Ana Tominc

'I WILL NEVER STOP SAYING WHAT I THINK'[1]

An interview with Prof. Ruth Wodak, a discourse analyst

In the late 1980's Ruth Wodak and her colleagues developed the *Diskurshistorischer Ansatz*, an approach to discourse analysis which enabled critical research in numerous areas, such as identity politics, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia for which she is mostly known for. Since 2004, she is the only female distinguished professor at Lancaster University, where she holds a personal chair in discourse studies. This interview has been conducted on the 9th February 2010 in her office, B68, just a week after she received her first doctorate *honoris causa* at Örebrö University, Sweden.

Ana Tominc: When arranging for this interview, you said in an e-mail that the "Trip was great! Celebration total!" What are your feelings after receiving such an important academic recognition?

Ruth Wodak: Well, I thought it was a very nice celebration, I always think it's nice if sometimes you are allowed to be pleased and also proud of yourself and satisfied. There are not many events in your life when you are allowed to do that. It is also culturally different, the British do it less then, probably, the Southern cultures, and obviously Scandinavian cultures like to celebrate and like rituals; and I believe that's sometimes quite important. Because it sort of pinpoints a certain stage in your life or a specific achievement or the transition from one stage to another stage, like when you finish your PhD, for example. Such rituals are quite important; also that you can celebrate these with your family and friends. So looking back I thought it was very stressful to get there, a long trip and so forth; on the other hand, I really enjoyed the very egalitarian and democratic set-up of this event because they celebrate that once a year: the University celebrates the finishing PhDs - a sort of graduation -, the new professors who are starting, the honorary doctorates and various university prizes which they might have. Örebrö has one for democracy,

[1] This interview was prepared for publication in *Monitor ZSA* (2010), but was never published as the journal ceased publication in 2010. It is now available from http://lancaster.academia.edu/AnaTominc. **Please acknowledge if used**.

for example. And so all of this takes place on first Saturday in February, and public lectures by all the prize winners, the new professors, and the doctors *honoris causae*. So you experience that the entire university is celebrating science in many ways and achievements of various people, from the young to the old; they also invite the public, thus we gave our lectures in the Town Hall. Every new professor and the honorary doctor had to give a 30 minute lecture, there were five parallel sessions, I was at the same time as Roy Bhaskar. He also got an honorary doctorate. And people come and go, everybody, from the street, you don't pay to listen, and we try and explain to them what we are doing. I thought that was really fascinating. I listened to two lectures myself, one was about the Big Bang and new explanations about the beginning of life, because one person who got the honorary doctorate was a Greek biogenetic scientist, and then I listened to somebody who got the Math prize and was doing all kinds of formulas...

What was yours about?

Mine was about 'Rightwing populist Rhetoric - a European glocal Phenomenon?' It was about the research I am actually currently involved in.

The way to the honorary doctorate was very long. You were born in London because your parents had to flee Vienna. What memories do you have of your childhood?

Well, I don't have any memories at all of London because my parents left back to Austria quite soon after I was born, but I have very clear memories of later periods – my parents were diplomats after the war. They were Jewish refugees, after the war my father went back to Austria, first as a part of the British Army and then he was offered to join the diplomatic services so... We spent six years in Belgrade and I have very fond memories of that time. But the whole diplomatic life and moving around - I believe this was partly responsible that I started liking languages, I always could learn languages very quickly, you know, you have to communicate in a foreign country and you learn a language.

So you learned Serbian?

I learned Serbo-Croatian at that time and later my parents were diplomats in Moscow, I didn't go with them because

there was no school for me but I did go there twice for half a year and I learned Russian. Then I studied Slavic languages anyway.

You wrote your PhD in Vienna. Did this central European milieu influence your approach in any way? Vienna is famous for Beaugrande and Dressler's text linguistics and you worked with Dressler as well.

He was my PhD *papa*, yeah /laugh/. I was his first PhD student and I was also his first *Habilitant*. Vienna at that time was a very interesting place, Vienna was always a very contradictory place because, on the one hand, every corner you visit you are able to encounter some memories of the Nazi time, or of the Austro-Fascists or the Monarchy; so it triggers many bad memories; and on the other hand you have *fin de siècle*, wonderful culture and art, you have the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein and Carnap, and language philosophy. I started studying in 1968 and that was very exciting because there was the student 'revolution' or up-rise and I became part of that, of course, and we challenged – everything. And this was one of the most important experiences in my life: the possibility to challenge everything: the way our parents lived, the way the society and the university were constructed, the way we had to learn, write, everything suddenly was open for debate. And we had night long discussion groups and we read zillion of also non linguistic related stuff from Marx to Habermas. It was a totally vibrant time, interesting, but much less radical than in Germany or France. At that time I also decided I would stop with Slavic studies because they were very traditional, actually I started out as a literary scholar, I wanted to write a thesis on Russian symbolism and it was so boring – I mean the way it was taught.

It is still quite traditional in many departments I think.

Yes. And then Dressler was appointed as professor in 1971, he was young at that time and he came back from the States. Before that there had been no linguistics in Vienna, just historical Indo-European languages. And so when I got to know that, I immediately went there and I said, 'could I write my PhD there' and he accepted and from one day to the next I shifted to linguistics, at that time Chomskyan linguistics, I became a formal linguist, I did mathematical linguistics, and then, because Beaugrande and Dressler were writing their

book together at that time, we were the first ones who read draft chapters and discussed them with him before they were printed. So that was all very exciting. There was no sociolinguistics at that time; nobody did sociolinguistics in Austria so basically I had to work on my thesis on my own, no supervision by Dressler because he didn't know anything or very little about it. He read it but he couldn't really advise me.

How did you manage to finish your PhD six years after starting university? You finished aged 24. In the Central European context this is quite extraordinary.

Well, we didn't have to do an MA or a BA at that time. The whole curriculum was different, you did your seminars, that was a *Privatissimum* or big essays and then some exams and you could start with your PhD. So basically you were left alone until somehow you passed some formal threshold. It was good for people like me who were very active and initiative and found stuff they liked to do; and it was very bad for people who needed more guidance. That way I started with my thesis in '72 when I came to Dressler and I did my fieldwork and I submitted in '74.

And, related to the changes of 1968: I can say from my own experience and also from experience of others with whom I had a chance to talk that you are an excellent and very approachable doctoral supervisor.

Thank you.

A number of your former students – de Cillia, Gruber, Anthonnisen, Reisigl to name just a few – have become renowned European scholars in their own area. How do you understand the relationship between the supervisee and yourself – a supervisor?

I think for me it was always clear, there's no way to deny that there's power. We first denied that, we thought 'OK, everybody's equal', and when I started teaching everybody was saying *Du* to everybody, and of course this just mystified power relationships. In German I would not do that anymore. Only once somebody has already passed their exams, it's a way of closeness which is not good between teachers and students. But what I did learn was that you need space for ideas to develop and a good discussion climate. And obviously

that cannot be too hierarchical because otherwise people are frightened to say what they think. I grew up in this atmosphere in Vienna where everybody was so frightened of the professors and some of them were still Nazis, terrible people, and that probably influenced me a lot; thus, what I'm trying to do – and I don't know how successful it is – is actually accept other people's view and perceive them as a challenge and discuss them without being dogmatic. But also accept students as partners in research. So I learn from you and they learn from me. This is the way I would define my way of supervising. Of course it's leading you, discussing and criticising and helping you find relevant literature, etc. and challenge what you're doing, but it is also giving somebody a space to do it.

You said that May 1968 gave you such a space to be able to turn towards sociolinguistics. But the next turn happened in 1986 with the Austrian Waldheim Affair when you started your work on racism and anti-Semitism for which you are most known. In 2004, you moved from Vienna to Lancaster, UK. Was that a start of another new phase, perhaps in terms of theory, topics, interests?

It was actually a transition from one phase to the next phase, it was a post-'Wittgenstein' thing (after the end of my time as Wittgenstein prize winner), but it also was very much connected to my personal experience at the Austrian Academy of Sciences: they closed my centre, there was some explicitly sexist and anti-Semitic rhetoric against me personally - *ad hominem* -, some colleagues falsified my writing, so actually leaving Vienna for Lancaster was a good exit strategy, being head-hunted, I didn't have to apply to go elsewhere. Basically in a way it was a continuation of what I was doing, an easier way because here I was supported and there I was not, it was a shift and change from directing a big centre and having many assistants in the Central-European sense /laugh/, a secretary and all these nice things to being, you know, one of many. The system here is very different and you work much harder because you do all these administrative things yourself. I do believe this is terrible because you waste your time with it and you are not professional in it either /laugh/ but on the other hand, I did continue with what I thought it was important and what was really very interesting and challenging here was to confront this commitment to interdisciplinarity which Lancaster endorses: it was like

coming into paradise, getting to work with sociologists, migration studies, cultural studies and that being a *leitmotif* of this university and not something exceptional which you have to justify – it's great!

You and a number of other scholars are usually related to the school of so called "Critical discourse analysis" (CDA). What does Lancaster as a signifier mean in it?

Well, Lancaster was very strongly related to Norman [Fairclough] as was Amsterdam to Teun [Van Dijk] as was Vienna to me and London to Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. So Lancaster was always Fairclough's hub and things developed simultaneously in different ways at the various hubs and then of course intersected and overlapped. This is the way Lancaster was perceived and it was also very much centred around research on British politics, there was basically not much else, it was all about Thatcher and Blair and the Third way whereas other people in CDA covered many other areas as well. And it was also very strongly related to Halliday and his grammar.

But since 1991, when this network of 'CDA' was finally first established in Amsterdam, it has grown enormously. How do you feel now that it has become such a big and influential school? How do you see it in the future?

I think there are challenges to CDA and I think that it's good that it's been it's been elaborated, developed, criticised, changed – I think that's great – like any paradigm and I think there are very interesting questions which many people in CDA have not addressed yet. A lot of them are epistemological like you and Bernhard [Forchtner] have been doing,[2] going back to the roots and trying to find what's the basis of CDA, there are challenges due to globalisation – different concepts mean different things in different parts of the world...

Like 'critique'?[3]

[2] Reference to Forchtner, Bernhard, Ana Tominc (2011): Critique and argumentation: on the relation between the discourse-historical approach and pragma-dialectics. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 11, 1, 31–50.
[3] See Chilton, Paul, Hailong Tian and Ruth Wodak (2010): Reflections on Discourse and Critique in China and the West. *Journal of Language and Politics*, special issue on China, 9, 4.

Yes, like critique; we are being accused of being Euro-centric. But on the other hand, is there something similar elsewhere? So I think this is a big debate to be taken up and there's a lot of critical social research in linguistics which is *not* part of CDA: feminist studies, for example, it would be interesting to look what's the difference and then, there are new questions which CDA has not addressed at all.

Like what?

The question of 'glocalisation' has not really been addressed enough in theory; there's a lot to say about the development in gendered cultures, I also think that structural racism has not really been sufficiently addressed, it's not only about discourse, there's a lot of other phenomena for example in the States. There are issues, interesting issues...

'CDA' is an abbreviation for 'Critical Discourse Analysis' and 'DHA' usually for your, Discourse-Historical Approach. In his One-Dimensional Man, Herbert Marcuse explains that "[t]he abbreviations denote that and only that which is institutionalised in such a way that the transcending connotation is cut off. The meaning is fixed, doctored, loaded. Once it has become an official vocable, constantly repeated in general use, 'sanctioned' by the intellectuals, it has lost all cognitive value and serves merely for recognition of an unquestionable fact."[4] Abbreviations are thus the language of the one-dimensional thought that critical discourse analysis claims to stand against. This causes a contradiction, especially if one adheres to the philosophical orientation of the Frankfurt school (like your approach does), in which Marcuse is also seen to be one of the members. What do you think about the intrusion of the market ideology (i.e. branding) into the scientific discourse?

I think it's not good but on the other hand it's probably not to be avoided in some ways and in some ways it should be avoided, so there's a fine line, there were always acronyms used for certain things. It's good to have labels but they shouldn't become empty brands – which happens. So if you just see 'CDA' when everybody thinks they know what it is, it might just be an empty signifier. In general I oppose this very

[4] Marcuse, Herbert (2008 [1964]): *One-Dimensional Man.* London, Routledge, page 97f.

strongly but I think you can't avoid it in teaching, writing and the way organisations and institutions like Universities work. And I think from time to time, becasue 'CDA' is about critical reflection there should be space to reflect. And who I really like in this respect is Mick Billig; every three years there's something which he writes and in which he says: »Look, that's where you are going and this is something you should be aware of«. I think we should do more of this.

Related to the criticism of 'CDA', numerous authors criticised it. Famous are the debates between Fairclough and Widdowson, Fairclough and Stubbs, most recently between Billig, Fairclough, Van Dijk and Jim Martin about the question of nominalisation in 'CDA'.[5] *I can't see you in any of these. Would you say that there's a trace of your parents' diplomatic skills in the way you usually interact with the people around you?*

I don't think so. Basically the Widdowson-Fairclough evolved because it seems that these two men can't stand each other /laugh/ and Widdowson metonymically perceives Fairclough as 'CDA' which many people used to do and they still do. So Widdowson attacked Fairclough *ad hominem* as 'CDA' and everything, that way. So there was no way anybody else could intrude. But if you look at my review of Widdowson's book in 2004 and also Jan Blommaert's book I was quite outspoken and, unfortunately, Jan Blommaert was not pleased. It was published in *Language and Society*. Although I thought I'd been quite polite, but I did say that he had misquoted and misrepresented me. So when it's possible I do take up that challenge. And related to nominalisation, Teun [Van Dijk] also asked me to write something and I didn't want to write because I thought Billig was right. I didn't want to challenge that, I could have added that feminist scholarship has always also opposed these kinds of nominalisations, that would have been half a page. But I thought Billig was right, I completely endorsed what he wrote, in the way of challenging some kind of unnecessary jargon. There was no way I wanted to oppose that.

So in the future...

[5] See *Discourse and Society*, 2008, 19, page 783ff.

...oh yes. If there's some issue where I get attacked or CDA gets attacked in a way which I think is unjust you would always find me.

To deviate from criticism a bit, I always wondered to what extend one could understand 'CDA' to be a branch of Linguistic Anthropology? You once said that in the US, you are often labelled as a lingustic anthropologist.

I think it's certainly a branch of Linguistic Anthropology and in the States I would indeed be labelled as such although here we don't have lingusitic anthropology: Susan Gal, Michael Silverstein, Ron Scollon, Deborah Tannen, they are all lingustic anthropologists. What they don't have or only some of them have is the European critical theory background. So linguistic anthropology for some of them just means that you do anthropology and also look at the language like, for example, Deborah Tannen. If you have the European critical theory tradition, you'd get someone like Susan Gal who's much more reflective and critical and of course she would be in CDA or we would be in that. So as a generic nouns it would be wrong to say that, we would need to clarify it.

How do you see a role of public intellectual like yourself in the time when censorship as well as financial pressures and various threats to social scientists are greater and greater. You were censored on ÖRF in 2000 for example, and then, as you said, in 2003, the Austrian Academy of Sciences blocked funding for your project...

...they threw me out, yes.

They said that your critical research 'brings Austria to bad light'.

Being a public intellectual was always difficult /laugh/ and that's why they are not many. It's different from only applying knowledge transfer in the sense that you apply it to some other phenomena, it is being outspoken while using your expertise about current affairs and of course administrators, officials, politicians don't like that. Now there are very different cultures; some like public intellectuals, there are many, they can be attacked, like in France It's part of public life. The same in Germany, you have much more public debate, then in Austria where many think that if you oppose

something in politics you are a so- called '*Nestbeschmutzer*', that is when you say something bad. And England has few public intellectuals because the university is quite distant, people don't leave that ivory tower except for scholars, like Tony Giddens or Timothy Garton Ash. This probably has a tradition, it was always like that, although they have Hide Park corner and so on. I find Britain an interesting case, in the US you find much more public intellectuals, people writing in the *New York Review of Books* and *New Yorker*, like Naomi Klein, Tony Judt: they are hated, they are loved but they have space. And for myself, I think I will never stop saying what I think if it's useful or if I have an expertise; I would not like to contribute to discussions where I don't know enough. I often get requests to contribute to newspapers, I say 'no' because I don't know enough about it but if it's about something I know I think it's important to speak up. I think professors are the people who can speak up without much danger of something happening to them, even if you loose some funding or ... I mean you are permanently employed, you are well-known, if something happens to you there will be hundreds of letters and a scandal. So, who else if should speak up? Not the young people who are unemployed, losing their jobs *et cetera*; of course, I am talking about democracies, not about totalitarian regimes...

But even there, they do, they do it anyway.

Yes, but in what danger!

Of course. You talked about feminism before. In 1996, you were the first woman and the first social scientists to be awarded the Austrian prestigious Wittgenstein prize for elite researchers. What are your views on being a woman, a mother and a successful researcher today? In your 1996 monograph Disorders of Discourse *you thank your son to let you work ... It's not likely you'd find this in an acknowledgement written by a male author.*

No. Because they can work anyway /laugh/. I think it's very difficult. I think women still have it much harder than men, that's no question, possibly in your generation you'll have it a bit easier but my generation had to work twice if not three times harder than any man to achieve something similar or still not achieve it, the glass ceiling is still there, the salaries are still lower except in public service. Scandinavia is of course

better than Central Europe; we have achieved quite a lot, child care *et cetera* but I think it's still very hard. And for me it was always very clear that I would never want to be put into this decision of either family or work, I always opposed this dichotomy. But it meant so much work and so many compromises; it is a difficult trajectory, I still believe it's right, why should we not do it, why should we not have kids and families, I think that's mean /laugh/. But you need, of course, partners to support you and that means men have to change because some of them still have problems with successful women. You work terribly hard and you are successful, then you have to justify that you are successful to your partner so that he still accepts that and then you might be punished for being successful when your partnership dissolves. I think it's very unfair but we still have to do what we do. It's been a life-long struggle: I can't imagine a life without my child, I love him dearly and once you have a child you get totally ga-ga /laugh/, it is really hard.

To conclude, 'CDA' stands for change, for emancipation, for greater equality. Do you think that research can in fact make a difference in today's world?

On that general level probably no, on much more local levels yes, I also see it in a way of how you teach and how you deal with your students and how you apply your beliefs in the everyday life, many people of course don't but if you are capable of doing that, you can also educate your children differently. So you make your change locally but I also think via your writing: if you are able to convey your ideas in genres that lay-people understand: exhibition on anti-Semitism or various writings on racism actually has lead many people to change their minds, schoolbooks being rewritten, most recently in Graz, you know my famous picture which I always show[6]...

Yes.

This analysis has led to NGOs monitoring the recent local elections there referring explicitly to my and John Richardson's work and other work in 'CDA', like by Sigi Jäger. Obviously, if you make it readable, then people can do

[6] Reference to the poster and campaign 'Wir säubern Graz', used by the Austrian party *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich* (BZÖ) in 2008.

something with it. So yes, there are small points where you say 'fine, great, I have contributed to something'. But probably from a certain age on I gave up the idea of changing the world but you contribute to it, otherwise it wouldn't make sense to do what I do.

So you think you'd choose your path again?

Probably. I don't know if I'd choose the Austrian Academy of Science again /laugh/ to host my centre which I created myself and I could have of course moved it elsewhere. But basically yes, I am really doing what I like to do.