

Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*. London: Routledge.

## Chapter 5

---

### **Power: an ecological model of text-life**

[pp. 85-103]

---

Thank God for our bobbies. Their image has been severely damaged recently. *But how many of the Guildford Four were driving ambulances in London yesterday?*  
(Sun, 24 October 1989)

Psychology is supposed to supply descriptions of individual action and experience. Development, personality and the nature of thought are topics we try to understand in everyday life, and upon which psychology should have something helpful to say. Unfortunately, often it does not. Sometimes psychology confirms common-sense pictures of people, us, as isolated competitive individuals ‘thinking for ourselves’. Here it reproduces discourses of liberal individualism which hold together Western (post)modern culture. Sometimes the discipline clashes with common sense, and elaborates stories about complicated internal mechanisms guiding individual behaviour. Here the administered world which bears (down on) us is shrunk and located inside the head. Discourses of rationality and machine ‘intelligence’ are used to reproduce the ‘subject’ as an *object* of a peculiar type. The role of psychology is contradictory, but the contradictions between expert knowledge and lay understanding are wished away. Its models circulate in texts, only in texts, but we are told to read them as if they were real. The discipline has the power to operate within a ‘psy-complex’, but it disempowers those it studies.

In and against psychology, however, there are alternative traditions of work which describe behaviour and mental life as embedded in the world. These traditions are worth recovering. It is not a question of ‘recuperating’ them, absorbing them into radical discourse, for critical psychology is too weak to do that, but an [86] engagement with the radical fragments of the discipline should help rebut the charge that discourse analysts have nothing to say about the individual. Critical discourse-analytic psychology drawing on alternative traditions, such as that to be found in the work of JJ. Gibson, could interpret contradictions in ‘thought’ as expressions of discourse dynamics. Such a critical psychology could describe the circulation of individuals through texts, and their (human) nature as forms of text-life. Critical Gibsonian psychology could focus on power and resistance, empowerment, transformation.

Proposals in the ethogenic ‘new paradigm’ literature, that people should be ‘treated as if they were human beings’ (Harré and Secord, 1972: 84) and that people should be seen as embedded in relationships with others (Gauld and Shotter, 1977) often ran alongside the employment of Gibson’s (1966, 1979) ecological account of direct perception. Gibson, particularly in his later writings, was seen as emphasising the activity of the ‘subject’ (Harré and Secord, 1972), and as providing an account of the person which was

non-cognitivist (Shotter, 1984). Recent critiques of cognitive psychology have employed Gibsonian descriptions of the relationship between the individual and others and the world (Costall and Still, 1987). The most important respect, however, in which the ecological model of the person differs from much traditional psychology, and in which there are significant connections between the new-paradigm accounts and discourse analysis, is in the attention directed to the location of accounts and persons in and suffused with language.

In this chapter I will explore the value of alternative ecological descriptions of direct perception and the embeddedness of the person in niches structured by specific arrays of meaning. First, I will rehearse arguments in favour of a Gibsonian ecological approach to perception as an alternative to cognitivist psychology and make some connections between accounts of direct perception and language use. This is the point at which discourse analysis comes into the picture. I will then introduce as an example a piece of text and take up the problem of dualism as it is reproduced in discourse. The next sections raise some more general issues to do with relativism in radical discourse-analytic psychology: in the third section I extend the account of realism given in Chapter 2 and discuss the implications of an ecological account for our understanding of the relationship between discourse and reality; in the fourth, final section I deal with [87] the significance of these ideas for a critical psychology. I shall also be supplementing my use of ecological theory at points with deconstructionist views of meaning, with the post-structuralist theory employed throughout the rest of this book. First, then, some reasons why we should adopt an ecological account.

## **(ANTI-) COGNITIVISM**

Cognitive psychology has been looked to to provide the answer to a problem that has preoccupied *social* psychologists for some time, and it is an even more attractive source of work for psychologists caught up in the impossible fantasy of constructing explanations of individual action which are not social. The problem is, what model of the person is presupposed by our descriptions of experience and social action? If we were to accept, for the sake of argument, that phenomena identified by psychology (such as cognitive dissonance, stereotyping and conformity) were 'true', what are the people like who do those things? This problem can be, must be, stretched further (and this then causes more difficulty for the mainstream in the discipline): first, what if cognitive dissonance, attribution theory, stereotyping, conformity, risky shift, minimal group phenomena, social representations and so on were *all* 'true' (which they all seem, on some occasions, to be); and, second, there was *more* than this going on in our 'subjects' (which there undoubtedly is); and, third, we had to include ourselves in this picture, talking and theorising about what we, as subjects, were doing? What model of the person should we then adopt?

Traditionally, there are two responses to the question which neatly complement one another. These responses are often implicit, taken for granted. On the one hand, sometimes the answer is left to common sense, and psychology, particularly social psychology here, simply leaves aside a residue after distilling out the particular processes it wants to describe (and that residue is the individual). Longstanding traditions of work on groups and 'pro-social' behaviour in north American social psychology (e.g., Deaux

and Wrightsman, 1984) offer this answer to the question, as do more recent European attempts to develop a theory of 'social representations' (e.g., Farr and Moscovici, 1984; Parker, 1987a). The legacy of behaviourism informs this response, with an emphasis on situational determinants of action, and a reproduction of the [88] paradoxical relationship between situationally inclined psychological social psychology and its individually biased neighbour, sociological social psychology (Farr, 1978).

On the other hand, sometimes the answer is provided by focusing on the individual as information, attribution or representation processor, and social phenomena are seen as a result of the meeting of these processors. The burgeoning cognitivism in north American psychology and social psychology 'informs this response (e.g., Fiske and Taylor, 1984), and in Europe a similar enthusiasm for cognitive explanations has affected even the social identity theory tradition (Michael, 1990). Both responses divide the individual from the social, and the result is a dualist account. We are presented with a focus either on the individual *or* the social, never a model of the person to account for both. In cognitivist theory, the information in perceptual input is assumed to be so impoverished that 'representations' must be constructed inside the head which approximate to the 'real world'. Perception is necessarily non-veridical here, and an awareness of the world can be produced only by supplementing that information. The deficient flow of stimulation must then be ordered into perception (and a sense of place, position, social subjectivity) by integrating a set of isolated sequential samples of the real world. An *alternative* to this model could be found in the work of J.J. Gibson and his followers, an approach concerned with the 'direct perception' of the physical and, I will argue, the social world.

### **Ecological psychology**

Ecological psychology draws attention to the way cognitivist psychology merely pushes the problem back a step so that the individual is still *divided* from a direct engagement with the social through the interposition of an imaginary mechanical apparatus constructed as a series of hypothetical constructs in psychological theories (Parker, 1987b). In contrast, for Gibson (1979), perceivers are directly and immediately in contact with the 'dimensions of information' available or 'afforded' them. The individual organism and the world s/he inhabits are described as if they were a single system. Gibson argues that '[the] state of the perceptual system is altered when it is attuned to information of a certain sort' (Gibson, 1979: 254), and that 'one does not need to have ideas about the environment in order to perceive it' (*ibid.*: 304). He attempts to avoid [89] splitting the subject from the object of visual perception: 'Perceiving is an achievement of the individual, not an appearance in the theater of his [*sic*] consciousness ... there is no content of awareness independent of that of which one is aware' (*ibid.*: 239). His account is of the individual embedded in a system of relationships, relationships with the world and with others.

The static conception of the world which pervades much social psychological description, not to mention psychological research deliberately unconcerned with the social, is replaced by a sense of continual movement. This movement is thus seen as 'regular without being a chain of responses and is purposive without being controlled from within' (Gibson, 1979: 237). Each system of structural invariants in the optic array

is understood dynamically as part of a pattern of transformational invariants. Within the systems of information which comprise the 'niches' we inhabit is the specification for what type of person(s) we can be. The process of information 'pick-up' could be thought of as one of 'resonance'. This is a process Gordon (1989) intriguingly likens to a radio receiving electromagnetic radiation.

While this analogy serves to highlight the impossibility of locating the particular single component picking up signals, and so the stupidity of much positivist work on information processing, it also raises issues about the way human beings *differ* from such mechanisms. Human beings acquire a structured subjectivity which is in a continual dynamic of transformation and renewal by virtue of their understanding and use of language. The debates over the status of language (as a variety of 'indirect perception') in Gibson's writings can only be briefly signalled here (e.g., Noble, 1987; Parker, 1988b), and, as will become clear, I shall be adopting the position that an ecological approach should view our use of language, of discourse as 'direct', as (at least potentially) unmediated. While our perception of discourse is direct, however, the conflicting positions afforded by different discourses continually obstruct a direct engagement with others.

## **Discourse**

Discourse analysis helps provide a variety of psychology where the question 'what model of the person?' starts to make sense within a thoroughly social framework. Discourse analysis responds adequately to each of the questions posed above to do with the social [90] nature of the individual in psychology (questions that the discipline traditionally falls to answer): first, discourse analysis posits a framework in which all of the processes discovered by psychologists so far are 'true' (by virtue of the fact that the processes become 'real' as they are spoken of and reproduced within language); and, second, the approach works with, rather than against, the unresolvable conflicts between different explanations and the contradictory accounts people give (by making a virtue of variability); and, third, it draws attention to its own way of describing the accounts it collects and attempts to provoke the researcher, the writer and the reader to interrogate their own presuppositions, their own discourses.

However, the model of the person as 'discourse user' threatens to become, by default, a *cognitivist* model. Readers of *Discourse and Social Psychology*, for example, are warned against approaches saddled with the 'weight of unformulated cognitive baggage' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 146) and told that a discourse approach to categorisation directs attention 'away from the cognitive processes assumed to be operating under people's skulls' (*ibid*: 137), but they are also told that cognitive science has 'insights to offer' and, more seriously, that 'analysis and explanation can be carried out at a social psychological level which is coherently separable from the cognitive' (*ibid* : 157). The suggestion that analysis of these two levels of experience should be 'coherently separable' flows from a particular model of social life. This model in psychology forms part of the dominant dualist conception of the relationship between the individual and the social in the disciplines of both psychology and sociology (Parker, 1987a, 1989a). The argument that thought is irremediably rhetorical, public and accountable is a good defence against cognitivism (Billig, 1987; Billig *et al*, 1988), and recent work in

discourse analysis has developed this line (e.g., Potter and *Edwards*, 1990). The discourse-analytic texts which unwittingly warrant cognitivist work are signed by *those* who have since, in practice, done much to undermine it. Varieties of discourse analysis which use psychoanalysis (e.g., Hollway, 1989) fall prey to reductionism in other ways, a problem I take up in the next chapter. My starting point in this chapter is precisely that 'it is discourse analysis which offers a systematically *non-cognitive* social psychology' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 157), and that it is now necessary to specify the nature of the individual as discourse user. If such specification is left to another level separate from the social, [91] discourse analysts will find themselves hostage to the deeply ideological individualism that attends cognitivist explanations (Sampson, 1981) and a mechanistic conception of mind that meshes with a hierarchical vision of the social (Bowers, 1990). It has been argued by advocates of the 'new paradigm' in psychology influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology that it should be possible to take Gibson's work as a 'descriptive vocabulary' which can be applied to other modes of perception (Shotter, 1984). It is possible to pick up this suggestion and follow it through so that the 'perception' of the discourse user is that of a reader of *texts*. I will take a small piece of text below to illustrate my argument. My reading of Gibson's texts brings the notion of direct perception into realms of social life that we usually experience as enigmatic or obscure. It is the structure of and relationship between, discourses, each of which is directly perceived, that gives rise to the feeling that we are separate, alienated from things and their meanings. When this is borne in mind, the ecological model could then be extended to account for the role of language as a series of symbolic arrays in which the various discourses which comprise it each 'afford' possibilities for compliance and resistance, reproduction and transformation.

The Gibsonian argument is that our experience of the world cannot be reasonably understood as a sequence, or even accumulation, of separate discrete stimuli. An ecological account, then, has no need to resort to cognitivist notions of memory (Still, 1979). For ecological psychology 'there is no dividing line between the present and the past, between perceiving and remembering.... A perception, in fact, does not *have* an end. Perceiving goes on' (Gibson, 1979: 253). This point connects with the work on collective remembering (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). In this work, 'the mind and memory are seen as extending beyond the "individual skin" to encompass both the cultural milieu and the "body politic"' (Cole, 1990: viii). Memory is a thoroughly discursive matter. Discourses permit and provoke the phenomena we call cognition, and which we learn, in contemporary Western culture, to funnel into single minds. This connection with discourse serves to emphasise a crucial quality of the transformational array and transformations of meaning, that of *difference*. [92]

## **Difference**

Deconstructionist views of discourse have also emphasised this quality of difference. The view expressed by supporters of direct perception, of 'the organism and its environment regarded as a single system' (Still, 1979: 152), captures the interconnectedness of subject and object. For Gibson 'Neither mentalism on the one hand nor conditioned-response behaviorism on the other is good enough. What psychology needs is the kind of thinking that is beginning to be attempted in what is loosely called systems theory' (Gibson,

1979:2). However, *discourse* as the symbolic environment of human beings is marked by the quality of difference, a quality expressed in two ways. First, the discursive is digressive because, as Derrida (1973) points out, language is a system of differences in which a final meaning is always deferred. It is instructive to bring Derrida's meditations on meaning in here for he deconstructs traditional oppositions between nature and culture, between ecological views of biological niches and the discursively structured environments speaking subjects inhabit. The second way in which the quality of difference marks discourse is that discourses differ not only from each other (a characteristic which enables us to distinguish them) but also within themselves (a characteristic which makes analysis difficult). Items in discourse have dynamic and multiple meanings.

## SPIRITS

At this point I want to introduce a piece of text - '*Spirits in the Material World*' - in order to trace through the argument that an ecological account of perception can provide the basis for a model of the person as discourse user. What niches does the statement '*Spirits in the Material World*' inhabit, and what meanings does it evoke and reproduce? Already as a set of readers you may have started to fragment into those who do, and those who do not, already recognise the phrase, and cutting across those new constituencies will be various positions, stances towards the statement. At this point, social identity theorists would posit the existence of a cognitive apparatus which groups must employ in order to relate to the statement. In this case, however, such a differentiation is furnished solely by this context, the confluence of *these* meanings, and our identification of the existence of particular 'groups' of readers is only a rhetorical device. The identification of collections of 'groups' here (as in much [93] social identity research) is *only* in the public, discursive realm (Griffin, 1989). I will, as a first step, mark out two audiences called into existence by the introduction of this piece of text.

For the first group, '*Spirits in the Material World*' is recognised as a phrase in a Police song (and the second group should be told that *The Police* were a pop group). Part of the process of identifying and marking the phrase is to attach a reference to it (i.e., Sting, 1981). It then also becomes part of academic discourse. A flood of connotations also becomes available to both audiences (now both those who knew its source and those who did not). For some the phrase may be nostalgic, for some it is merely passé. Some will hear the phrase also in the context of an associated Police promotional video which carried scenes from the north of Ireland and which was banned by the BBC (or at least one of my informants has this memory, and I pass it on as part of the text for the moment). For the second group, '*Spirits in the Material World*' may hold within it conceptions of minds and bodies in which '*Spirits*' are conceptually distinct from and are 'in' the '*Material*'. This reading, more philosophically inclined and available to the whole audience (because the 'mind-body' problem is part of the architecture of our academic world), could see the statement as an example of dualism, an example, perhaps, whose implications need to be discussed. I have to be tentative here in elaborating a range of meanings of the phrase for different audiences in different discourses. This, for fear of legislating the correct meaning. There are no correct meanings, only contested meanings which both adherents and critics of an ecological discourse-analytic psychology can

engage with.

The multiple meanings of a statement can be considered with regard to occasions of use, and it is the reification of such occasions into collections of people with a particular reading, and then into groups holding a shared view, and then into cognitive schemata in the heads of the members of the groups which lures us into cognitivism. We can avoid this route by just considering discourses and occasions of use. One occasion, then, for reading 'Spirits in the Material World' could be as a dualist expression of the relationship between minds and bodies, and as an expression loaded with romantic yearnings to connect two alienated essences. As an item in the discourse of dualism, it makes available to us a vocabulary in which we talk about minds as 'objects' as if they were there. As objects of this discourse, a dominant discourse in Western culture, their 'thing' status disrupts [94] attempts to talk about experience and reality as connected, integrated, dialectically interrelated, ecologically entwined.

In a sense, the Gibsonian 'account is merely an alternative *description*' (Still, 1979: 153). It is an account which must rest on criteria other than those favoured by positivist psychology. While the ecological account may resonate with a discourse-analytic perspective, it faces the insuperable problem of describing social action in a language which is structured by powerful dualist discourses. The fact that many individuals within psychology deliberately subscribe to such discourses is the least of our problems, for it is the language we speak itself which is loaded against us. The language game being played here in this chapter, which has been played before on millions of occasions, positions the advocate of an ecological discourse as providing a description of perception as the relationship between organism and environment. The problem that a critical account has every time it attempts to posit a relationship between two sides of the equation is that the dualist assumptions contained within discourse, and not only 'explicit' dualist discourse, have to be employed.

Even the argument in favour of an ecological account falls prey to the traditional oppositions by virtue of the requirement that I specify two separate sides of a relationship. It would be appropriate here to think of the immersion of the subjects of such a debate as players well versed, that is directly perceiving and responding to a discourse they know their way around in a social context in concert with others, and the echoes here with Wittgensteinian accounts are deliberate (Shotter, 1990a). There are also powerful resonances with post-structuralism.

Post-structuralism attends to the way that language contains the resources to recuperate alternative, ostensibly oppositional, assumptions about the nature of the world, and this is why deconstruction, as part of post-structuralism, works 'from within' the texts. It knows that it cannot get 'outside' them (Derrida, 1976). It is hardly surprising that deconstructionist writers, such as Derrida, absent themselves from these already loaded categories by declaring that there has never been any 'perception'. This provocative claim is also designed to disrupt 'the presupposition or the desire for an invariable identity of sense already present behind all the usages and regulating all the variations' (Derrida, 1982:303). Because it is so difficult to debate within dualist discursive ground rules, challenge to cognitivist designs must be critical of most of the discipline they inhabit.

The phrase 'Spirits in the Material World' sets up a puzzle, then, [95] that psychology has attempted to resolve by positing a cognitive apparatus between the

individual and the world, and between stimulus and response. However, in the extended ecological account presented here there is the basis for an alternative description which allows us to consider the relationship between persons employing particular discourses, and our vantage point can both be within language and be critically reflective of the operation of discourses. Here, the reflexivity urged upon discourse analysts can be pursued *and* grounded. We can also develop an account in our own discourse of the role of 'the real' discourse user, and here I move onto an account of different experiences of the real that are compatible with an ecological and discourse account.

## **REAL BODIES**

The immediate problem discourse analysts face as they radicalise the turn to language and immerse themselves in the devices through which texts accomplish the social construction of reality is that of relativism, and then idealism. The illusion, itself borne by increasingly powerful discourses in academic debate, that there is nothing outside language always threatens to spill over into some notion of spirits (souls, gods, essences) independent of the world. Such an illusion is nurtured, ready to spring to life in mystical, sometimes dangerous forms, in dualist discourse. I described the solution offered by a realist position in Chapter 2, and will explore that position further now.

There are two ways to make a realist approach work in critical psychology. The first is to interrogate the positivist methods employed by the discipline, to take due account of the mediation and transformation of the real in the 'transitive' realm which contains scientific knowledge, and to re-interpret the descriptions given by psychologists in order to divine which structures (with what 'powers') have a *real* existence, in an 'intransitive' realm. Writers inspired by the 'new-paradigm' debates in social psychology, such as Manicas and Secord (1983), have championed this view. However this position, taken on its own, can fall into the trap of re-describing, in new 'realist' terms, the very cognitive apparatuses that a discourse-analytic psychology promised to dissolve. The clear danger here for the anti-cognitivists is that a realist position can turn, ironically, into a series of rhetorical devices which buttress reductionism. [96]

The second way that a realist position can be introduced is to present an account of the individual as a 'realist subject'. It is this second way that I will take up here. The Gibsonian ecological model provides just such an account, for here the person directly perceives the world, engages with physical and social material as real opportunities for (and constraints on) action. When deconstructed, the agency of the person is no longer seen as 'inside' seeking expression against an imperfectly known 'outside', but as the exercise of power (and resistance) realised moment to moment in movement through the world. Aspects of this movement are physical, practical, and here the biological structure of the person as organism resonates with material niches. Other aspects of this activity are symbolic, expressive, and here the individual moves through the world as a reader of texts. Collections of texts define symbolic arrays which are the cultural niches we inhabit, and discourse analysis traces the threads which run through those niches meshing them together into 'society'.

## **Three caveats**

There are a number of implications for the conception of our place in the social world that would be entailed by such a view of the person. Whilst the ecological approach provides a non-cognitivist, and fully social, account of individual experience, the consequences of the model are not unproblematic, and could, in various ways, still lead us on circuitous routes to an anti-realist position which would complement rather than challenge cognitivism. I will note three unresolved issues, potentially unhelpful consequences of the ecological model which lead us astray from a realist stance, before returning to my example text.

First, care has to be taken to conceptualise the activities and experience of the discourse user temporally (in time) as well as spatially (in space), and here there are serious implications for the character of research into discursive niches. The danger is that the ecological account could be reduced to a 'role' model in which persons are assumed to be able to take each other's place and experience. This position has been stated in the ethogenic 'new-paradigm' literature as follows: 'although no two individuals can be in the same place at the same time, any individual can be in the same place, position or situation at different times' (Shotter, 1984: 93). [97]

This vision of fixed positions requires a denial of personal history and experience (and of the different readings of texts available to gendered, classed and culturally located subjects of discourse).

The ecological niches that Gibson describes could certainly be understood in this static way. As material niches through which an individual organism moves, they are fairly permanent, and evolutionary changes respond to the needs of a species and its environment such that the two mesh. However, in some of the descriptions of direct perception that Gibson provides there are also clear debts to both a behaviourist and a *Gestalt* tradition, in which the relationship between learning and understanding is more fluid. In discursive niches, sets of texts which present the 'reader' with a characteristic symbolic array, this fluidity is accentuated. The ambiguities, shifts in meaning and power-knowledge relations in and between texts that deconstructionists call 'intertextuality' make a static view of positions and possibilities of choice untenable.

Second, the ecological account turned to discourse, and the recognition that it is not possible to tie meaning into a system (in which we are able to adopt discrete roles), itself needs to become reflexive. To do that now, however, requires the elaboration of moral/political positions. Its account of the relationship between language and the practical order has to be connected with its own account of how a discourse user engages with the world. In other words, the realist position (as a theory of epistemology) must be matched by an account of the subject as realist (as a theory of ontology).

For example, the realist framework allows an analyst to distinguish different discourses which constitute 'the family' as an essential natural unit of society, and then to show how such discourses function to normalise heterosexual relationships and proscribe alternative living arrangements. To accomplish this, the analyst has to draw on other work on the structure of society and the coercive character of family life (e.g., Barrett and McIntosh, 1982). Here, the discourse analyst is working with a realist epistemology (a conception of where knowledge comes from), and grounds discourse in the real. This is one side of the equation. A properly reflexive *and* realist account would match this with an engagement with the political effects of familial discourse as dividing categories of person inside (comfortable, secure, trapped, miserable) and outside (lonely, homeless, free, politically

sound). In some categories, it could be [98] assumed, are those people who *use* the discourses, directly perceiving the meanings they afford, and in others are those who study the discourses, seeing them as strange. In feminist and qualitative work the relationship between the two categories of person is explored under the heading 'the position of the researcher'. In discourse analysis it has to be taken up and developed around the puzzle 'in what ways are these people like us, and why can they not see it as we do?' An account of direct perception able to sidestep cognitivist explanations is also an account which makes a direct connection between (ourselves as) subject and (others as) object of discourse analysis.

Third, an account has to be given of the difference between occasions in which the Gibsonian account holds and the (peculiar) circumstances in which some kind of cognitive account has to be called to supplement ecological descriptions. This issue is, at root, one of 'ecological validity'. Language itself should here not be seen as a 'representational artefact' which 'wrenches us from the ecological contexts of animal life' (Wartofsky, 1980: 150). (That would give a particular naturalist twist to the ecological account, a point I will return to below.) An ecological account helps us distinguish between 'natural' and unnatural occasions in which discourse is used. This is an appropriate point at which to return to the sample text.

Another occasion for reading 'Spirits in the Material World' is when students read the phrase to be tackled as a question requiring a three-hour answer in a finals examination ('"We are spirits in the material world" (Sting, 1981). Discuss'). Now, what the statement affords (and demands by way of an appropriate response), as part of the array which comprises desks, clocks, the felt compression of time and invigilators, is writing. It also comprises others, but here the others are as enclosed, constrained, isolated as individuals. (When such a statement *did* appear on a paper under these conditions the isolation was disrupted briefly by a shared, audible and thus reciprocated recognition of the intrusion of an item from popular culture into an academic frame, but the enforced silence of the examination hall soon closed around the readers.)

In contrast to the previous occasion, and as a peculiar condition of memory display similar to the tightly controlled studies on memory and perception in laboratory-experimental psychology, an ecological approach runs up against some limits to its domain of explanation. 'The experimental psychologist should realize that he cannot truly *control* the perception of an observer, for the reason that it is not [99] caused by stimuli' (Gibson, 1979: 305). Laboratory experiments are precisely designed to prevent people from transforming the situation, and, like our examinees in the present example, they can merely react to, rather than change, imposed conditions: 'the psychological laboratory is the very microcosm of the Cartesian scheme' (Costall, 1984:99). How people cope here is outside the scope of an ecological theory, and the bizarre separation of subject and object is materially reproduced in the spirit of dualist discourse.

This draws attention to two important aspects of the real (*and* the connections between them). First, there are 'natural', felt needs of human beings, and it is necessary to attempt to retrieve the values of humanism from the traditional functions of humanist discourse. Humanist discourse locates responsibility for action inside the individual, and anti-humanism tackles that position for moral! political reasons. Anti-humanists, as Eagleton (1983), a literary theorist critically employing post-structuralist ideas, points out, are concerned with the effects of material and discursive constraints on action and

subjectivity; they are not people who refuse to give sweets to children. A form of humanism rooted in biological needs, demands and desires is necessary also to counter the temptation to assume that a simple turn to language can free us from all material constraints (and involves a necessary repudiation of the dubious history and effects of humanism). There is a sense, as Eagleton again points out, in which post-structuralist ideas evoke a 'liberalism without a subject' (Eagleton, 1981: 107). This view emerges when discourse is completely disconnected from the real in forms of relativism. Language is rooted in physical and biological matter (as waves of sound, physical inscriptions on a page, vibrations within an ear, etc.). The second aspect of material reality lies in the ways in which persons as biological units are located physically in space, and it is important here not to lose sight of physical aspects of coercion. One only has to look at Foucault's (1977) descriptions of prisons and discourses of punishment to see that rhetoric is framed by and reproduces the practical order. Foucault makes some intriguing connections between discourse, power and an ecological view of subjectivity:

power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending on the mediation of the subject's own representations. If power takes hold on the body, this isn't through its having first to be interiorised in people's consciousness.

(Foucault, 1980: 186)

[100]

## **INSTITUTIONS, SOULS AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS**

There is an intimate connection between power and institutions, and it is when discourses become embedded in *institutions* that they have the power to wrench our language away from its connection with our needs. Then they create a disjunction with reality such that (as in the examination example) the subject is alienated, and a cognitivist account becomes applicable. There are clear connections with historical accounts of cognitivist de-skilling of subjects in psychology here (Shotter, 1987). Here again we have to step back and ensure that we have an account of reality as well as rhetoric so that a critical psychology sensitive to the powers of discourse can move forward.

A third occasion for reading 'Spirits in the Material World' is as an example of a piece of text, and here I want to remind you of the political connotations the words acquired when the associated video was banned. Or, rather, to note that the images (of the north of Ireland) which provoked the ban connect a new range of already constituted associations to the phrase. I could, in this vein, suggest links to reinforce a tenuous, but sufficient, connection between the statement and the politics which looms over it. As a description of the power of institutions, and the peculiar isolated confessional sense of self which is produced within them, Foucault's (1977) history of discipline and modern connects the material organisation and regulation of bodies with the meanings we attribute, in discourses, to our positions. The power produced in the modern prison, for example, had 'a double effect: a "soul" to be known and a subjection to be maintained' (Foucault, 1977: 295).

Among the trains of association that 'Spirits in the Material World' connects with here is the importance of the materiality of, for example, the imprisonment of the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six (Irishmen framed for planting bombs in

England), and the destruction of something we call spirit or mind as part of ‘the material’ after the prolonged major tranquilliser medication many prisoners receive, which leads to (permanent) tardive dyskinesia. The modern prison, and its parallel forms of surveillance in the rest of society, produces a particular form of individual subjectivity (of a piece with that predicted and controlled in laboratory experimentation). At the same time, components of the *physical* techniques it employs destroy the physiological basis for the expression of that individuality. Here also is a disturbing illustration of the materiality of one area of psychological practice (Carlen, 1986).[101]

The impact of physical techniques (and not only in the above example) does not alter ‘cognitions’, but destroys either the material basis for the expression of human needs (the character of the biological organism) or the circumstances in which needs can be described (the conditions for the employment of particular discourses) or both. The types of connection we make between the material and the discursive, then, do not require a cognitive apparatus to mediate between the two.

A point supporters of a direct perception account often have to repeat is that an ecological account does not argue that *nothing* ever goes on inside the head as an aid to interpretation and action, but it deconstructs the cognitivist dogma, ‘the presumption that all psychological explanation must be framed in terms of internal, mental representations, and processes (or rules) by which these representations are manipulated and transformed’ (Costall and Still, 1987: 2). The connection between discourse analysis and ecological psychology does not only provide a model of discourse user (a benefit to discourse theory) but also helps answer some problems that have beset accounts of ‘direct’ perception. Three issues that arise in criticisms of Gibson’s work can be addressed once discourse is added to the picture.

First, there has been a curious puzzle set up in debates within ecological literature over the way in which an organism has ‘direct perception’ of affordances (as meanings) as well as physical properties of the world, and this has led some writers to argue that Gibson was therefore a relativist rather than a realist (Katz, 1987). Once niches are understood as being discursive as well as material, the false opposition between ‘realism’ and ‘relativism’ disappears, for we are able to distinguish different senses of the real in which the person is immersed. Second, the introduction of language into the equation also provides a point of connection between ecological descriptions and those who are critical of Gibson precisely because they wish to emphasise the materiality of signification (e.g., Sinha, 1988).

third issue which can be addressed also connects the first and second points, and this is where we acknowledge the role ‘cognitive’ processes sometimes play in social action. The ecological account is, in contradistinction to a cognitivist account, not one which immediately, in its very language, dehumanises the person. Rather, when connected to discourse theory, it is an account of the conditions [102] in which a person becomes dehumanised. It is, by this token, doubly reflexive, for it not only traces the emergence of the cognitivist discourse and the power that discourse has in the alienating institutions that make ‘cognition’ necessary (and cognitive psychology a self-fulfilling account). It also attends to the ways in which cognitivist rhetorical devices (which locate thought inside individual heads as a matter of necessity) affect its own language. Much of ecological psychology is a self-consciously alternative *description* designed to defend an image of the person as potentially directly connected to others. The location of that model

of the person in discourse has, then, moral/political consequences.

Turning to an understanding of real relations of power entails an historical analysis of particular discourses, and it is necessary, as will have been clear over the preceding pages, that I use deconstructionist views of language to bring discourse analysis into a fruitful connection with ecological theory. As well as an analysis of the way in which language organised into discourse constrains meaning, the ecological model alerts us to points of resistance. The ecological account found in descriptions of direct perception resonates with a politics which takes ecological matters seriously, but need not do so in a way which romanticises nature and appeals to a ‘deep ecology’ as the touchstone of the real (Sylvan, 1985a, 1985b). By locating the problem in, and describing the separation of the person from a symbolic array which directly affords her or him movement and meaning as an issue to do with *institutions*, we can develop a sense of mediation which is outside, not only inside the head. A direct-perception position is one that sees that information about patterns of light ‘is not the kind of information that is transmitted over a channel. There is no sender outside the head and no receiver inside the head’ (Gibson, 1979: 64). When we see that ‘information’ conveyed by language is not sent from head to head but present in symbolic arrays, we arrive at exactly the position argued by discourse analysts.

Ecological psychologists have argued against the view that representations are manipulated and transformed inside the head, but this does not mean that the meanings we assign to the real, whether that is the realm of biology or of institutions, cannot be transformed. Action is not unmediated, but necessarily shared with others, and is structured through discourses and institutions rather than internal representations and cognitions. It is the focus on those [103] discourses, the conditions for their rhetoric, and institutions, their real power, that makes a critical discourse-sensitive psychology possible.

Ecological psychology provides the kind of *description* of the activities of individuals as discourse users which could operate as a general covering cross-cultural account *and* it can account for the way in which particular culturally specific forms of psychology become embedded in what we now call ‘minds’. It would be theoretically conceivable, for example, both for the Gibsonian story to be true, and for the cognitivist discourse to become ‘true’ insofar as it is lived in the action, experience and self-understanding of a population. This, in present political arrangements, is possible, and that is all the more reason to challenge cognitivist discourse inside psychology now. It is also entirely possible for the forms of text-life that a discourse-analytic ecological psychology describes to imbibe psychoanalytic discourse, and that variety of self-talk and subjectivity could become ‘true’. This has already happened to an extent in the dominant cultures of the West, and different political dynamics flow from psychodynamic models of the person. The following chapter explores these models. [end of page 103]