy. If a We-group, an Us, is constructed in an argument, and used in the strategic function of legitimisation, it follows that the essential counterpart is delegitimisation of some group of others—Them—who are different from Us. Sure enough, this group is constructed in paragraph two of the op-ed:

"There are some who believe that the war on terror is something we can avoid, that we can roll into a ball and, in the false security of an inward gaze, behave as if we are a small target and leave others to fight our battles. (Downer, 2004b)"

In contrast to the We-group that is trying to protect its hard-worked-for civilization, several other categories of ‘them’ are constructed here
by Downer. The first of the 'third-person referents ... which form the 
alienated topics' of this op-ed (Fowler, 1991, p.114) appear in the 
first sentence of the second paragraph. They are people 'who believe 
that the war ... is something we can avoid ...' Significantly, the They-
group thus invoked seems to exist within the We-group, are 'enemies 
within' (Chilton & Shaffner, 1997, p. 213), a typical construction in 
the strategy of delegitimisation. And the colloquial phrase 'leave others 
to fight our battles' works both metaphorically (meaning: letting 
others do unpleasant work that we should do for ourselves), as well as 
literally since We do have troops in Iraq. And the argumentative device 
used here? It is, of course, presupposition, since the voice obliquely 
introduces into the text a proposition that there is indeed a metaphoric 
battle, without any actual explanation of what 'our battle' really is. The 
terrorist event in which Australians were killed—the Bali bombing—can 
hardly be what is meant here, since the perpetrators of that had long 
been tried and sentenced. In any case, one would think that if that 
were meant, it would have been explicitly stated. And the strategy? 
Again, coercion—attempting to compel assent to the government's 
view that Australian troops should be, and stay, involved in the war in 
Iraq.

The delegitimisation strategy begun in paragraph two is heightened in 
the next (third) op-ed paragraph, by using the speech act of blaming 
'the enemies within', who are pronounced 'wrong', and also by the 
speech act of accusing 'the perpetrators' of terrorism (who are the next 
construction of a third-person referent):

These people are wrong. Terrorism is a threat today that knows no boundaries. Its perpetrators pay no regard to the morality of 
the religion they purport to uphold. The targets and the scale of 
their carnage are limited only by the weapons they can access and the opportunities they can identify. (Downer, 2004b)

Since 'perpetrators' are a focus in this paragraph, then surely the 
'perpetrators' of the war are an important omission, as are the deaths 
they have caused to tens of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians. Such 
absences suggest a strategy of dissimulation, and it can be seen how 
the strategic functions employed so far have already constructed a 
significant degree of ideological polarisation, all through various 
properties of discourse. In this paragraph, too, the amorphous concept 
of terrorism is first introduced. It is the subject and the main character 
of the second sentence, and takes the finite, present tense forms of

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two verbs, 'is' in the main clause, and 'knows' in the adverbial clause, a grammatical construction that almost anthropomorphises the concept of terrorism.

What it (terrorism) does 'know' are 'no geographic boundaries ...' (Downer, 2004b), suggesting it is truly amorphous, seeping everywhere, out to get everyone. The focus is then narrowed to 'its perpetrators', the characters in the subject position of the next sentence, whose 'targets and scale of carnage are limited only by the weapons They can access and the opportunities They can identify' (Downer, 2004b, capitalisation added). But the We-group is never absent for long, as such ideological polarisation must be continually maintained, and We are mentioned again in paragraph four in the context of the 'terrorism challenge we face':

The terrorism challenge we face does have the dimensions of a war. Its prosecution requires clear-sighted political commitment, national vigilance and preparedness, an informed and resilient public and a commitment of energy and resources that must be sustained over many years.

How is the legitimisation of the We-group continued here? It is, I suggest, achieved by explicitly conflating, in the first sentence, 'the terrorism challenge' that the We-group faces, with 'war'. This war is not 'waged' or 'fought' as one might assume, but 'prosecuted', a word that has connotations of a methodical activity conducted by those whose activities are legitimate, who have law on their side. This is in contrast to the terrorists' actions of the war, which (we were told in paragraph three) are carried out by 'perpetrators'; this term delegitimises by implying anonymous criminality, such implication embodying another opinion-proposition—that the two actions are qualitatively different, as indeed they are to the ideology that justifies the war in Iraq, a war waged—according to all of the primary definers—because of the arguments rehearsed here by Downer. To members of an opposing discourse community, however, such as those who believe that the invasion of Iraq was and is morally wrong, the two actions, waging terrorism and waging war, may well be similar in kind.

Such starkly opposing ideologies are ideal vehicles for teaching students the concept of discourse communities and the reading strategy of critical discourse analysis. Even with a text as apparently monologic as a political newspaper article, asking sufficiently probing questions can result in discussion that reveals the implicit 'dialogic organisation,
reflecting oppositional discourses in the surrounding political culture' (Chifton & Shaffner, p. 216). Of course, a political text, and one by such a prominent politician, is clearly not the usual op-ed article; but, nevertheless, such politicians' utterances are, to use John Hartley's term 'accessed voices' (Hartley, quoted in Fowler, 1991, p. 22) and are therefore part of the 'efforts of governments ...' to manipulate 'the dissemination of information by the media', to quote Don Watson (p. 355), whose argument set off my discussion.

The reading described here is only the start of what could be a most fruitful discourse analysis of both the original speech and the entire article, as well as many other similar mediated political linguistic acts, by both the government and the opposition. Such analyses constitute a most suitable methodology for examining media in a way that can help illustrate Watson's view (p. 355) of how, 'for every opinion there is a countervailing one [and] for every lie there is at least an opportunity to correct the record'.

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