Applying cognitive pragmatics to Critical Discourse Studies: A proximization analysis of three public space discourses

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to show how proximization theory, a recent cognitive-pragmatic model of crisis and threat construction, can be applied in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). It is argued that the rapidly growing, intergeneric field of CDS is in need of new, interdisciplinary methodologies that will allow it to account for an increasingly broader spectrum of discourses, genres and thematic domains. Thus, proximization theory is used as a candidate methodological tool to handle three sample discourses – health, environment, modern technology – with a view to further applications. The results seem promising: the theory elucidates well the key features of public discourses within the CDS scope, especially the legitimization patterns in policy communication. The analysis of the three discourses demonstrates a consistent reliance of policy legitimization on discursively construed framework of fear and threat, both material and ideological. Equally promising are the prospects for proximization theory itself to continue to draw empirically from the expanding CDS territory. The most fruitful seem those of CDS domains whose discourses (ranging from war discourse to cancer treatment discourse) force a direct and growing conflict between symbolically demarcated ''home'' and ''external'' entities, thus sanctioning urgent preventive actions against the latter.

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Keywords: Critical Discourse Studies (CDS); Cognitive pragmatics; Proximization theory; Public space discourses; Policy legitimization

1. Introduction

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) counts, without exaggeration, among the most vigorously developing research enterprises located at the intersection of contemporary linguistics and social sciences.[1] Colonizing, day in and day out, new discourse domains, from the top-most level of (mediatized) state politics to the bottom-most level of (individual) discourses of social concern such as health or environment, CDS is committed to a necessarily broad spectrum and a large number of different, often interdisciplinary and converging, methodologies. The goal of this paper is to contribute one such methodological tool, *proximization theory* (Cap, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013), a recent cognitive-pragmatic development designed to account for strategic regularities underlying forced construals in political/public discourse. It is to offer, in Chilton's (2005b, 2011) words, a ''missing [*interdisciplinary* as well as *intergeneric*] link'', between Critical Discourse Studies and cognitive pragmatics.

Originally meant to deal with legitimization issues in state political discourse (especially interventionist discourse such as discourse of the war-on-terror [Cap, 2006]), proximization seems now well applicable in the vast area of public discourses, including such heterogeneous domains as preventive medicine, cyber-threat or policies to contain climate

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[1] See a comprehensive, four-volume overview by Wodak (2012).

change. Of course, as will be demonstrated, the implementation of proximization to account for these discourses, entails certain changes to the initial assumptions and design of the theory. In that sense, the secondary goal of the paper is to use the CDS empirical scope and data to upgrade proximization theory.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 I give a necessarily compact overview of proximization as a concept and a theory. In Section 3 I provide a sample illustration of the descriptive and explanatory power of proximization in its ''cradle'' domain of state political discourse. The examples come from the US administration discourse of the Iraq war (2003–2004). In Section 4, I extend the original scope of proximization theory to cover several public space discourses which CDS practitioners have recently developed much interest in: health, environment and modern technology. Section 5 is a summary statement on what the analyses of these discourses promise in the way of further implementation of proximization in critical studies and, conversely, what modifications of proximization theory must be put in place to process greater and more varied amounts of CDS data.

2. Proximization: the concept and the theory

In its most general and practical sense, proximization is a discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events and states of affairs (including ''distant'' adversarial ideologies) as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee. Projecting the distant entities as gradually encroaching upon the speaker-addressee territory (both physical and ideological), the speaker may attempt a variety of goals, but the principal goal is usually *legitimization of actions and policies* the speaker proposes to neutralize the growing impact of the negative, ''foreign'', ''alien'', ''antagonistic'', entities.

Proximization is a relatively new concept in linguistics. The verbal forms ''proximize'', ''proximizing'' (i.e. bringing [conceptually] closer), are first found in Chilton (2004), while the nominal term ''proximization'' was originally proposed by Cap (2006), who also first used it to mark an *organized, strategic deployment of cognitive-pragmatic construals in discourse*. Ever since, proximization has developed into a cognitive-linguistic, pragmatic, as well as a critical discourse analytic concept accounting for the symbolic construal of relations between entities within the Discourse Space (DS) (cf. Chilton, 2005a) – most notably, the symbolic shifts whereby the peripheral elements of the DS are construed as the central ones, members of the ''deictic center'' (Chilton, 2005a; Cap, 2006) of the Space. The explanatory power of proximization has been utilized within a number of different theoretical frameworks and thematic domains. Chilton (2005a, 2010) relates to it in his cognitive-linguistic Discourse Space Theory (DST); Cap (2006, 2008, 2010) makes it a theoretical premise for several case studies of the Iraq war rhetoric; in a similar vein, Hart (2010) incorporates it (as a coercive strategy) in his multidisciplinary approach to metaphoric construals of the speaker-external threat. Proximization has been shown to operate within diverse discourse domains, though most commonly in *state political discourses*: crisis construction and war rhetoric (Chovanec, 2010; Okulska and Cap, 2010), the (anti-) immigration discourse (Hart, 2010), political party representation (Cienki et al., 2010), and construction of national memory (Filardo Llamas, 2010). There have also been studies of proximization in works at the intersection of political genres. In the most comprehensive one, Dunmire (2011) investigates proximization patterns in a US foreign policy document (the 2002 National Security Strategy articulating the ''[G.W.] Bush Doctrine'') and how they were followed in speeches enacting the Doctrine.

All these theoretical and empirical threads have been recently reviewed and revisited in Cap (2013), a monograph proposing an integrated *proximization theory.* The theory follows the original concept of proximization, which is defined as a forced construal operation meant to evoke closeness of the external threat, to solicit legitimization of preventive measures. The threat comes from the DS peripheral entities, referred to as ODCs (''outside-deictic-center''), which are conceptualized to be crossing the Space to invade the IDC (''inside-deictic-center'') entities, that is the speaker and her addressee. The threat possesses a spatio-temporal as well as ideological nature, which sanctions the division of proximization in three aspects. ''Spatial proximization'' is a forced construal of the DS peripheral entities encroaching *physically* upon the DS central entities (speaker, addressee). ''Temporal proximization'' is a forced construal of the envisaged conflict as not only imminent, but also momentous, historic and thus needing immediate response and unique preventive measures. Spatial and temporal proximization involve strong fear appeals and typically use analogies to conflate the growing threat with an actual disastrous occurrence in the past, to endorse the current scenario. Finally, ''axiological proximization'' is a construal of a gathering ideological clash between the ''home values'' of the DS central entities (IDCs) and the alien and antagonistic (ODC) values. Importantly, the ODC values are construed to reveal potential to materialize (that is, prompt a physical impact) within the IDC, the speaker's and the addressee's, home territory.

Proximization theory and its Spatial-Temporal-Axiological (STA) analytic model assume that all the three aspects or strategies of proximization contribute to the *continual narrowing of the symbolic distance* between the entities/values in the Discourse Space and their negative impact on the speaker and her addressee. As such, goes proximization theory, the strategies of proximization constitute prime legitimization devices in political interventionist discourse; the discourse