

Interview with Teun Van Dijk



BY ZARA PINTO-COELHO

Teun van Dijk was professor of discourse studies at the University of Amsterdam until 2004, and is at present professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona. After earlier work on generative poetics, text grammar, and the psychology of text processing, his work since 1980 takes a more critical perspective and deals with discursive racism, news in the press, ideology, knowledge and context. He is the author of several books in most of these areas, and he edited *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (4 vols, 1985) the introductory book *Discourse Studies* (2 vols., 1997; new one-volume edition, 2011) as well as the reader *The Study of Discourse* (5 vols., 2007). He founded six international journals, *Poetics*, *Text* (now *Text & Talk*), *Discourse & Society*, *Discourse Studies*, *Discourse & Communication* and the internet journal in Spanish *Discurso & Sociedad* of which he still edits the latter four. His last monographs in English are *Ideology* (1998), *Racism and discourse in Spain and Latin America* (2005), *Discourse and Context* (2008), *Society and Discourse* (2009). His last edited books are *Racism at the Top* (2000, with Ruth Wodak), and *Racism and Discourse in Latin America* (2009). For more information, please go to <http://www.discourses.org>.

Zara Pinto-Coelho is Associate Professor at the Communication Sciences Department and research group leader at the *Communication and Society Research Centre* (CECS), University of Minho, Braga, Portugal.

Zara Pinto-Coelho – How has the notion of crisis entered discourses about higher education and research?

Teun Van Dijk – The word that comes to mind is “cuts”, in Spanish “recortes”. So crisis for us in the university, first of all, means cuts. It means that students – even those with a PhD – don’t get jobs. In Spain they didn’t get jobs anyway, but now it’s completely impossible. Today there are limitations on practically everything, resources for scholarships, for research projects and so on.

So the dominant theme of political and educational discourse today is *austerity*. Governments that need to cut expenditures will cut funding for research projects. And less research means being technologically less competitive which in turn means fewer jobs, and so on. So this crisis is spiraling down everything, and it may take a decade or more to recover – if at all.

Do you think there is a connection between the crisis discourse and other kind of crisis discourses? I mean the crisis discourse is used in education, as well as in other fields?

Such as?

For example, people are talking about a financial crisis, cultural crisis, political crisis. Is there an interconnection between these discourses of crisis?

I think the main discourse is about the financial-economic crisis. These topics take so much space in political and media discourse that there is hardly any time and energy to attend to other problems. If you think of Spain, where I have lived in the last thirteen years, several years ago the dominant topic was of course terrorism. But since ETA was nearly defeated, the other main topic of public concern and discourse was immigration, as elsewhere in Europe. Cultural differences such as Islam, the use of hijabs by some Muslim women, or the construction of mosques. Or healthcare – the alleged abuses of health services by immigrants. Now, during the economic crisis, this is worse, of course, because autochthonous people tend to blame the immigrants – thus following the dominant discourse of the symbolic elites in politics and the media.

So, no wonder that the economic crisis in Europe is exacerbating racism and xenophobia everywhere. We not only see racist parties getting lots of votes in many countries. But – even worse perhaps – mainstream parties advocating ideas that are hard to distinguish from those of the extreme right, as it is happening in the UK. In Greece, an openly fascist party is wielding power in parliament and on the street. As is the case in Hungary. In Denmark, Holland and Austria anti-immigrant parties have received lots of votes. Interestingly, such racism, xenophobia and islamophobia is so strong in relatively prosperous northern countries in Europe. This suggests on the one hand that these seem to be defending themselves primarily against the cultural Other from the South, as is the case with islamophobia. But on the other hand, we should always remember that racism is a system of power. So, the resistance against immigration, also in the North, should primarily be seen as a manifestation of domination, of white Europeans and their culture against Others and their cultures.

Obviously, this is not totally new. Racism is a European invention. It was invented in the 18th century, for instance to legitimate slavery, and then segregation and Apartheid. It was blatant until at least World War II – with eugenic policies in many countries. And after the war and the Holocaust it became less acceptable to be explicitly racist and anti-Semitic. But memories are short and although current extremist right-wing parties are still generally seen as less *salonfähig* as one says in German, their ideas are readily accepted in the mainstream media, as I just said.

Today, this debate on immigration is being submerged in a much more general debate on the economic crisis. Whereas immigration was and is in many respects about a pseudo-problem (after all, immigration generally brings mostly advantages – also economic ones – to a country) the current economic crisis is a real problem to worry about because it affects all and everyone except maybe the rich.

So are immigration policies getting stricter?

Everywhere, but that was already happening before the crisis. Don't forget that racism and xenophobia are not a question of "fear". Therefore words such as *xenophobia* and *islamo-phobia* are in fact misrepresenting the situation. People in Western Europe, and especially the elites, do not live in permanent fear of a few immigrants – who don't even enter their own neighborhoods except as service personnel. Again, racism is about power and power abuse. It is about who is in control. Economic, political and cultural control.

I don't know, my impression is that now the situation is worse.

No doubt, in terms of economic crisis, and with popular pressure for jobs and services, immigration policies and the general discourse become more anti-immigrant, and not only on the right. Also, the immigrants are a perfect excuse to blame the victim. In history, strangers, minorities and immigrants have always been used and abused as scapegoats for internal crises, as we have seen most dramatically with the Holocaust following the economic crisis of 1929. But don't forget that anti-immigration policies and discourses have been widespread in Europe since the 1970s even in times of economic prosperity. So, explaining racism and xenophobia only in terms of economic crisis is a bad theory.

How is the role of the state in research and education being revised and with what implications? How is the scope of freedom and creative potential of researchers being affected in a context where markets seem to rule? There's less money available...

Yes, obviously, and as I said before, when governments have less to spend they will cut costs where they can, and since education is where a lot of money is going, education will suffer. Research is especially vulnerable because research projects and scholarships are easier to cut than positions of teachers and professors, especially those who are civil servants. So, those who will suffer most are the younger teachers who don't get jobs in the first place, or the younger researchers who don't get scholarships, so need to find a job that is very hard to find in times of economic crisis. And even those few who are able to finish a PhD against all odds won't get the few highly qualified jobs in universities, laboratories and other organizations. So, thousands of them in Spain are now leaving the country. I recommend to my PhDs to go and find jobs in Brazil, Australia or South-East Asia. In our area of discourse studies the pressure of the economic crisis and the markets does not yet affect the very aims and contents of research projects as may be the case in other fields. We can still do critical discourse analysis, and others can still analyze poetry. But it is obviously true that if you want a job in the future it is better to have an MBA or a PhD in molecular biology. An additional problem in Spain is that, compared to other countries, companies hardly invest in

research. No doubt this is one of the major reasons of its economic and academic weakness. So, it is no longer very relevant to be “excellent” or not.

Evaluated as Excellent?

As you know the fashionable word in international university-speak is “Excellence”. Look at any university website and you’ll see that they sell themselves as being “excellent”. Also in Spain, despite the fact that there are barely any Spanish universities among the 500 best universities in the world, as measured by the well-known Shanghai criteria. Universities are becoming more and more like business corporations competing for funds and for paying students. So they must compete with the “excellence” of their programmes and professors to attract students, especially those from abroad who are able to pay high fees. Where before professors (and, since 1968, some students) were running our universities, today administrators run them.

I have no problem with hiring and evaluation criteria getting tougher. In Spain, to become a professor today, you need to be evaluated by a national organization, ANECA, which will require that you have international publications in “impact journals”. There were, and still are, many university appointments of scholars who are local students or local professors, instead of really open forms of competition for jobs as the system of “oppositions” in Spain requires. It is also true that in Spain access to the international literature and publication is seriously limited by the low level of proficiency in English, as compared for instance with Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries.

So we see a complex combination of reasons and causes that make Spain less competitive internationally – and hence more prone to suffering from the economic crisis – besides the known causes, such as its exaggerated reliance on construction and construction jobs during the last decades of strong economic growth. And the economic crisis in turn exacerbates the financial situation of universities and research, which in turn prevents the crisis being resolved by for instance technological renewal, as was happening in Finland, and today in China and many other countries in what was called the Third World.

Who drives research policies? The Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation cites Germany as a model and claims that the way it can help the Portuguese scientific community be successful in European calls is by promoting a “greater alignment with the European programmes”. To what extent are core countries setting standards, research areas and priorities, and how can that impact on social sciences and humanities, which are context-specific?

I haven’t followed that particular kind of debate and I don’t see it being dealt with in the press or in university department. Yes, it does make a difference if a scholar is able to get “European” money and international projects, especially in the new technological areas. But in our area of linguistics, discourse analysis, communication and the social sciences, I don’t see much of such pressure for alignment with Europe, which by the way I see as a positive thing. Research is inherently international and international cooperation is crucial. As founding editor of several international journals in my field, I can say that the criteria are

explicitly international. I have contributed to international cooperation by co-founding the Latin American Association of Discourse Studies (ALED) in 1995, took the initiative to found a similar organization in Spain and Portugal, and am now trying to stimulate my colleagues in South East Asia, who very much interested in discourse studies, to do the same. From my experience with ALED such organizations are tremendously successful in stimulating international cooperation. My colleagues in Latin America traditionally looked up and imitated French and sometimes English, German and North American scholars. Today, because of biannual meetings they see, hear, read and cite also each other. Europe has a strong tradition of international cooperation – where in the USA many scholars only read and cooperate nationally – and in many fields of research it is no longer possible to advance without such cooperation, especially in fields where expensive labs and machinery are necessary. But although Germany is economically dominant in Europe, it does not mean it is academically so – at least not in our area, where Anglo-Saxon research is no doubt dominating.

Maybe it is just an European policy.

By European policy you mean out of Brussels? Or because that take up what German scientists do?

Germany is now leading in Europe...

Financially speaking?

Not only. Also in research, at least in our country. The Portuguese Science Foundation in their official documents uses Germany as a model to be followed.

How? I haven't seen it for Spain, but I can see later, after this conversation. I'm curious to see how they formulate the arguments that they are the best...

They use German research policy as an example of excellence.

And why not, for example, England?

I don't know. I think it has to do with other reasons, political, economic...

As I said, in our field, in the journals I edit, German scholars are not very prominent. They are more active nationally than internationally, as is the case in France, also because many of them are hardly fluent in English, which is surprising when you think of the international economic role of the country.

But such influences may fluctuate. Think of the 1960s and 1970s when structuralism in linguistics, literature, semiotics and the social sciences became widespread. This was the time of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas, Todorov and many others, such as Foucault, becoming internationally famous and inspiring. Today, virtually nothing of this remains, and the only ones in our field heard of outside of France are Maingueneau and Charaudeau, but their influence is limited to South America where the French School is still very influential. Today, in our field, I would say that most work being published in the scholarly journals is truly international, with papers from the USA, the UK and the EU still being prominent, but

with increasing numbers of papers from China and many other countries. There are very prominent absences besides Germany, as is the case of huge countries such as India and Russia. So, it is difficult to say which research programmes or systems of evaluation should be imitated in Portugal and Spain. It is best to be very flexible and to ask scholars rather than administrators or politicians. I'm not sure if Germany is such a good example... But, yes, they have more money for research than Spain and Portugal.

Probably that's the point...

I'm not sure whether their criteria are so much better than those of everybody else.

Our research Foundation doesn't explain. It just uses it as "the example".

But we can explore why Germany is such a good example. Why not China? Why not India? Why not Norway? Why not the United States?

Why not?

It's still the case that internationally, by far, the United States is on top of the frequency of publications, of everything, because of the language. They attract most influential scholars in practically all domains, maybe not in discourse analysis, but practically all domains. They may have come from Hungary, Germany, Austria, Japan or Asia. They go there, because of the attraction of the universities, and the salary, or because in their countries there's no money, or they were expelled for political reasons as we know from the exodus of thousands of brilliant Jewish scholars in the 1930s.

The next question has to do with excellence. In Portugal there is a widespread institutional pressure towards excellence, translated into the internationalization of research, strong competition and publication in journals with known impact factor. In Portugal, for the social sciences and humanities fields, this means following core countries – Anglo-Saxon ones – and core languages – basically English – and applying for European funding. Is that the case in your country? What are the implications of these priorities for the work of researchers and for the diversity and quality of research?

As already indicated above, this is very strong everywhere: in Spain, Holland and in Latin America. Some of this is positive, such as the necessity of international cooperation, and the criterion that your paper or book is inspired by international research. We may regret it, but the fact is that the current international *lingua franca* is English, and with respect for the diversity of languages and data, we'd better be fluent in English in our academic communication. But there are also many disadvantages, such as the exclusive focus on journal articles. Sometimes because of the influence of the hard sciences a paper in a so-called impact journal, which could be written up in weeks, counts more than a monograph that one has worked on for years.

What examples of resistance to the crisis discourse can you point out? How can alternative forms of governance in education and research be imagined and enacted?

Compared to what happens in the cities, in the university there is very little resistance. If I think of resistance, I think of the movement in Spain of fifteenth of May, the M-15. Also in Lisboa I saw people camp in the central square, as they did in Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona, or in a square in New York. We have had some recent university strikes and even high school students have gone to the street. But within the universities, compared to say 1968, the resistance is minimal. Besides direct political action, we also need much more critical analysis in the social sciences and discourse analysis. But again it is remarkable that after four years of economic crisis very few articles have been written about it from a discourse analytical point of view. In that respect, CDA is not very influential, I am afraid to admit.

There is a meeting in Lancaster about the crisis discourse next week with Ruth Wodak, Jason Glynnos and Andrew Sayer. They are working on that topic, so maybe in one year or so...

I don't see it coming just yet. I got for the first time an article about the discourse of the Arab liberalization and "Spring" in Tahrir. So the first papers are coming and they get to journals in a few months, so that's no problem. But I still haven't gotten any crisis discourse paper. Look, it's a lot of work, but we already have the economic crisis here for four years, so where are all these papers? By now we could have all kinds of papers about this topic in the three journals [*Discourse & Society, Discourse & Communication, Discourse Studies*], but I don't see it happen. Maybe in the economics, but not in the linguistic discourse analysis.

Braga, University of Minho, July 6, 2012