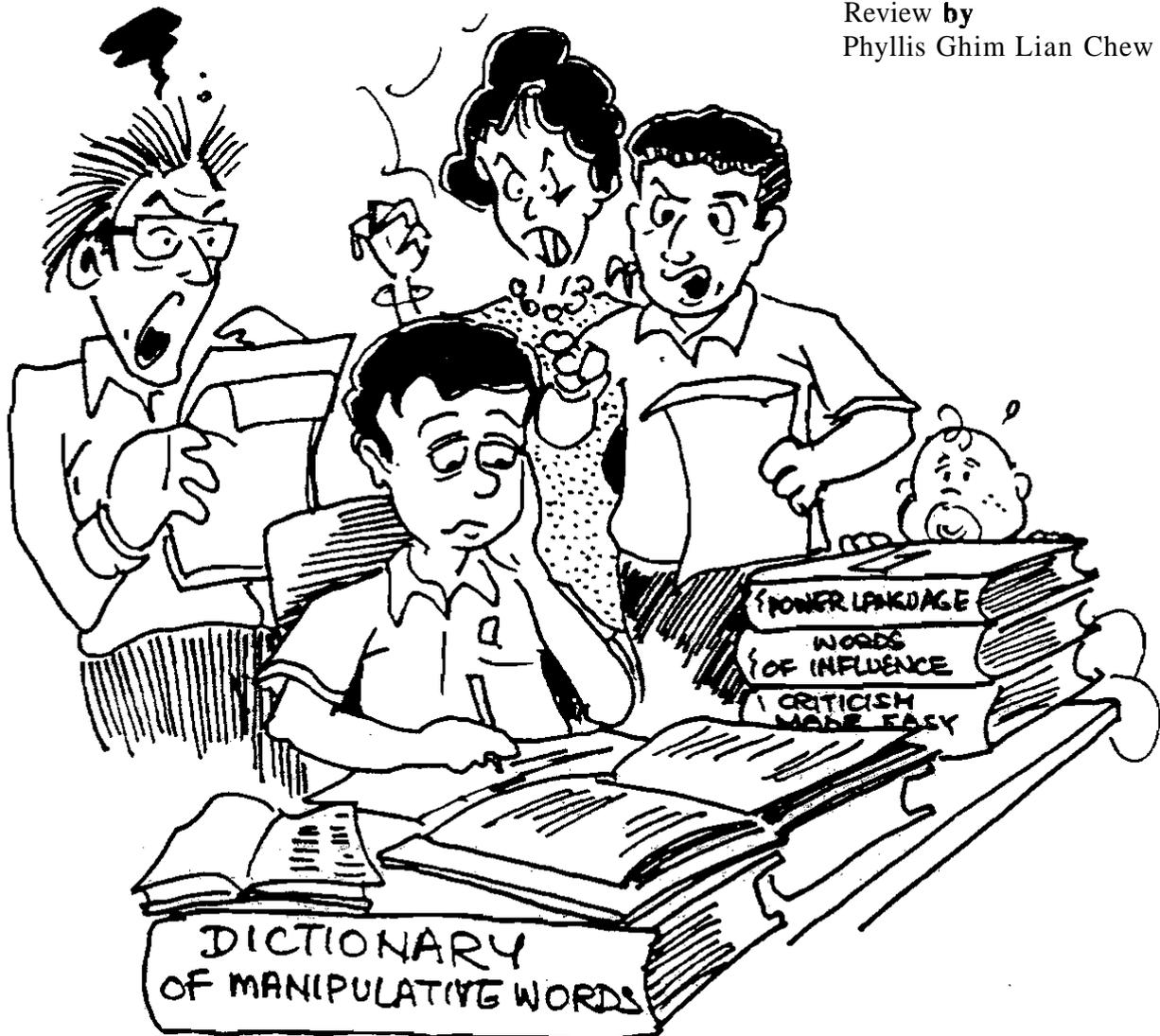

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CRITICAL LINGUISTICS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Review by
Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew



WHAT IS "CRITICAL LINGUISTICS"?

Critical linguistics is an approach to the study of language which stresses the close connection between linguistic structure (language) and social structure (society). Its practical objective is to help increase **consciousness** of language and particularly of the way in which the use of language contributes to the domination of some people by others. While power exists in many forms, including that of physical **force**, the type of power that is of interest to critical **linguists** lies in the assumptions which are implicit in the **conventions** which underlie everyday social interactions.

There are social meanings in any language, and these are reflected in its phonology, vocabulary, grammar and **discourse** structure. Critical linguistics shows the processes of how one party may be **manipulated** by another through the use of language and how another party may "pull **the wool** over the other party's **eyes**". There is a focus on how people **use language** for a **variety** of purposes but mainly on how people use language to manipulate or control their environment as well

as **other people**. Thus, language is never shown as neutral but always embodying beliefs and practices **which** incorporate **power** relations and social struggle.

It is an **area** of language study which is relatively recent. A "critical linguistics" was first proposed in Fowler et al. (1979). Their approach is based on the dialectical inseparability of two concepts, "language" and "society", two words which happen to be indexed separately in English. **Influenced** by Halliday (1979), their objective was to combine a close formal analysis of language texts and social analysis. They were interested in analysing text in such a way that it would act as a critical resource of use to non-linguists.

The original orientation in Fowler et al. was continued by a group of scholars working at the University of East Anglia (e.g. Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress 1991). Work on the connection between language and **ideology** has been further developed by a number of researchers (e.g. Threadgold, 1986; Wodak, 1989) and sociolinguists (e.g. Hall, 1985) attached to the Centre for Contemporary Studies in Birmingham.

WHAT ARE ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS?

Although a relatively new development in linguistics, critical linguistics comes with pedagogical implications, a few of which are outlined below.

First, it should be clear that critical **linguistics** is more concerned with language education than language training (Clark et al, 1990). There is a suggestion that children should have "more **education**". That is, children need to understand the odds, to make their own informed decisions about their language practice in the light of an understanding of the individual, and collective benefits and costs. There is a suggestion therefore that language awareness programmes ought to help children develop not only their descriptive knowledge of language use, but also a critical awareness of how such uses are shaped by and shape social relationships involving power.

Another pedagogical implication is that children should be made aware of the exercise of power by some groups over others as they are revealed in speech and writing (for example, the use of the inclusive we). They could be made aware of how the talk of educational or medical and legal institutions employs, for example, specialized vocabulary and syntax which, while appearing conventional and "normal", actually serves to increase the distance between speaker and listener or writer and reader. This increase in distance in turn serves to increase the power or domination of the speaker over the listener or writer over the reader.

In addition, because people are constantly subjected to **various forms** of "**persuasion**" through the mass media of television, radio and print, it is important that children be educated about the **more "covert"** uses of language. In advertising, for instance, language is used to manipulate not just ideas **but the emotions of the reader** or listener. All **this implies** that language education should begin to focus upon developing the critical and analytical capacities of children **and their** ability to creatively transform **and challenge** the conventions of discourse and practices which are manipulative or alienating.

Where the **teaching of grammar** and vocabulary **is** concerned, critical linguistics is concerned not so much **with the** teaching of **forms of** grammar and vocabulary per se but **rather** with how their use **reflects** and expresses **social** differences or social inequalities between participants in an **interaction**.

In the teaching of vocabulary, critical linguistics would call for the discarding of the idea that the "vocabulary" of a language is some sort of neutral label which comes from nowhere in particular and belongs to everyone independently of class, gender and race. It would also claim that children should be shown that not only are there radically different ways of wording the world according to the speaker's or writer's point of view, but that the most familiar and natural-seeming wordings incorporate implicit philosophies or theories.

In the teaching of writing, there would be a stress on procedures for making the writing process transparent. One technique suggested is to **encourage** children to keep a "think book" in which they jot down their thoughts, feelings and reasons for choices made in wordings or grammatical structures of language, etc. Besides enabling learners to share thoughts and experiences, such a book will encourage them to reflect critically on their individual perceptions in relation to whom they are writing for and what context they are writing in. In this way, a critical sense of readership may be cultivated. In writing on an event, learners may decide to provide different versions for different audiences, and this in turn might affect language choice, and decisions about what to include or exclude. Through discussion, the teacher can help learners see how a change in wording or in the structure of a sentence or in the order of paragraph might change the whole perception entirely.

Overall, research in critical linguistics implies that the teaching of language awareness should not be a separate component of the curriculum. A critical language awareness, it is argued, should be integrated into all aspects of the curriculum and all aspects of language teaching. All language teachers are advocated to have, in the long term, a language awareness agenda, and should aim to foster in their learners a critical awareness of the language of **learning** in their own subject area.

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