Introduction

Discourse of violence

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
but words will never hurt me

Many of us have grown up with some version of the adage above. I recall chanting 'Sticks and stones may break my bones ...' at taunting children when walking into a new school setting—chanting it, though, silently inside my head, to buck up the courage to take retorts. I wonder now at the flimsy promise of the second half, 'words will never hurt me', and consider anew the connection between words and violence. If we take as a premise that violent acts reflect a violent society, can we then look at the discourse of violence to investigate, to understand, to seek to change a violent course? Might it be that we should look to the discourse of and about violence as a key into the construction of a violent society, a violent act, a violent self? This essay provides some overview of areas of violent discourse needing analysis, some works that offer a discursive approach to the language of violence, and introductions of the papers that follow in this special issue. Obviously, neither the articles mentioned nor the occasions for study of the intersections in violence and discourse will be exhaustive in the space allotted here.

If we consider that language, as Vygotsky (1934/1986) noted in his work on the Zone of Proximal Development, is learned in the public context, practiced in the private sphere of inner speech and brought out into the public sphere to be further shaped, we must also consider that the language we speak is not only shaped by others but is also a shaping force on others *and* on ourselves. We hear what *we*, as well as others say. When the words of violence are spoken by others and by ourselves we may well be advancing acts of violence. Language which we display in the public sphere may be picked up and applauded, or picked out and condemned, or both. When words inhibit speech actions and other physical acts, such speech acts contribute to a speech act of violation. Utterances, as Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) clearly note, can be actions, whether they be vows, contracts, teases, threats, etc. Silences, too, can be a part of event structures of violent acts (Labov, 1981).

What we are concerned with in this issue of *Discourse & Society* are discourses of violence—language that accompanies acts of violence, language that reports or reclaims acts of violence, language that leads to violence and violation, language that is itself a violation. This special issue is devoted to analyses of discourses of violence looking not only at talk and

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texts that describe or record violent events, but also analyzing talk and texts that precede and assist in instigating acts of violence. Thus, we consider how discourse itself is a contributor to and an enactment of violence as well as a reflexive instrument to examine violence. The articles in this issue take up, in varying degrees, several 'sides' of discursive practices: reporting, enacting and instigating. Talk about violence and texts of violence proliferate, yet often remain far too unexamined—perhaps because of a fear that talking about violence will bring it close, will validate violence as 'speakable' and thus silence can no longer protect us from 'unspeakable acts'.

Words of violence are being cited as evidence in formulating violent acts: 'sheets of anger-filled rap lyrics that depict the deadly violence he is accused of wreaking at the D.C. police headquarters' are cited in the lead paragraph of a *Washington Post* article referring to a shooting spree in the police headquarters and the deaths of one Washington police officer, two FBI agents, and the lyrics writer himself, in November 1994 (Wilgoren, 1994: C1). Lyrics cited in the article include: '"It's all about stompin on heads and killin feds" and "kill or be killed"' (Wilgoren, 1994: C1). At issue in debate over rap lyrics is whether they represent hate speech or free speech, whether they are inflammatory or artistic expression (see Razza, 1995, for a recent study of rap lyrics).

How then do we investigate a discourse of violence? The articles we present in this issue use the tools of discourse analysis to collect and to analyze language about violence. Although talk about violence is pervasive in the press and other news media, and talk is the keystone of most criminal justice investigatory processes about acts of violence, more close analyses of the components of this discourse are needed. If Harré and Secord (1973) and Harré and Gillett (1994) are correct in that discourse is the window into the mind, more comprehension about acts of violence may come about if we learn to analyze carefully the discourse of those who victimize others.

First we must make a connection between language and violence: in essence we must examine the chant 'words will never hurt me'. When can words hurt? One persistent connection occurs in hate speech which emerges as a violation of one's personal or a group's social space. Such language verbally validates violence and often provokes violence toward the target or in reply from the target person or group. Looking at subtle encodings of racism in discourse, Van Dijk's work on communicating racism notes that 'ethnic attitudes and prejudices that form the cognitive basis of discrimination and racism cannot become socially acquired, shared, and confirmed without the multiple processes of public and interpersonal communication' (1987a: 383). He reports from interview data that various strategies of linguistic distancing circumscribe racist views: '"I am not prejudiced, but ..."; "we also sometimes do bad things, but ..."; "these people"; "they"; "life is not exactly nice in this neighborhood"'—such wordings show apparent denials, concessions, contrastive emphases, indefinite expressions and litotes as discursive strategies to emphasize

negatives in positive ways (Van Dijk 1987a: 388); see also Van Dijk 1992; Wodak and Matouschek, 1993; and Thiesmeyer, this issue, pp. 319–52.

Record of spontaneous and violence-invoking discourse can be found in public spheres as we see in the following *Washington Post* article depicting violent discourse in the aftermath of the multiple-fatality bus bombing claimed by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in Tel Aviv in October 1994. The article ends by quoting remarks and shouts from spectators in Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Square, scene of the bombing: 'If I could catch an Arab now, I'd just slaughter him. With joy, even!' (Gellman, 1994: A37). The reporter then notes that the crowd began a chant that grew louder and more rhythmic: 'Death to the Arabs' (Gellman, 1994: A37). Not the particular people who did the bombing—any Arab will do for revenge; in fact, the threat is carried further to include all members of the type in 'death to *the* Arabs'. Violent discourse here occurs in the aftermath of violent acts and may serve to further the cycle, should any member of *the* group come within reach of the chanting crowd.

We can also look at language that regulates, records and reports (and even promotes) violence by studying the discourse of legal statutes, proclamations and news media (see also Van Dijk, 1987b, 1991) on racism, power elites and media discourse. Thiesmeyer takes up this effort in her essay, this issue (pp. 319–52), 'The Discourse of Official Violence: Anti-Japanese North American Discourse and the American Internment Camps', in which she examines the discursive strategies of War Orders, Congressional Hearings and War Department texts that interned and silenced Japanese-Americans in the US during the Second World War.

Other approaches to discourse of violence look closely at the language of those who speak about their crimes, their circumstances upon arrest or their circumstances as victims of crime. To investigate such narratives of violence we can look at re-presentations or accounts of violent acts as found in depositions, interrogations, confessions and court testimonies. Discourse proliferates and is routinized in the investigation process in modern criminal justice systems (Foucault, 1979). Auburn et al.'s article in this issue (pp. 353–86) '"You Punched him, Didn't You?": Versions of Violence in Accusatory Interviews', investigates the construction of guilt in police–suspect discourse in taped interviews between suspects and interrogators. Their research calls attention to the ways in which 'preferred versions' of events are created, such that they facilitate the functionings of the criminal justice system in disposing of suspects.

Discourse analysts can also investigate the discourse of violence through examining autobiographical narratives, counseling accounts, even re-presentations in works of fiction, movies, songs and videos—a list which moves now from the realms of the legally ratified to those of therapy, art and popular culture. The above-noted news article reporting a role for rap lyrics on violent crimes depicts a site for a systematic analysis of the words of rap lyrics. Similar discourse analysis in other artistic media may give insight into perceptions of salient discourses in violent incidents. Media reports and investigatory records about incidents of spouse abuse and

assaults against women provide a case in point in which documentation exists, but in which methods of collection are called into question. Consider the necessity for further discursive analysis revealed in press reports on violence toward women by American football players. According to a *Washington Post* review '141 men—56 current and former professional football players and 85 college athletes—have been reported to police for violent behavior toward women since January 1, 1989' (Brubaker, 1994a: A1). Brubaker's story includes long stretches of quoted speech by the American football player, ex-Denver Bronco, Vance Johnson who says he has been three years in counseling and who relates seeing violence toward women in his home as a child: 'I saw this craziness, the men partying and having affairs and the fighting and screaming and beatings . . . And I became part of this chain' (Brubaker, 1994a: A24). According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (Zawitz, 1994: 1) intimates (spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends or girlfriends) from 1987 to 1991 'commit an annual average of 621,015 rapes, robberies or assaults representing over 13% of all these violent victimizations'. They also note (Zawitz, 1994: 2) that annually, 'compared to males, females experienced over 10 times as many incidences of violence by an intimate'. Worldwide, news articles and programs examining spouse abuse have proliferated since the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and the arrest and trial of her ex-husband, athlete O.J. Simpson. How news media themselves encode the act of violence must be further investigated (see for example Clark, 1992, on the linguistics of blaming the victim in reports of sexual violence in *The Sun*).

Discourse analysis of the language of surviving victims and perpetrators of domestic assault, spouse abuse and retaliatory assault and murder are areas in need of more analysis. Therapeutic settings offer another area for discursive analysis of the language of violence. In this issue Peter Adams (who works as a therapist in a Stop Violence Program in New Zealand) and co-authors Nicola Gavey and Alison Towsend investigate the rhetorical strategies used by men who are just entering counseling programs aimed at stopping violence towards women. Their essay (pp. 387–406) 'Dominance and Entitlement: The Rhetoric Men Use to Discuss Their Violence Towards Women', gives us a new way of listening to and categorizing the talk that they say 'colonizes' women and thus makes the move from talk to physically colonizing acts more easily interpreted. While this study examines the perpetrator's discourse, we can look to earlier work by Gavey (1992) for an analysis of women victims' discourse in acts of heterosexual coercion as part of our more global analysis of connections between language and violence (see also Hydén and McCarthy, 1994, on 'impossible conversations' in clinical interviews about battering and incest).

Gavey (1992: 329–30) notes that women's personal accounts provide direct access to the discourses and subject positionings available to women. Particularly disturbing and revealing in her data are the women's accounts of sexual encounters that they did not want, but seemed unable to refuse. In reporting a sexual encounter with a relative stranger as physically rough, one woman recounted, '"He bit my thighs and he bit my breasts and

[pause] um [pause] I had fingermarks on me as well and, and my legs and, and breasts were terribly bruised for two or three weeks . . . I was terrified. I was really quite scared, because he was quite violent"' (Gavey, 1992: 335–6). Gavey notes that the woman (Pat) did not consider this event to be rape and Pat offered the following in explanation:

> Pat: 'Well, I wasn't raped, raped, because I did—I—See, I've actually never been raped, but I mean really it's a fine line, isn't it, between saying yes, whether you want to or not, to somebody like that, that I really didn't want to go to bed with . . . He didn't rape me, because I more or less consented.' (p. 336)

What is interesting here is that in Pat's wording, she has chosen not to call this rape, and thus has not (in her interpretation) been raped. Gavey uses discourse analysis to arrive at points suggested by others in discussions of rape as a particularly difficult phenomenon to analyze. In *Transforming a Rape Culture*, those who counsel rape victims wrote of the denial of discourse that uses specific parts of the body, as well as a denial of the naming of the act of rape. They note that 'in a culture in which images of body parts are so heavily eroticized the victim [of rape] who speaks of violation may be experienced as speaking pornographically' (Buchwald et al., 1993: 66) and thus unfavorably viewed in a courtroom context (note, that by choosing the particular excerpt above, I run that risk as well in this essay). The assertion that women often speak of rape only when the aggressor is a stranger, accepting society's idea of 'real rape' and denying marital rape, is found in Russell's (1990) study; she reports that women who did not 'see themselves as raped, confirmed that they had been forced to have intercourse or that intercourse had been obtained by threat' (quoted in Buchwald et al., 1993: 65).

Thus, we see the difficulties of looking at the language of violence and must note that one of the complexities of such discourse is wrapped up in agency and positioning where not naming the acts of violence or deflections of discourse and the silences surrounding coercive acts must also be examined. Methods used to obtain the experiences of rape victims, according to Wood and Rennie (1994), often thwart extended narrations of the rape and thus do not elicit the victim's formulations of the self nor of the rapist. Wood and Rennie call for more studies that elicit accounts of acts not only as told by the one raped, but also by the rapist—such that we can investigate the broader construction of rape in the culture, including its formulation in courtrooms and in research (p. 146).

There is a growing need to study the conflicts and actions of children growing up in what are being called 'communities of violence'. Labov (1981) noted that a significant silence can precede a violent act. This could be a starting point to analyze the discourse of violence on the streets, in schools, emergency rooms and juvenile court hearings across the world. Labov (1981) asserts that the stopping of talk—silence—cues violent acts in narratives about dangerous events. His discussion of speech actions and reactions in narratives that report on acts of violence indicate that the lack of response to a verbal request (usually when the one needing to respond

does not understand the entire situation) can culminate in a violent reaction such as a knifing, a throat cutting or an axing incident in the narratives in his data. Labov's (1981) study on reactions to and within speech acts suggests that 'in reports of violent conflict, we can hope to find some comprehension of the conflict itself' (p. 243).

In light of such actions and reactions, consider a case in the Texas courts being tried for a second time due to a hung jury on the first trial. A murder trial of 17-year-old Daimon Osby in Forth Worth, accused of killing two men in 1993, has used as its defense what is being called the 'urban survival syndrome' and notes that 'carrying a gun with a hair trigger is the rational thing to do' in some neighborhoods (Montgomery, 1994: A4). Osby's words on how he shot the men (whom he said had wanted him to gamble with them again so they could win back some money) reveal a Labovian site for discursive analysis:

> There wasn't no words said. Marcus just came up to me and hit me in the face with his fist. We just started fighting. I just backed up and . . . I pulled the gun out of my pocket and shot Marcus one time. Peanut was right there next to Marcus. I shot Peanut one time. I was just scared and started shooting. (Montgomery, 1994: A4)

Although different from Labov's narratives, where discourse was ongoing then stopped just before violence occurred, Osby reports that the incident is the follow-up of prior discourse and perceived threats. He is thus claiming that to shoot first was his only chance for survival, which recalls the sports world adage—'a good offense is the best defense'. The story is actually more complicated because Osby is also quoted from an interview given in Tarrant County, Texas, as saying that he did speak, ' "I told him [Brooks, one of the men killed] it wasn't his money. I just walked out" ' (Montgomery, 1994: A4). This example illustrates one of the major points of contention in discursive research. Can we rely on speakers to tell the truth about events they relate? In the discourse of violence there may be considerable vested interests in 'coloring' the story or interrogations may force a culpable statement, or a speaker may be suggestible. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 4) note that speakers give 'accounts' of events and that often 'accounts are versions of versions' (see Goodman et al., 1991, on suggestibility in children's responses to questions about abuse).

Recent writings by gang member Sanyika Shakur (1993) from Los Angeles vividly describe scenes that seem less motivated by personal threat, and more motivated by a threat of a generalized other (similar to the 'death to the Arabs' discourse above).[1] The autobiography *Monster* by Sanyika Shakur (1993), also known as Monster Kody (Eight Tray Crips gang name) and Kody Scott (birth name), describes scenes of violent attack missions on rival gang members who violate his 'set' by coming onto the streets and in the shops that are 'controlled' by the Eight Trays. Not yet 15, while shopping in a market with his mother, Shakur writes of sighting an enemy (p. 41):

> I made a beeline for the vegetables, and that's when I saw him. Damn! Enemy! Enemy! . . . We both reached for our waistband simultaneously . . . I managed the drop and drew first . . . Not bothering to aim, I fired.

Boom!
Confusion and chaos swept the aisle like buckshot, screams following in quick succession.
Damn, I'd missed!
I fired again and hit him in the torso. The bullet knocked him back and his weapon discharged into the air . . .

An analysis of such discourse recounting the acts of crime and of the all too few moments of reflection made by this author and others who have begun to write their stories of criminality could make a contribution to discerning the self-perceptions in communities where violence proliferates, where, as Shakur puts it, 'Without a doubt, I was engaged in criminality. But my activity gravitated around a survival instinct: kill or be killed' (p. 138). His words recall the rap lyrics mentioned above as well as the words of the Texan youth pleading 'urban survival'.

Discourse analysis may lead us to a necessary understanding of the violent acts proliferating among youth not only in *direct* retaliation for an act, but in general actuation because of the possibility of a threat, which, though vaguely perceived by those outside the gang turf, is so real, so deadly that the 'set' takes pre-emptive action, a military maneuver. This military rhetoric and rationale, incongruously voiced by children, is eerily presented in Shakur's gangbanger discourse throughout *Monster*: 'I was engaged in a war with an equal opponent' (p. 138); 'the idea was to drop enough bodies, cause terror and suffering so that they'd come to their senses and realize we were the wrong set to fuck with' (p. 56); 'a full scale mobilization of as many troops as needed to achieve the desired effect: funerals' (p. 57).

In their article in this issue (pp. 407–27) 'Children's Talk about Conflict: An Exploration of the Voices and Views of the "Experts"', Hale et al. look directly at the discourse of young children. In their analysis of rural and suburban Appalachian children's rhetorical tropes they use data from focus groups on conflict with children in groups from 7- to 17-year olds. The point of this research in the study of communication discourse is that the children themselves are speaking about their conflicts and their strategies for entering into or avoiding conflict: the researchers are not relying on adults' versions of children's ideal behavior for their analysis. How children (and others involved in situations of violence) see their seemingly 'parallel' worlds must be taken into account if we are ever to find ways to create intersections other than morgues and courtrooms for interactions with those within cycles of violence.

Violence is also signalled in subtler discourses. The recent research of Adelsward and Linnell (1994) describes how vagueness is used as a linguistic resource in delivering threatening phone calls made by Mafia members. Using data from taped calls in the 1985 trial of Michele Sindona, Adelsward and Linnell (1994: 267) say that Mafia threats are routinized via a category of inducements such that:

If you (B) do (or do not do) X, then I (A) will do Y
or Y will happen to you.

They note that 'vague, unspecific, and indirect expressions within a frame of threat' are useful in the 'logic of negotiation and blackmail, the treatment of morally sensitive topics, and the concern for third parties', particularly in the case of a powerful threatener (pp. 285–6). An example of this vagueness occurs when a person receives a call to 'do me a favour', 'make a few calls and ask what you can do' (p. 261). In reply, the receiver of the call asks for more specifics from the caller and hears instead, 'okay, Mr. Cuccia, but you do you do what you're supposed to do because believe me, I I'm desperate and if I'm desperate than I'm gonna suffer and I'm gonna make other people suffer too' (p. 262). The call ends with the mafia threatener saying 'happy Easter', something that might seem innocuous outside the context of the prior threats. Adelsward and Linnell's careful discourse analysis of the nervous voice and desperate tones of the victim of the threat show that he interprets these remarks in the context of a sinister, underlying meaning (p. 263).

Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1994) analyzes discourse surrounding events that culminated in a city police department bombing a Philadelphia neighborhood in 1985—ostensibly to remove a radical threat posed by an African-American group that called itself MOVE. Her book concerns 'the relationships among discourse, social power, conflict, and violence' (p. ix). Wagner-Pacifici's analysis of spoken rationalizations, excesses, silences and incoherences in official discourse of hearings and videotaped presentation of the explosion of the 'entry device' and subsequent fire illustrate an effective use of the tools of discourse analysis to unravel what she calls a 'terror of the inchoate, the unknowable' (p. 148). Her work aims to explore what she calls 'the small cracks between discourse and violence', which she deems a 'critical, if elusive, territory' (p. x).

Using such data, the discourses of actual conversations, videotapes of events and the autobiographical reflections and recollections gives us as researchers an opportunity to explore the language of violence as part of a context and as shaper of contexts. In my essay in this issue (pp. 429–56) 'Speaking of crime: "I Don't Know What Made Me Do It"', I examine prisoners' versions of their past lives. Focusing on epistemic moments in frame breaks in narrations of criminal acts by men in a maximum security prison, I claim that autobiographical tellings can contain sites of and for rehabilitative discourse. While Labov's call is for us to analyze discourse to comprehend, my work calls our attention to the potential in a discourse as a therapeutic and potentially rehabilitative event as we discern the strategies in violent offenders' attempts to comprehend their own actions, which I suggest are agentively located in sites of evaluation in narratives and positioned at (all too rare) moments of reflection in current lives.

As researchers, as workers in communities that endure, engage in and even showcase violence, we have no shortage of situations for data collection and analysis for those in need of methods to better discern the language of violence: emergency rooms, rescue squads, courts, schools, prisons, survivor groups, perpetrator groups, television, movies, music lyrics—a potentially overwhelming litany of discursive situations, es-

pecially overwhelming if we take no measures to unpack the metaphors and tropes, make no effort to understand the fast-changing and deadly retorts, deny the contradictions in accounts, ignore the discursive power of status and privilege in discourse, and thus close our eyes and ears and merely chant: 'words will never hurt me'. This issue of *Discourse & Society* makes a call for furthering research in ways that recognize the power of social discourse in the shaping and reshaping of human behavior.

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NOTES

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1. According to Shakur, gang members kill youths (unknown to them) who venture into the neighbourhood streets claimed by the gang. They are killed because they are *not* part of the killer's group ... They are generalized as outsiders, 'not in *my* gang'.

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