

## ○ C. ANTHONISSEN AND J. BLOMMAERT (EDS), *DISCOURSE AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS*

(AMSTERDAM; PHILADELPHIA: JOHN BENJAMINS, 2007, PP. VII, 142)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with the affirmation that ‘all human beings are born with equal and inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms’. Unfortunately, for many, these fundamental freedoms such as the common values of human decency and dignity, equality and justice, as convincingly illustrated in this volume, can be agonisingly difficult to achieve.

*Discourse and Human Rights Violations* is a collection of six papers first presented at a workshop on the Language of Remembering and Forgetting in 2001 at the University of the Western Cape, subsequently published as a Special Issue of the *Journal of Language and Politics* 5:1 (2006). This volume is centred on the political uses of a Truth Reconciliation Committee. A core objective of the TRC is ‘restoring the human and civil dignity of victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are victims’ (Brooks 1999, p. 482). The book is a useful and comprehensive review of a selection of material that reveals the limitations of the processes of a TRC as an opportunity to face an oppressive past and help create conditions for healing. Reading this book raises some pertinent and rarely researched questions and subtle issues about ownership and the empowerment of language - the right to re-tell, reuse, analyse and interpret the stories.

I found this book very interesting, highly readable and thought provoking. The volume is an attempt to synthesise and demonstrate the value of linguistic and literary methodologies as powerful analytic tools to make human rights violations more visible and penetrable through an investigation of the processes of remembering and forgetting. A consistent line of argument running through the volume shows how the process of law fails to understand and adequately address the transgression and gross violations of human rights. A central theme underlying the text is that Truth lies in what is, and probably more significantly, what is *not* being said; the hidden qualities of the discourse of pain and suffering. It is in this realm that innovative and rigorous linguistic analyses such as those advanced by Wodak, Blommaert et al, have much to offer in human rights discourse.

The topic of human rights discourse is relevant to a multidisciplinary readership - sociologists, historians, international lawyers, social anthropologists, political scientists and psychologists - while targeting its primary audience, those working in the field of linguistics. It foregrounds the value of detailed linguistic analyses using a welcome variety of methodological approaches from a range of theoretical standpoints: an anthropological perspective, narrative analysis, sociolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-historical method.

The title of the book, *Discourse and Human Rights Violations*, is imprecise. This could be misleading to a prospective and diverse readership with expectations that the collection would present a more global perspective of human rights discourse, drawing examples from a wider range of contexts. A two-part title, for example: *Focus on South Africa*, would have assisted in allaying such expectations and be helpful in signalling to a more general readership the main focus of the volume. The volume does not cover the broad spectrum of human rights violations. With the exception of the last, polished and very persuasive contribution by Ruth Wodak in her case study approach of human rights discourse in the Austrian context, 'German *Wehrmacht*', the remainder of the collection focuses on South Africa and the Truth Reconciliation Committee.

In terms of structural organization my main criticisms are twofold. First, thematic development, while present, could have been more explicit. The volume could, at first, look like a series of articles with the TRC as its focus, yet the contributions are much richer than this. While each piece contributes to the editors' vision of the whole, more lessons could have been drawn from them in order to make the sum more than the addition of its parts. This resulted in a missed opportunity that could have been exploited and signalled in the introduction to the volume. Secondly, the inclusion of Wodak's intriguing paper, which seems a little out of place in terms of its context, undoubtedly adds status to the volume, and its link to the other works could have been better integrated in the introduction. Alternatively, another paper examining data from another human rights situation context outside South Africa, (Chile, Argentina) would have assisted the coherence of the volume. Whilst the South African Commission has certainly been shaped by its unique history, there are many similarities to the experiences in Eastern Europe and elsewhere that could perhaps have been usefully integrated into this volume.

Among the individual contributions, the first paper by Annelies Verdoolaege provides a comprehensive literature review of the TRC that serves as a useful framework for the following papers, particularly for the non-specialist. She also highlights the main theme of how language mediates memory.

Blommaert, Bock and McCormick's focus on narrative inequality is a stand-out piece that relates the suppression of truth in a global context by referring to other voiceless/powerless groups (Blacks in the US). The paper shows how the power of the system that did the evil may dismiss certain language varieties. Succinctly expressed in, 'people don't enter the public forum as equals' (p. 34) this data-driven approach, drawing on compelling personal testimonies, is very engaging and furthers our understanding of different ways of speaking which are socially positioned (Hymes 1996) and problems associated with testimonies in an African language, e.g. dependency on translation, received with less credibility. The data are exhaustively and insightfully analysed in terms of structure, sequence and function. Insights that emerge from the analysis are the inadequacy of reliance on verbal transcripts alone to tell the story, and the role of the commission in its methods, in its selection, conversion and transformation of private to public transcripts.

Christine Anthonissen reminds the reader of the situatedness of discourse. She draws on Wodak's Discourse-historical analytical method, stressing the non-neutral aspect of language and its relationship to power relations in society. Her paper is an important contribution and is well integrated into the volume. In her analysis of transcripts from the Trojan Horse hearings (1997), a violent confrontation between youngsters and police, she develops issues of powerlessness, raised by Blommaert et al, persuasively demonstrating how language can be reformulated to present an inaccurate record of events with much remaining suppressed.

Annie Gagiano's essay is moving and disturbing, yet hopeful. Firmly situated in the post-apartheid era of South Africa, the novel serves here as the vehicle for analysis with a focus on the depiction of violation, dispossession. Six novels (fictional and non fictional) were chosen as 'examples of the way fiction can "extend" the sense of apartheid as an *experience* ... making it possible for readers to ... recollect ... intimate as well as public aspects of the system' (p. 90). Gagiano's aim is to demonstrate how such texts 'can put harrowing memories to healing use' (p.98) while emphasising that the language of reconciliation can sidestep issues of retributive justice and recovery (p. 93). She succeeds admirably in this creative approach in her use of literature.

Fiona Ross makes an important contribution in an international human rights community that has largely ignored women's issues (Mackinnon 1993). Her impressive data focuses on women's testimonies, their experiences of harm as reported before the TRC, and the inadequacy of language alone to recall experiences of violence and suffering. This is an insightful paper that draws attention to the significance of the subject position of the speaker being of central significance in attributing meaning to the narratives. Data

comprise ethnographic observations and video recordings of testimonial practices. Rich case studies are insightful as they relate to issues of truth, and the significance of cultural and normative conventions in shaping meanings is emphasised.

Ruth Wodak, a highly respected, experienced and eminent scholar in studies of global discourse, presents a fascinating case study approach of how language is used to distance people from justice and responsibility. The discourse-historical analytic method adopted demonstrates clear links to those used in other papers in the volume. The context, however, is Austria, and data comprise interviews with three visitors to exhibitions of war crimes of the 'German *Wehrmacht*'. This context makes the chapter stand out from the rest of the collection.

Reconciliation is an international phenomenon of concern and *Discourse and Human Rights Violations* offers a valuable and accessible account of sound theoretically supported research that has elicited rich and fascinating historical narratives. The volume is an interesting presentation of the complicated domain of human rights discourse that indicates the rich potential for multidisciplinary research between linguistics and a range of related disciplines. My main reservation about the book is that the work that it reports is already 8 years old. This is an important contribution to the discourse on human rights which I admire, yet the book could have achieved more. The questions and issues that emerge from this volume are unquestionably confronting, timely, and particularly pertinent, not least in the Australian context, in this age of public apology (Brooks 1999). As clearly articulated by Wodak (p. 139) 'societies have tremendous difficulties in dealing with traumatic pasts which do not match their overall official democratic values and their national myths and narratives'. This volume encourages its readers to become more active in that community to reveal these gross injustices and assist in the healing process.

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