Critical Discourse Analysis: Learning From English Conversations on the Set of a Japanese Television Drama

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Abstract

In this paper, critical discourse analysis (CDA) helps explain how a racially accepting and tolerant Canadian man could so callously objectify a Japanese woman on the set of a Japanese television drama. It is an autoethnographic piece, which takes an interdisciplinary approach to research and concentrates on the Japanese media from a foreign actor’s perspective. I first identify what I mean by critical discourse analysis and then discuss the Canadian man’s comments in relation to racial, gender and media discourses within the context of a two-day drama shoot, which saw ten men from nine different countries play minor parts in the Tokyo Broadcasting Corporation’s production of the drama called Spec.

Key words: critical discourse analysis (CDA), racial discourse, gender discourse, media discourse

She’s twenty-five? Wow! How old is this one? A white Canadian man was sitting amongst a group of actors on the set of a famous Japanese television drama when he responded to one of his co-worker’s comments, pointed to a Japanese woman sitting across from him, and uttered the words above. Despite objectifying the woman, the man spoke without malice and arguably had no intention of offending her. In fact, he appeared to be completely unaware of the nuances of his comments. Where did he learn this form of social behaviour? According to Teun van Dijk in “Discourse and Racism,” much of what we learn about the world is derived from “everyday conversations with family members, friends, and colleagues. The same is true for ethnic prejudices and ideologies” (p. 150). Could this mean that the man’s comments reflect what he has learned from the conversations he has had with his peers in Tokyo’s foreign acting community? In this paper, I will attempt to explain how critical discourse analysis may help understand the answer to this question better. I will first identify what I mean by critical discourse analysis and will then discuss the Canadian man’s comments in relation to racial, gender and media discourses within the context of a two-day drama shoot, which saw ten men from nine different countries play minor parts in the Tokyo Broadcasting Corporation’s production of the drama called Spec.

Defining Discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis

In Discourse: The New Critical Idiom, Sara Mills explains that the term “discourse” has become so conventional within a variety of academic disciplines “it is frequently left undefined, as if its usage were simply common knowledge” (p. 1). There are numerous interpretations of the word, but like James Gee in “Discourse Analysis: What Makes it Critical?” I believe discourses are “distinctive ways people talk, read, write, think, believe, value, act, and interact with things and other people to get recognized (and recognize themselves) as a distinctive group” (Hacking in Gee, p. 39). And like van Dijk in “Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity:” ‘Discourse’ is here meant in the broad sense of a ‘communicative event’, including conversational interaction, written text, as well as associated gestures, facework, typographical layout, images and any other ‘semiotic’ or multimedia dimension of signification (p. 98).

In this essay, I will be focussing on conversations
that naturally occurred during a two-day drama shoot, which would indicate, at least to theorists like Sara Mills, Deborah Tannen and Jan Renkema, that I will be engaging in a form of discourse analysis. However, as indicated earlier, I have chosen to focus on these communicative events in relation to critical discourse analysis (CDA). But what exactly is the difference between discourse analysis and CDA? According to Renkema in Introduction to Discourse Studies, “The most prominent approach to discourse and culture is Critical Discourse Analysis, a method in which many central concepts in discourse studies play an important role” (p. 282). Renkema also notes that CDA attempts to “detect societal problems, especially discrimination” (p. 282) and he describes the differences between CDA and discourse analysis when he states, “The term critical in this approach means that an analysis cannot be neutral or free of values” (p. 282). To my mind, Renkema’s comments inspire one very important question. Can any form of analysis actually claim to be “neutral or free of values?” Like James Gee:

My view is that there are solid linguistic, even grammatical, grounds on which to argue that all language in interaction is inherently political and, thus, that all discourse analysis, if it is to be true to its subject matter (i.e., language in use) and in that sense scientific, must be critical discourse analysis (Gee, p. 34).

CDA, like the term discourse, is also open to a variety of interpretations, but a great number of theorists tend to associate it with communicative events and their relationship to power. In “Reframing for Decisions: Transforming Talk About Literacy and Assessment Among Teachers and Researchers” for example, Loukia Sarroub writes, “Critical Discourse Analysis refers to how and why people talk and interact the way they do in their everyday lives” (p. 98). She then explains that it can be used to help better understand “the relationship among talk, interaction, and power” (p. 99). In “What CDA is About – A Summary of its History, Important Concepts and its Developments,” Ruth Wodak agrees with Sarroub when she notes that CDA is particularly interested in how language relates to power (p. 2). According to Wodak, “CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (p. 2). Both Sarroub and Wodak offer compelling arguments but perhaps it is van Dijk in “Critical Discourse Analysis” who best manages to define CDA:

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (p. 352).

For the specific purposes of this essay, van Dijk’s comments in “The Study of Discourse: An Introduction” are also worth noting:

Critical discourse analysis focuses on social problems and not on scholarly paradigms, and tries to understand and solve such problems with any kind of method, theory or description that may be relevant – taking into account the experiences and perspectives of the participants (p. xl).

As I see it, the social problem being discussed in this piece focuses on how a Canadian man can unwittingly objectify a Japanese woman without awareness of his behaviour. I also believe that this essay, in and of itself, is a form of CDA because I am allowing the writing process to help develop my thoughts while I attempt to critically analyze the racial, gender and media discourses that took place during the two-day shooting of Spec. And, although I have chosen to look at this event from my particular perspective, I am keenly aware that “inherent in the interdisciplinary nature of the field of discourse studies is the fact that each phenomenon can be looked at from different viewpoints” (Renkema, p. 5).

Racial Discourse and the Tokyo Broadcasting System’s Production of Spec

Before starting this essay, I had every intention of writing a piece about critical discourse analysis
in connection with racism. As a visible minority living in Tokyo, it is not hard to come up with numerous examples of unintentional as well as blatant forms of racial discrimination. On August 16, 2010 however, my focus changed when I started working as an actor in a minor role on the set of Spec. I played an elite security guard and was supposed to be a member of the notorious private military group called Blackwater. My “team” or “unit” was comprised of ten foreign men from nine different countries, including one Australian, two Canadians, one Ghanaian, one German, one Iranian, one Kenyan, one Moroccan, one Senegalese, and one man from Somalia. We were definitely a diverse group of individuals placed in a very unique situation. During the two days, like most acting jobs, all of the actors with minor parts spent their long waiting hours either sleeping or just talking to one another. In fact, on a job like the one being discussed, it is not uncommon for an individual to sit and wait for three or four hours before he or she is needed for a particular scene. These long hours usually provide cast members with the opportunity to engage in long and often times intimate conversations. So, I thought that this would be an excellent opportunity to focus on how ethnic minorities living in Tokyo really talked to one another.

While attempting to concentrate on the natural and spontaneous conversations happening all around me, what I quickly realized, or perhaps what was once again reinforced for me, was that the racial differences or hostilities so readily played up in the Western media did not exist amongst these ten foreign men living in Japan. Our racial and religious diversity appeared not to matter, which prompted many of the Japanese extras to ask us if we were long-time friends or acquaintances. When one of the production staff members asked how we all managed to bond so quickly, the man from Ghana simply said, “We are like brothers in this industry and we are like brothers in Japan.”

As Chris Barker et al. explain in Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis: A Dialogue on Language and Identity, “Ethnicity is a relational concept concerned with categories of self-identification and social ascription. What we think of as our identity is dependent on what we think we are not” (p. 123). In the case of the ten men acting in Spec, our individual ethnicity did not define us as a group, and we more or less defined ourselves by what we were not. And, at the risk of oversimplifying our diversity, the two most defining aspects of our group came down to the fact that we were not Japanese and we were not women.

Unfortunately, the racial harmony displayed by the ten foreign men on the set of Spec did not mean that the two days passed by without various forms of racial discrimination. Because the ten foreign actors were cast as members of Blackwater, almost every member of the Japanese production staff seemed to feel very comfortable referring to each individual actor as “Blackwater.” Typical comments sounded something like, “Blackwater, can you stand over here please” or, “Blackwater, you are going to have to close that door during the scene.” Referring to the individual cast members as “Blackwater” did not come across as being particularly offensive, but it definitely made everyone vitally aware of the “Other” on the set. According to Renkema, racism tends to manifest itself in discourse and it is usually “defined as a prejudice or stereotypical belief that discriminates against a minority group (however, not necessarily of another race) or a group with less status than the group in power” (p. 288). In this particular case, the foreign actors had minor roles in the drama and consequently we were treated better than the Japanese extras. However, while we may have received special attention, we were still treated as outsiders whenever compared to anyone in the Japanese cast. And when one of the assistant directors did not appreciate the German actor talking to one of the Japanese female extras, he proceeded to warn everyone over a loud speaker about the “Blackwater” men and their notorious womanizing habits. His comments were delivered somewhat sarcastically, but the general implication was that the foreigners were a mild threat to the Japanese women on set. In “Discourse and Racism,” van Dijk discusses this kind of social behaviour and explains that discriminatory
practices are not always intentional, but they "presuppose socially shared and negatively oriented mental representations of Us about Them" (p. 146). The assistant director may not have meant any harm by his comments but according to van Dijk in “Racist Discourse,” these kinds of comments do in fact reflect common forms of racist discourse, which focus on the “Other” as a threat to the dominant group and as individuals who could potentially harass the women from this group (p. 353).

So, why did the Japanese production crew appear to be more comfortable referring to individual foreigners as “Blackwater” instead of by name and or by individual characteristic? In “Discourse and Racism” van Dijk explains that “ethnic prejudices and ideologies are not innate, and do not develop spontaneously in ethnic interaction” (p. 146). He also explains how these prejudices and ideologies are developed:

They are acquired and learned, and this usually happens through communication, that is, through text and talk. And vice versa, such racist mental representations are typically expressed, formulated, defended, and legitimated in discourse and may thus be reproduced and shared within the dominant group. It is essentially in this way that racism is "learned" in society (p. 146).

In this particular example, referring to each individual foreigner as “Blackwater” tends to mirror the Japanese society in general. In Japan, the polite word for foreigner is “gaikokujin” and the impolite word is “gaijin,” and both words literally mean “outside people.” According to the Japanese language, there are essentially two kinds of people in Japan, or in the world for that matter, the gaikokujin and the Japanese. Pico Iyer discusses this social phenomenon in Imagining Canada: An Outsider’s Hope for a Global Future and claims that even the foreigner who lives in Japan “for fifty years and speaks flawless Japanese will always and only be called a gaijin, or ‘outsider person’” (p. 30). And thus, the racial interactions on the set of Spec appear to reflect the greater racial discourse in Japan. In this case, the word “Blackwater” simply replaced the word “gaikokujin” as a word used to refer to the “Other” or the “outside person.” This kind of behaviour might be considered somewhat racist in heterogeneous countries like Canada or America, but in Japan it simply reflects a learned form of social behaviour, which, according to Iyer, is a result of a classically exclusionary culture trying to hang on to its traditions, and preserve its sense of self in the accelerating global world (p. 30).

At times, the ten foreign men on the set of Spec were not just the victims of racial discrimination they were also the perpetrators of racist discourse. The racial harmony that existed between these men did not carry over to the larger dominant Japanese culture. During the shooting, five of the foreign actors often referred to the Japanese staff members as “these people.” Typical comments sounded something like, “These people just don’t get it” or, “These people just don’t have any common sense and they can’t give anyone a direct answer.” The words “these people” were often used to describe how “we” as foreigners could do a better job of producing the drama and how “they” as Japanese could not comprehend our way of thinking due to different cultural and social behaviours. In “Racist Discourse” van Dijk notes that one of the overall characteristics of “racist discourse is the negative portrayal of Them, often combined with a positive representation of Ourselves” (p. 352), which is exactly what some of the foreigners were implying whenever they used the words “these people.” And, the continuous use of the words “these people” helps explain why the Canadian man felt so at ease when referring to the Japanese woman as “this one.”

Gender Discourse and Foreign Male Actors in Tokyo

The racial harmony demonstrated by the ten men on the set of Spec was arguably a very commendable form of social behavior. If one were to focus exclusively on this topic, these men would probably be portrayed in a very positive manner. However, whenever the conversations focused
on women, and admittedly this subject tended to preoccupy our minds, the accepting and tolerant discourse practically disappeared. In “Discourse and Racism” van Dijk writes, “text and talk play a vital role in the reproduction of contemporary racism” (p. 145). I will argue that text and talk also play a vital role in the reproduction of sexist discourse and gender discrimination. In “Racist Discourse,” van Dijk explains that the first form of racist discourse occurs when individuals blatantly use “derogatory slurs, insults, impolite forms of address, and other forms of discourse that explicitly express and enact superiority and lack of respect” (p. 352). Once again, I will argue that this comment can be applied to gender discrimination, which unfortunately was very prevalent in the majority of conversations the foreign men had about women.

One particularly disheartening comment came from one of the men who had just finished talking very passionately about Ramadan as well as the virtues of the Islamic faith. The man was very proud of his religion, and despite the intense Tokyo heat and a busy work schedule, he fasted during the daylight hours. After one of our intimate conversations about religion, the topic gradually shifted back to women and one man started talking about one of the female Japanese extras. The Islamic man talked about the same woman and said, “I don’t have time for that bitch, unless she has her own place and wants to fuck.” He followed up this statement with “I am married, so if a girl does not have her own place I am not interested.” My question, how does one attempt to understand or analyze comments like these without casting aspersions on the individual responsible for making the remarks? According to Rebecca Rogers in An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education, CDA “is an analysis of not only what is said, but what is left out—not only what is present in the text, but what is absent” (p. 7). In this case, the man was speaking his fourth language, and for him, words like “bitch” and “fuck” did not necessarily have the same implications or meanings that they would otherwise have had if he had been speaking in his native Arabic. In fact, the man later admitted that he did not curse in Arabic because it sounded too vulgar, especially during Ramadan. And, as Gee explains in Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method, “meanings of words are not stable and general. Rather, words have multiple and ever changing meanings created for and adapted to specific contexts of use” (p. 40). For this man, using foul language in Arabic would have been particularly offensive during Ramadan, but he did not associate his crude comments in English as being inappropriate. He also learned a great deal of his English on television and movie sets, which means his cursing and derogatory remarks towards women may in fact reflect the common discourse spoken by native English speakers on these sets.

In most social situations the Islamic man’s comments would have been inappropriate and shocking, but on the set of Spec they weren’t even the most derogatory remarks made about women. But how is this possible? How can ten men be so accepting of other cultures, races and religions and then engage in discourse that blatantly disrespects women? Once again, according to Rogers, it is often important to focus on what has been “left out” or what is “absent” from an individual’s comments. In the case of the foreign men on the set of Spec, it is possible, and probably very likely, that the social environment helped contribute to their sexist discourse. Most of the men were selected to be in the drama because of their physical stature and or masculine appearance. A group of ten large masculine looking men can be intimidating, and it is very possible that some of these men were degrading women in order to establish the “Other,” which in turn would help secure their own individual places as members of the group. As Renkema notes, an individual can “use language intentionally to give information, to tell a story or to try to convince someone” (p. 4). To my mind, the men who frequently used sexist discourse were trying to convince the other members of the group that they were “real men,” which meant that they belonged to this aggressive and masculine form of culture. And thus, during the two-day drama shoot, those men who felt the need to degrade women
may have, and probably were, compensating for their own feelings of insecurity. When I was questioned about the Japanese women on the set, for example, I responded by saying, “You know something, I’m a happily married man and I have two beautiful kids, now why in the hell would I want to fuck that up?” I definitely didn’t need to curse, but looking back on that conversation now, I too was attempting to look tough or strong while talking about women. I’m not saying that any of this behavior should be considered socially acceptable, but it does help explain why so many of these men felt the need to talk about women in such a degrading manner. And thus, when the other Canadian man referred to the Japanese woman as “this one,” he was not only repeating what he had learned from other members of the group, he was also probably trying to establish himself as a group “insider.”

**Media Discourse: Reflecting and Simultaneously Promoting Racial and Gender Discourses**

As the two-day shoot was coming to a close and everyone was preparing for the scene’s climax, I started wondering how all of the racial and sexist discourse might be interrelated with the media, and more specifically with the production of *Spec*. In the final party scene, one of the main Japanese actors got poisoned and then died in front of everyone. While he was writhing in pain, another Japanese actor dramatically took control of the situation and instructed everyone on how to behave. The supposed elite foreign security guards in charge of protecting the poisoned man’s life did not respond at all. In fact, they didn’t even move. When some of the foreign cast members tried to tell the director that their lack of movement would come across as being extremely unnatural, he simply cut them off and told them that the scene had already been designed that way. It was not difficult to see that the director had created a scene that would allow a Japanese man to become the only hero. But while this scene glorified the Japanese man, it also inspired an image of foreign male incompetence. In a Japanese drama, this is not necessarily surprising in the same way that it is not unusual to see a white hero in the overwhelming majority of American television shows. According to van Dijk, “racist societies and institutions produce racist discourses, and racist discourses reproduce the stereotypes, prejudices and ideologies that are used to defend and legitimize” the dominant culture (“Racist Discourse,” p. 354). Of course, I don’t believe *Spec* was produced with any particular malice or racist intent, but it did reproduce stereotypes and legitimize Japanese superiority, which in turn reflect as well as perpetuate a continuous cycle of racist discourse.

The final party scene also appeared to reflect and perpetuate gender discrimination. While the poisoned man was supposed to be dying, the director instructed many of the Japanese women to let out a panic-stricken scream. And like the Blackwater members, these women appeared to be completely helpless until the brave Japanese man took control and told them what to do. According to Barker et al:

> Television does not construct identities in the manner of a hypodermic needle but provides materials to be worked on. As Tomlinson (1991) has argued, the media is the dominant representational aspect of modern culture but its meanings are mediated by the ‘lived experience’ of everyday culture. The relationship between media and culture is therefore one of the subtle interplay of mediations (p. 8).

In *Spec*’s party scene, the women were highly emotional and heavily dependent on a man during the time of crisis. This stereotypical portrayal of women in the Japanese media was definitely not unusual. And, the foreign men who were so dismayed when their own characters remained motionless during the scene’s climax didn’t even notice that the women were being portrayed in the same weak and powerless manner. In fact, no one seemed to notice. The climax of this scene was definitely not responsible for the racist and sexist discourse that took place on the set, but it did reflect this behaviour and it will probably...
perpetuate similar behaviour in the future.

**Conclusion**

CDA may not be able to decisively explain how a racially accepting and tolerant Canadian man can so callously objectify a Japanese woman, but it can help explain why such a phenomenon might occur. In this particular case, the man’s comments reflect the racial and sexist discourses that he and the other foreign men frequently used on the set of Spec. To a lesser extent, his comments also reflect the Japanese media’s stereotypical portrayal of women. Of course, it would be easy dismiss this individual as a white male chauvinist and then disregard his comments entirely. But human beings are so much more than simple comments and or opinions, and there is so much to be gained or learned from critically analyzing the complex chain of events that lead up to the man’s comments. As most critical discourse analysts note, there isn’t one particular set formula for conducting CDA, but as Barker et al. explain, “CDA can enrich the study of human beings talking. If language is a tool, CDA may help us wield it in ways better suited to our purposes” (p. 21). I for one used the writing process involved with this essay to help analyze my own actions and words on the set of Spec. I am sure that I will work with most of the Spec actors again on different sets, and this will provide me with an opportunity to show them that it is possible to talk about Japanese women in a tasteful and respectful manner. I’m also positive that direct lectures about respecting women just might. After all, if causal conversation has helped teach these men how to discriminate, perhaps it can also be used in a manner that teaches them how not to discriminate.

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