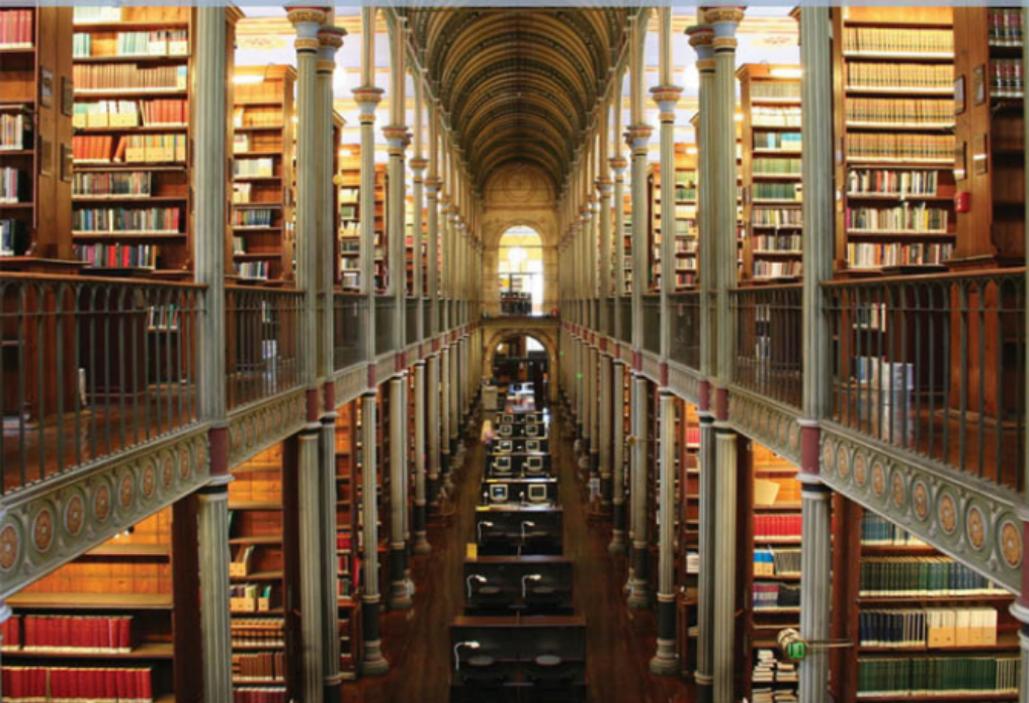Adam Hodges

The "War on Terror" Narrative

Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction
and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality

The "War on Terror" Narrative

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Adam Hodges

For the victims of 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq
Peace and justice begin with understanding.

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Preface

> A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside of
> it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat
> it to us inexorably.
>
> <div align="right">—Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001: 41)</div>

By now, much has been written about the events of 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, weapons of mass destruction, supposed links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, Joseph Wilson's trip to Niger, the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Bagram Air Force Base, the Downing Street minutes, the torture of "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo Bay, extraordinary rendition, the Geneva Convention deemed "quaint" by the Attorney General, the elimination of habeas corpus by Congress, waterboarding—in short, the multiple variations on the all-encompassing theme that Americans came to know as the "war on terror" during the Bush administration's tenure in the White House. Given that the sine qua non of democracy is transparency and accountability, one hopes that Americans will persist in the search for greater understanding of these issues and practice democracy by entering into a healthy conversation about the past in an attempt to create a better future.

I write this book from the perspective of a sociocultural linguist interested in the discursive details of political interaction, but I also write as an American citizen deeply concerned with the response to 9/11 orchestrated by the Bush administration and the policy it pursued during its two terms in the White House. My position as a scholar cannot be decoupled from my position as an intellectual in a democratic

society. Although this book is primarily aimed at an academic audience familiar with and interested in the empirical study of political discourse and concomitant theoretical issues, the impetus for the investigation stems from my position as a member of a society that has been engaged in an ongoing debate about an appropriate response to terrorism and America's role in the world. As a citizen, I watched the horrifying scenes of 9/11 beamed via television into my home, and became further horrified as my government turned to war as the answer. My horror turned to incredulity as I witnessed the Bush administration plan and execute the selling of a second war in Iraq, using 9/11 as the pretext for its marketing campaign. How could the administration be so effective in convincing so many Americans that war with Iraq was justified and necessary? Arguably, the mobilization against the war prior to its start was unprecedented. Millions of concerned citizens, myself included, joined campaigns and street protests to voice opposition to what we saw as an ill-conceived and illegitimate invasion. Yet, the "marketing campaign" succeeded, and the war in Iraq became just another "front" in the "war on terror," according to the narrative. In short, the Bush administration succeeded in painting a vision of the world that seemed to hold a nation captive. With that vision of the world, the Bush administration succeeded in gaining consent for its foreign policy.

This book is a scholarly investigation guided by the big picture question of how language use shapes and influences sociopolitical reality. It is also a critical inquiry into how political rhetoric can pave the way for justifying war in the hope that such an understanding might raise awareness and develop the critical ethos needed to avoid future wars. In broad terms, both critical scholarship and democratic participation rely on such a critical ethos where the aim is, as Foucault writes, "to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions" (Foucault and Kritzman 1988: 265). In the case of this book's investigation, the task is to get outside the "picture" (to use the imagery Wittgenstein provides in the epigraph) that the Bush administration has presented to us about 9/11 and America's response to terrorism. Even political opponents of the Bush administration have been held more or less captive by the picture that is the Bush "War on Terror" Narrative, and were hard pressed to completely rupture its dominance in American public discourse while he was in office. The aim of this book is to examine why that might be the case from a linguistic perspective, and to expose the Bush "War on Terror" Narrative for what it is: only one story (among other potential possibilities) about the world since September 11, 2001.

Acknowledgments

In true Bakhtinian form, this book builds upon countless prior interactions. Although it would be impossible to name every individual here who has impacted this project, there are several people who bear special mention. First and foremost, I owe my deep gratitude to Kira Hall whose enthusiastic encouragement and incisive feedback made this book possible. Karen Tracy, Ira Chernus, Andy Cowell, and Barbara Fox have also been instrumental with their time and comments as I brought this project to fruition. Chad Nilep has been a true colleague and I owe many thanks to him for his readings of earlier drafts of this work. Special thanks are also due to Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland for their feedback and encouragement on the manuscript. There are, of course, many others who I cannot mention by name, but their influence has impacted this work all the same. Whatever shortcomings that may remain are, of course, my sole responsibility.

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Introduction

> At 8:46 on the morning of September 11, 2001, the
> United States became a nation transformed.
>
> —9/11 Commission (NC 2004a: 1)

DISCOURSE AND THE "WAR ON TERROR"

Immediately upon the impact of the first plane into the north tower of the
World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, people began talking. Live
images of lower Manhattan and accompanying words were broadcast
across the nation and around the world. Journalists began to ask questions,
bystanders recounted their personal experience of the events, and the na-
tion (and broader world) entered into a conversation about the nature and
meaning of what would come to be known as "9/11" and its aftermath. The
events of 9/11 have produced an abundance of reactions, among scholars
in particular and the nation in general. Regardless of the specific details of
those reactions, they all have one thing in common: they are interpretive
acts achieved through discourse. Although the events of 9/11 are actual
happenings in the world, those events do not intrinsically contain their
own interpretation. Only through language are such events turned into a
full account of that experience. Through language, we name protagonists,

ascribe motivations, and provide explanations. Through language, we construct a narrative.

This book provides a comprehensive treatment of the discourse of the George W. Bush administration in the years after 9/11. In particular, I focus on the formation and recontextualization of what I term the Bush "War on Terror" Narrative (henceforth, the Narrative), which forwards a powerful set of assumptions and explanations about America's struggle against terrorism since September 11, 2001. Although much narrative research has been done on personal narratives—that is, narratives told by individuals about personal experiences (e.g., Heintzelman 2009, Linde 1993, Ochs and Capps 2001, Riessman 1993, Young 1989, inter alia)—I focus here on political narrative (e.g., Martin and Wodak 2003, Wodak and van Dijk 2000).

The empirical investigation is divided into two parts. The first part examines speeches delivered by President Bush over a time period of nearly seven years, stretching from September 11, 2001 through March 19, 2008. I analyze these speeches to examine how basic elements of the Narrative are discursively established. Although the analysis focuses on a narrative told by an individual speaker on specific occasions, the result is to distill from these representative examples the macrolevel discourse about the "war on terror." In this way, the repeated narrations by the president of the United States effectively accumulate into a larger cultural narrative shared by many within the nation (and beyond)—what Bruner (1991) terms "narrative accrual." Importantly, the power of the president (and the story he tells) is, as Gal (1991) says of power more generally: "more than an authoritative voice in decision making; its strongest form may well be the ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world" (197).

The second part of the analysis examines the process of recontextualization that takes place as the Narrative enters into the media and is taken up by citizens in their conversations with each other. The representation of issues is an ongoing process always subject to challenges and new *representations*. More pointedly, it is through multiple, overlapping discursive encounters that the social practice of meaning making occurs. As fragments of discourse, once spoken, enter into subsequent contexts, their recontextualization involves reshaping to some degree. I examine the intertextual connections in American public discourse about the "war on terror" to understand how the Narrative is not only reproduced but also reshaped and resisted across multiple discursive settings. The overarching aim of the two-part analysis is to illuminate the connection between microlevel discursive action and macrolevel cultural understandings. I argue

that applying ideas on intertextuality to the analysis of political discourse is central to understanding this micro/macro connection.

As widely recognized by language scholars, language—and more specifically, discourse—does not simply reflect events that take place in the world. Discourse infuses events with meaning, establishes widespread social understandings, and constitutes social reality. The beginning of the 9/11 Commission's Executive Summary states, "At 8:46 on the morning of September 11, 2001, the United States became a nation transformed" (NC 2004a: 1). Yet any transformation that may have occurred was realized through discourse and the stories told about the experience. As Bruner (1991) notes, "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (4). The Bush "War on Terror" Narrative has provided "the official story, the dominant frame" (Chernus 2006: 4) for understanding 9/11 and America's response to terrorism. It has allowed for the discursive justification not just of a metaphorical "war on terror" but of the very real wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the outset, it is worth emphasizing both what this book is about and what it is not about. I am not attempting to assess the truth of the statements that underlie the Bush "War on Terror" Narrative. That is, I am not attempting to assess the Narrative's adequacy (or lack thereof) for accurately describing and explaining the world. Instead, the point is to focus on the way discourse effectively brings into existence a "truth" with real world consequences rather than to evaluate that truth against a supposedly more objective body of knowledge.[1] In Foucault's (1980) terms, the Bush "War on Terror" Narrative is a type of discursive formation that sustains a *regime of truth*. It places boundaries around what can meaningfully be said and understood about the subject. As Blommaert (2005) summarizes, "Whenever we speak, we speak from within a particular *regime of language* (the title of Kroskrity 2000)" (102; italics in original). The Narrative has provided that regime from within which supporters and critics of the Bush administration have operated.

Regardless of the accuracy of the assumptions and explanations that the Narrative forwards about America's struggle against terrorism since September 11, 2001, the knowledge that it spawns serves as the truth in the sense that it produces real effects in the world. Although it may or may not

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1. Although events and objects certainly exist in the world regardless of whether or how they are talked about, following Foucault, my aim here is to place primary importance on the meanings given to those events and objects. Such meanings—in effect, social realities—are brought into existence through discourse.

be empirically valid that Saddam Hussein had ties to Al Qaeda and possessed weapons of mass destruction, if a significant number of people believe it to be true, real consequences result.[2] Thus, truth is not simply an object external to social interaction; but rather, a form of knowledge emergent from that interaction. In this book, I highlight the textual and intertextual nature of the process that makes it possible for the powerful discursive formation that is the Bush "War on Terror" Narrative to gain significant traction in public understandings since 9/11. By examining the formation and circulation of such powerful narratives, we gain insight into the social effects that text production and circulation can have in sustaining regimes of truth and producing real world actions.

DISCOURSE AND DISCOURSES

Central to the analysis in this book is a broad understanding of discourse, which takes into account Foucault's (1972) conception of the term. Thus, it is important to lay some definitional groundwork by differentiating between discourse in the linguistic sense and discourses in the Foucauldian sense. Most simply, the term *discourse* refers to language use; and the study of discourse from a sociolinguistic perspective deals with the situated use of language, or language use in context (Brown and Yule 1983). Yet Foucault's notion of discourse adds a different understanding. Foucault speaks not just of discourse, but of "a discourse" or "discourses" (as a count noun). A discourse is a "way of representing the knowledge about [. . .] a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (Hall 1997: 44). It refers to the "forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations, governing mainstream social and cultural practices" (Baxter 2003: 7). In other words, a discourse regulates the way a topic can be talked about meaningfully in a particular culture at a particular point in history. For example, Foucault (1978) examines the discourse of sexuality, which provides a way for talking about and governing forms of sexual behavior. As Foucault describes, it only makes sense to talk about certain social subjects (e.g., the "homosexual") within this particular discourse, or discursive formation. Moreover, for Foucault, *discourse* not

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2. One could innumerate those consequences in the countless lives lost and dollars spent since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which the discourse surrounding the "war on terror" helped justify. What I wish to underscore is the importance of language in the manufacturing of consent for war in a democratic society. As Nelson (2003) emphasizes, "Human conflict begins and ends via talk and text. [. . .] It is discourse that prepares for sacrifice, justifies inhumanity, absolves from guilt, and demonizes the enemy" (449).

only refers to objects of knowledge, but constitutes those objects of knowledge. Thus, "'the homosexual' as a specific kind of social subject, was *produced*, and could only make its appearance" (Hall 1997: 46; italics in original) within the discourse of sexuality that arose, as Foucault (1978) documents, in the late nineteenth century.

Within the context of this book's topic, the Bush "War on Terror" Narrative provides a way for talking about America's response to terrorism after September 11, 2001. This discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, governs public discussion and debate on the topic. It provides a common language to refer to objects of knowledge. For example, the crashing of airplanes into the World Trade Center becomes an "act of war" that launches a "war on terror." Moreover, this discourse effectively constitutes these and other understandings of the world. Instead of being seen as one among several possible interpretations, the "war on terror" discourse becomes naturalized as a widely accepted, "common sense" way for viewing and talking about 9/11 and America's response to terrorism. In Foucauldian terms, the Narrative represents the knowledge about this topic and thereby constrains what can be meaningfully said about it.

Gee (1996, 2005) provides a helpful way of thinking about these different notions of discourse with his labels "little d" discourse versus "big D" discourse. By "little d" discourse, Gee (2005) means discourse in the linguistic sense, that is, "language-in-use, or stretches of language" (26). In contrast, "big D" discourse encompasses the forms of cultural knowledge bound up in specific domains of language use—that is, discourse in the Foucauldian sense.

Fairclough (1992a, 1992b, 2000, inter alia) brings both the linguistic (i.e., "little d") and Foucauldian (i.e., "big D") notions of discourse into Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Whereas Foucault primarily deals with discourse in the macrolevel sense of the term, Fairclough and others attempt to provide analysis of microlevel discursive action to illustrate how that situated use of language relates to larger discourses. Phillips (1996), for example, operates from a CDA perspective to examine the connection between "little d" discursive action (in the form of political speeches, press reportage, and interviews) and the "big D" discourse of Thatcherism that arose during her tenure as prime minister of the UK. In linguistic anthropology, Inoue (2006) examines a similar type of connection between "little d" discourse and the larger discourse about Japanese women's language, which, as Inoue shows, arose as "an obligatory cultural category and an unavoidable part of practical social knowledge" in Japan (1). In a similar vein, the goal of this book is to examine the relationship between microlevel discursive action—in the form of presidential