

THE CRISIS-DISCOURSE DIALECTIC: CURRENT FINDINGS AND RELEVANCE FOR THE SERVICE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This article summarises some of the main strands in the critical discourse analysis of crisis published since 2013. Its archival research design has been limited in scope, however, to those projects in which the author himself was involved, either on his own or in collaboration with other discourse scholars. Through identifying and reviewing themes and topics within the crisis-discourse nexus, an attempt will be made to relate current findings to the emergence, development and resolution of crises in the service industries. Our review shows that conceptualising crisis as a social practice rather than as a turning point, disruptive event or ubiquitous, never-ending process may enrich current interpretations of the role of crisis in society. Moreover, when viewed from within a structure-agency perspective, a focus on the discursive co-construction of crisis as social practice highlights choice and control over inertia and concomitant trauma. The study concludes with a tentative, broad-brush consideration of how these insights may inform crisis management in the tertiary sector.

Keywords: Crisis, social practice, discursive construction, media representation, service sector.

INTRODUCTION

This article is interested in the intersection of — and interrelatedness among — three major social constructs, namely, crisis, discourse and service. To begin with the first one, “[c]rises are increasingly common parts of the larger organizational and social landscape of modern life” (Seeger et al., 2005: 79). Interest in crisis is rarely purely academic, however, and tends to come with an agenda of practical relevance or social criticism. Discourse, on the other hand, broadly refers to “semantic constructions of specific aspects of reality that serve the interests of particular historical and/or social contexts” (Van Leeuwen, 2008: vii). In 2013 the author co-chaired with Zuraidah Mohd Don (University of Malaya, Malaysia) a thematic symposium on how these semantic representations help co-construct crises; the symposium took place at the 3rd International Conference of the Association of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice (ALAPP), organized by University of Malaya (FBL/HERC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 12–14 December 2013). Our main aim was to assess the extent to which professionals, organizations and especially crisis communication researchers and practitioners may benefit from linguistically informed analyses of crisis-related discourse. After all, even outside the academic community of discourse scholars, there is agreement that crisis — viewed as both unfolding process and unresolved problem — not only involves “diverse extra-semiotic factors associated with structural, agential, and technological

selectivities” (Jessop, 2013: 7) but also *semiosis* even though it is not known in what proportion exactly and what factors explain the interplay of the ‘words’ and the ‘world’.

The various contributing papers at the ALAPP symposium explored the performativity of organizational, political and media texts in shaping crisis within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in its European tradition (e.g. Fairclough, 1992, 2002; Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2008; Wodak, 1996), raising, among other things, the question whether CDA forms a potentially useful feeder discipline for crisis communication research. CDA is fundamentally a problem-oriented approach, “studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 2). Though any social phenomenon can be subjected to this kind of critical investigation, crisis stands out because of the way it disrupts the “relative social equilibrium” (Fairclough, 1992: 197), including the order of discourse. This kind of disruption often reveals the hidden power structures, processes of control, secret agendas and underlying ideologies of a society, a particular organization or community (of practice). Moreover, when conceived of as a ‘moment of truth’, crisis also brings to light the deeper essence of the phenomenon perceived to be in crisis (Starn, 1971: 16).

It is only in the last five years that there has been a substantial increase in case-specific ‘discourse and crisis’ research from a CDA perspective, and it is no surprise perhaps that this coincides with the recent increase — or at least, the perception and experience of such an increase — in crises such as the global financial and economic crises (2007–2011) or the numerous refugee and migration crises (e.g. the European migrant crisis, 2015 to date). Moreover, all of these crises occur against a background of disruptions of established social practices largely due to globalization and the digital revolution. The relative paucity of CDA and similar discourse-analytical research is in sharp contrast to the examination of discourse and its relation to crisis in, for example, the field of organizational crisis (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Though these studies frequently use the term ‘discourse’, they do not work within a properly articulated discourse theory or offer a *systematic* analysis of *concrete* instances of *language use* in their multi-layered *contexts* as is typically done in CDA.

To some extent, this observation also holds true for studies that focus on crisis in service management and service provision (e.g. Rasoulia et al., 2017). Note that various incidents, disruptions, interruptions, etc. in the delivery of a service can be subsumed under one umbrella concept usually referred to as ‘service crisis’. Rasoulia et al. (2017: n.p.) define it as “a public service failure affecting a large number of individuals (e.g. public transport deficiencies, information breaches, internet service or electricity outages)”. Given the wide range and diversity of service activities, however, and also academic interest in service encounters and customer satisfaction (e.g. Davidow, 2000; 2003), the concept should also usefully include smaller-scale and private-sector services, often with fewer stakeholders that will be affected. Thus, service crises can range from firm-specific customer complaints (e.g. late delivery) to macro-level breakdowns in, for example, infrastructure, transport and logistics. More on this in the section on service-industry crises.

In what follows, I will briefly summarise ongoing research efforts into the interplay between crisis and discourse with a view to exploring new approaches to handling service crises ranging from firm-specific customer complaints to macro-level breakdowns in, for example, infrastructure, transport and logistics. Before proceeding two notes. First, throughout this paper, I will only refer to services in the *real* economy. Second, the current

study — though producing novel insights and arguments — is conceptual rather than empirical in nature and does not follow the standard layout of the majority of academic articles with an extensive review of the literature followed by sections on methodology, findings and analysis. The work is exploratory, aimed at challenging mainstream views and identifying avenues for future research.

CRISIS AND DISCOURSE

Since 2010, one of my research interests has been the semiotic analysis of organizational (institutional), political and media texts and genres that (i) represent past, present or future crises (cfr. Cottle, 2009), (ii) contribute to crisis outbreaks and/or (iii) co-constitute crisis during its actual development and resolution. To quote Fairclough (1992: 28), discourse is “a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning”. Regardless of the nature and scale of crisis, the CDA examinations of crisis discourses can only be successful if they adopt a rigorous research design (e.g. across-method triangulation), collect data in an informed and transparent way and analyse and interpret linguistic or multimodal data systematically. Moreover, studies into the crisis-discourse dialectic should lead to practical recommendations at the micro level of social interactions rather than restrict themselves to the more general issue-driven approach and macro-level interests of CDA (e.g. issues of power, inequality and manipulation

With these ambitions and requirements in mind, a book-editing project was set up in 2010 in collaboration with academic publisher John Benjamins’ *Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture*, a series of monographs and volumes under general editorship of Ruth Wodak (Lancaster University, UK), one of the leading international CDA scholars (e.g. Wodak, 1996; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). After a successful call for papers, 15 chapter-length contributions from across the world were selected, reviewed, revised and eventually brought together in *Discourse and Crisis: Critical Perspectives* (DAPSAC Series No. 52) — see De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013a). The many detailed case studies covered topics as diverse as police crisis negotiations, Ireland’s 1987 economic crisis, emergency calls, collaboration in crisis during the Iraq War, community leadership and Kenya’s development crisis, the H1N1 health crisis in Mexico and the media representation of terrorism in Malaysia’s English dailies.

Generalizing over these chapters as well as the more conceptual papers that framed them, De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013b) arrived at a significant number of interesting conclusions. I will only report those that are relevant to service crises. Arguably, the crisis semiosis to occur in a service-industry context is closer to other forms of organizational discourse than political or media discourse, which brings us to Part I in the volume (De Rycker & Mohd Don, 2013a: 101–183). Four findings are directly relevant to a consideration of crisis management in the service industry (De Rycker & Mohd Don, 2013b: 36–37).

A first observation is that epistemic and other asymmetries characterize task-oriented talk-in-interaction context and that to successfully negotiate those asymmetries, contextual knowledge is of the utmost importance. The case studies show that social actors participating in a crisis cannot comprehend the unstructured complexities typical of crisis from *within* the interactions, i.e. as the crisis events themselves are unfolding. We concluded

that “crisis requires the *simultaneous* – rather than *sequential* – adoption of both a narrow focus on the crisis events as they develop (e.g. the facts and figures, the detail) and a wider viewing frame that includes social and institutional aspects” (36).

Secondly, contextual knowledge is especially a matter of

genre conventions (e.g. an emergency call) and how the textual instantiations of a genre are shaped by the type of social activity, the roles and relationships of the social actors and the channel of communication (e.g. the emergency call operator’s preoccupations with protocol) (36).

The research reveals that lack of genre familiarity and other discursive uncertainties work in tandem with uncertainties about what is happening in the material and force-dynamic world. Risks of inconclusive crisis resolution, inadequate crisis recovery or even a deepening of the crisis situation at hand are higher for crisis participants that have not been prepared well to handle the semiotic demands of crisis.

Next, throughout the *Discourse and Crisis* volume, the discourse-analytical studies suggest that “crises, disasters, emergencies and related negative or threatening events do not tolerate silence, at least not at the here-and-now level of two or more people talking and coordinating their actions” (37). Crisis requires decisive action but the traumatic or stressful conditions under which crises unfold render coordinated action, information sharing and more generally *intersubjectivity* difficult to achieve or maintain. This creates room for miscommunication, misalignments, inefficiencies, non-committal responses and also *silences*.

As a fourth and final point, we drew attention to the many paradoxes, contradictions and tensions that crisis engenders. On the one hand, within organizational discourse, there are highly regulated forms of social practice (e.g. emergency calls), with regulations also applying to linguistic interaction; on the other, routine procedures and institutional practices are undermined by the exigencies of the crisis situation. This pits certain *sedimented* top-down ways of knowing, saying and doing against bottom-up idiosyncracies that arise locally and dynamically as the crisis develops.

Interestingly, resolution of the paradox lies in *adaptive flexibility*: generating creative solutions in new situations while respecting the boundaries of the pre-determined institutional framework. Adaptive flexibility, however, is no answer to the crisis-proneness of the organizational practice itself [...], and may in fact trigger crisis itself (De Rycker & Mohd Don, 2013b: 37).

Also in the service industry, crisis recovery will arguably be hindered and helped by how these paradoxes impact the praxis and what is at stake in the praxis. These and similar insights to emerge from the linguistically-informed analysis of crisis discourse led the author from a consideration of crisis as somehow external to the praxis to a consideration of crisis as a form of *recontextualized* social practice in and of itself, which brings us to the next section.

CRISIS AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Schatzki (2001: 2) defines ‘social practice’ as the embodied, materially mediated array of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding (see also De Rycker, 2018, forthcoming). My research into crisis as a social practice — i.e. crisis as performance, as “doing crisis” — follows on from De Rycker and Mohd Don’s (2013) volume but derives some of its impetus from crisis theorizing published after the volume came out, especially Jessop (2013). Some of my early exploration was published in De Rycker (2014). Because the findings are not readily available online or in printed form, I will recapitulate those parts that are directly relevant to the current article.

Jessop argues that “crises are multifaceted phenomena that invite multiple approaches from different entry-points and standpoints” (Jessop, 2013: 2). Unitary definitions of crisis as a *semiotic achievement* or mere *social construction* — as is the case in CDA — cannot be expected, however, to produce a more comprehensive or deeper appreciation of this pervasive phenomenon. Instead, Jessop promotes an approach that recognizes that “[a]ll social phenomena have semiotic and material properties” (Jessop, 2013: 3) and that semiosis (sense- and meaning-making) provide the foundation of society (Sum & Jessop, 2013: Ch. 3). The quasi-universal appeal of crises as both a research topic and an intensely felt human experience lies in the fact that

they often produce profound cognitive, strategic, and practical disorientation by disrupting actors’ sedimented views of the world. They disturb prevailing meta-narratives, theoretical frameworks, policy paradigms, and/or everyday life and open the space for proliferation (*variation*) in crisis interpretations, only some of which get *selected* [...] [and] are translated into economic strategies and policies – and, of these, only some prove effective and are *retained*. (Jessop, 2013: 5)

While Hay (1996) and others approach crisis as narration and discourse, Jessop (2013) — see also Sum and Jessop (2013: 161ff) — examine crisis in terms of the co-evolving and ongoing processes of structuration and human agency. In Fairclough’s (2005: 54–55) view, it is the balancing of both semiotic and extra-semiotic processes that sets Jessop’s work apart from other crisis theories.

However, there are synergies to be gained from combining Jessop’s theorization with key thinkers in CDA, especially Van Leeuwen (2008) and his socio-semantic framework. Social practices are “socially regulated ways of doing things” (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 6), structured around the following dimensions:

- actions
- participants
- performance modes
- presentation styles
- times
- locations
- resources (tools and materials)
- eligibility conditions

The performance modes are the “stage directions” for carrying out a particular action while presentation styles refer to the “dress and body grooming requirements” of the participants; eligibility conditions, on the other hand, stipulate what criteria a person, an object, a location, etc. needs to meet to participate in the practice (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 10).

If “crisis” can be meaningfully reconceptualised as “doing crisis”, and crisis can be examined in terms of the eight elements listed above, a new and original research agenda emerges, aimed at determining the degree of *regulation* that crisis is subject to, both as a social practice in its entirety and in terms of each of its constitutive elements separately. Some of these ideas were first presented, discussed and refined at the following three conferences:

- i. *6th International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences (ICHISS) 2014*, National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM), Faculty of Defence Studies & Management, 7 June 2014. Title: Conceptualizing Crisis: Balancing (Un) structured Complexity with (Un) intended Creativity;
- ii. *Sociolinguistics of Globalization: (De) Centring and (De) Standardization*, The University of Hong Kong, 5 June 2015. Title: Reconceptualizing Crisis: ‘Doing Crisis’ as a Recontextualized Social Practice [contribution to the Specialist Panel *Crisis, What Crisis?* Organizers: Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Philippa Smith, Other presenters: Jen Cope and Andrew Hoskins, Discussant: Stuart Allan];
- iii. *4th International SEARCH Conference*, Taylor’s University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia, 29 May 2015. Title: A Social-Practice Approach to Understanding the Crisis Phenomenon: Possibilities and Limitations.

The second presentation resulted in one publication, De Rycker (2014); the other two – including the *Crisis, What Crisis?* Panel talk — formed the basis for De Rycker (2018, forthcoming), however, after multiple and substantial revisions.

In the context of the current paper, the following comments may suffice to develop the bigger argument. They have been adapted from De Rycker (2014). The key component in every social practice is the myriad of actions that happen simultaneously or in sequence. For the “doing crisis” practice, at least, in the light of Jessop (2013) and Sum and Jessop (2013: 457), these actions include

- declaring that a particular configuration of material and/or semiotic phenomena counts as crisis
- generating crisis construals
- selecting crisis construals
- retaining crisis construals
- deciding crisis resolution and crisis recovery strategies

Two comments are in place. Construals also play a significant role when people — sometimes entire populations or communities — undergo (experience) and/or react to an unfolding crisis (e.g. Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, 2017, and the complex coordination action required). Secondly, as discussed by Cottle (2009: 17), media visibility will always be part of the social practice:

[issues] depend [for their recognition and standing as ‘crises’] on prominent exposure and elaboration in the media – such is the centrality of media systems today within processes of problem definition, awareness, legitimation and mobilization (Cottle, 2009: 17).

What is unique about these “processes of problem definition, awareness, legitimation and mobilization” is the time-sensitivity of all crisis-related actions across the crisis life-cycle; participants have to constantly navigate material and semiotic actions, choosing between “looking before you leap” and “leaping” against a backdrop of both silence and noise.

Taking of participants, the social practice of “doing crisis” includes — in the narrative tradition of viewing crisis — victims, survivors, helpers, rescue services, heroes and cowards (and other archetypical characters); next, there are institutional actors in the political field (e.g. government agencies), the social science field (e.g. universities and think tanks) and the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 2005). They can be “nameless or named individuals through social networks, formal organizations, institutional arrangements, specific social forms, or even the dynamic of a global society” (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 457). Eligibility conditions, however, apply to all of them. Legitimate participation in the social practice (e.g. the various crisis construals) requires, for example, *practical sense* (Vollmer, 2013: 58–60), or “competence in using the rules regulating the social practice, i.e. their ability to attend [...] to the salient aspects of what it is that is going on and to determine what is exceptional and what is not” (De Rycker, 2014). In my contribution to the *Crisis and the Media* volume, I elaborated this element further within Shove et al.’s (2012) tripartite social practice framework, concluding that the diffuse observability of crisis makes it difficult to identify unique competences (know-how, practical consciousness, technique, skills, shared understanding) across a variable range of potential perspectives and participants. More often than not, “doing crisis” seems to go hand in hand with *incompetence* and inadequate crisis recovery decisions or actions. The same holds true for the resources, materials and tools (e.g. technologies): what makes crisis a distinctive social practice is the lack or ineffectiveness of resources rather than their presence and effectiveness (for more details, see De Rycker, 2018, forthcoming).

Moving on to performance modes, De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013a) found that in its performance, crisis usually tempers its dynamic and volatile component (e.g. agitation, speed, drama, emotion) with more stable ways of thinking, saying and doing (e.g. expertise as a form of reassurance, the calming effect of adopting a broader historical perspective). Public-sphere discourses may foreground decisive leadership while in organizational crisis recovery; the language may project continuity and resilience.

Compared with the eligibility conditions for “doing crisis”, there is more distinctiveness to how presentation styles, times and locations shape the practice. Typically, dress and body grooming regulations are relaxed either by force of circumstance or in a bid to project authenticity and credibility. Political or community leaders will appear on the news, dressed casually if not hurriedly, at unusual hours, wearing wellingtons rather than brogues as the crisis occasion demands; corporate leaders equally will ignore the usually strict dress code that accompanies positions of power, choosing instead to become – at least in appearance – one with those affected (e.g. industrial accident), and showing up in places where they would rarely be seen otherwise (e.g. on the factory floor rather than in the CEO office suite, surrounded by a crowd rather than on their own with one or two executive assistants, in a TV studio, and so on).

SERVICE-INDUSTRY CRISES

For a good comprehension of the notion of ‘service crisis’, this section will first take a brief look at the nature of services itself. Illeris (2007) offers an in-depth discussion of this heterogeneous group of economic activities (e.g. trading, entertainment or transport) and corresponding products (e.g. sales, concerts and journeys). His critical review of the literature and further discussion of borderline cases suggest that traditional definitions centred on the *immateriality* of services are still the most useful (32). Additional characteristics should, however, be identified to differentiate among the many different activities (e.g. distributive, producer, social and personal services) or support the numerous purpose-built typologies. Reference is also made to Hill’s (1977) ‘service triangle’ model, which shows how bidirectional service relations and interactions between service providers [A] and customers or users [B] presuppose a third party [C] in the form of “the reality to be transformed or operated on by [A: the service provider] for the sake of [B: the customer or user]” (23).

Hill’s (1977) model allows us to define service crisis in terms of a disruption of the three sides that keep the triangle together. As argued by Shove et al. (2012), social practices consist in certain interdependencies among materials, competencies and meanings: it is the repeated integration of the materials, competences and meanings that reproduce a social practice. A conceptualization of crisis as a social practice — with recurrent integrations of its constituent elements — is, therefore, eminently suited to capture the discontinuities of service interruptions. Interestingly, there are homologous resonances between the social practice elements of competencies, meanings and materials, on the one hand, and the three corners in the service triangle: [A], [B] and [C]. It follows that a service crisis can be defined as the *disintegration* of this triangular configuration either because of changes in the nodes (e.g. global online service providers such as Amazon) or the service relations and interactions change (e.g. increased power asymmetry). Moreover, due to the nature of service activities, service crises are more likely to be crises *of* a given natural or social configuration than crises *in* that configuration (Jessop, 2013: 9). When public transport systems break down, the immediate knock-on effect can be felt in other societal domains — i.e. other social practices; this will in its turn put pressure on existing crisis response mechanisms and recovery strategies.

There is also a significant role for a discourse-analytical approach that challenges the dominant construction of crisis as a purely managerial issue. As we argued in De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013: 39–40), the media, for example,

typically construct crisis as a managerial issue [...], one that can be planned for, monitored and resolved through adequate crisis response; the implicit expectation is that this response will have to come from the social and political structures already in place rather than *ad hoc* individual or spontaneous collective action (a new social movement). On the other, it may also increase, rather than reduce, the overall complexity to be dealt with and/or lead to insufficient engagement with the unique characteristics of the crisis.

Insofar as service crises as defined above are always crises *of* social configurations, they lead to more disorientation than crises outside the service industries; after all, the defining characteristics of service are immateriality and triangularity. As a consequence, service crises make managerial crisis response procedures even more ineffectual. However, when services get disrupted, the mechanistic interventions typical of the managerial

paradigm can be enhanced by enriching them with the more fluid, interactionist interpretations produced by discourse analysis. Though I realize that further research is required, it seems that the semiosis and symbolic functions of language are better aligned with the intangible nature of services, and thus, hypothetically, also more likely to help capture and resolve concrete instances of disruption.

CONCLUDING REMARK

The crisis phenomenon is ideally suited for bridging research communities across otherwise unrelated academic disciplines. Social practice theory, discourse analysis (especially, CDA) and the study of services all converge, however, in the investigation of “doing [service] crisis”. Despite obvious limitations, it is hoped that the preceding discussion has shown the direction into which crisis research might usefully develop in the next ten years. In De Rycker (2018, forthcoming), I further explore the similarities, continuities and differences in the way crisis is performed and the way it is represented discursively, especially in the news media. A social practice perspective is not without problems, however. After all, if crisis is something that is “done”, then, there seems to be room for “not doing crisis”, too. This raises the issue of agency and the ability to “do otherwise”. Moreover, insofar as crisis is an undesirable activity because of its negative disruptive impact, the damage that it inflicts or the panic that it may cause, it is the *avoidance* or even *elimination* of this social practice that should be investigated rather than its actual re-enactment. What a consideration of service crisis adds to these two final observations is that paradoxically perhaps, avoidance and elimination are much less of an option than in the case of other types of crisis. Despite their immateriality, service activities impact the material world in a very immediate and concrete manner, necessitating decisive and swift crisis construal and resolution.

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