



The researcher as “implicated subject”. Reflections on sanctioned ignorance in (critical) discourse analysis and how we can move past it

Samuel Bennett

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan

In this talk I reflect on the nature of the critical in Critical Discourse Studies (Serafis & Bennett 2025) and discuss the ethics of doing sociolinguistic research. For many, taking a critical approach to the study of language means understanding that language is produced within contexts of power inequalities and that language produces inequalities. Still more will pair this with an explicit epistemological position that foregrounds research as ‘problem-oriented’ and that output should make a material difference to the fabric of society (cf. Reisigl & Wodak 2001; Catalano & Waugh 2020).

However, I argue that despite the ‘good intentions’ of (critical) discourse analysis, there are blind spots concerning the role that researchers and academia plays in upholding inequalities and exclusionary power structures. I show how there is often a ‘sanctioned ignorance’ (Spivak 1988) in sociolinguistics concerning this, which renders researchers as ‘implicated subjects’, i.e. “how we are ‘folded into’ (implicated in) events that at first seem beyond our agency as individual subjects’ (Rotherberg 2019, 1). To indicate this I offer a reflexive discourse analysis (Alejandro 2020) of my own work on race, immigration and colonialism (Bennett 2019, 2025).

However, following Alejandro (2020, 150) we need to ask whether “the knowledge we produce [can] be emancipatory when our discourses recursively originate in the world we aim to challenge?” For as, Audre Lorde reminds us, ‘the master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house’ (2017, 19). To this end, I propose bringing decolonial theory into (critical) discourse analysis research and offer a number of ways in which this be done.

References

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