This volume is ground-breaking in the study of crisis. Rather than asking why crisis happens and what consequences it entails, the authors frame their questions differently: In what way can language use constitute the crisis as an essential force, and how could the study of it contribute to a better understanding of crisis? In their definition, crisis events are socially produced and discursively mediated. They are lived and construed as unexpected moments of disruption which destabilizes normative social patterns and opens up space for discursive struggles. This collection offers detailed examination of real-life examples in wide ranging areas of organizational, political, and media discourses, and its real strength can be found in its critical theoretical perspective, wide ranging topic coverage, and methodological considerations.

To start with, it contributes theoretically to the field of social construction in general and discursive construction in particular. Although many prior studies have frequently used the term “discourse” in crises studies, scarcely have they started from and contributed to a systematic theory of discourse. They often either approached crises from a non-discursive perspective (using the word “discourse” in a commonsensical way), or highlighted micro linguistic studies (while ignoring the broader contextual factors). In this sense, the present volume helps bridge the gap between language and society from a critical perspective.

In the past half century, scholars in various disciplines have worked on the study of discursive construction in sociopolitical reality (Hodges 2011), psychological problem such as agoraphobia (Capps and Ochs 1995) and intellectual disability (Rapley 2004), literacy (Cook-Gumperz 2006) and scientific knowledge (Latour 1987), illness such as SARS (Powers and Xiao 2008), and self and identity (De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006). Scholars in these areas shift questions from “what and why” to “how”, looking instead at the process of construction, rather than taking those social phenomena for granted. All of them contented that language is not a transparent medium of communication that simply reflects social reality and denotes presumably fixed meanings, but is a toolkit which people use to accomplish social actions, which sets up relations among individuals,
establishes shared meanings, and constructs the social reality in which we live. The current volume stands squarely within this paradigm and in turn broadens the scope of social investigation of crisis and discursive inquiry.

Secondly, it covers wide ranging topics and is sensitive to the needs of mundane concern. Issues like terrorist attack, airline disasters, and breakout of epidemic have become the bread and butter of media report. This timely volume has addressed topics which span over police negotiation crisis, emergency calls, presidential address, shooting incidents, to name just a few. And as authors claim, with such reality where crisis concerns so many ordinary people, being critical in a deconstructive manner is not adequate, and researchers could and should serve the society more constructively with insights that help practitioners to better predict and tackle social crisis. Thus many chapters in this volume, study how ordinary people use language in their everyday situations which are of decisively influential to them, and how studies of such language use in crisis situations could shed light on reconstructing their reality.

Finally, the collection is innovative with its methodological advantages as inclusiveness and synthesis. “Inclusiveness” means the editors have included different methodologies in a single volume, and “synthesis” implies that the authors have used multiple methodologies – within a single paper. For example: Chapters on organizational discourse belong to bottom up micro analysis, in which crisis is conceptualized as the consequence of participants’ shared understanding. If normative procedures are violated, the process of police crisis negotiation (Chapter 3), emergency phone call (Chapter 4), or cockpit interaction (Chapter 5) could lead to crisis situation. When the crisis is conceptualized as context, various branches of critical discourse analysis, usually viewed as top down methods, such as discursive historical approaches, concept history, social cognitive approaches, and recontextualization instrument are put to use. Stories told by stakeholders such as president can supply interpretive framework which becomes the frame of reference which guides ordinary people’s social cognition and daily behavior. Bush’s state of the union address in Chapter 6 is such an example, where Bush revitalized the crisis of September 11 and transformed it into a discourse of war and nationalism. This study strikes a chord with Hodges (2011) study of the war on terror narrative in the United States.

On the other hand, the synthesis of methodologies has been used to reinforce the credibility of findings. Micro and macro analysis, qualitative and quantitative analysis have been combined. The research procedures and protocols are all made visible in all the 12 empirical articles. For example Chapter 4 and 5 have explicitly drawn on conversation analysis to study naturally occurring talk, and combined it with ethnographic methods, and argued for simultaneous adoption of local, institutional, social context in the analysis. Chapter 9 has drawn on quantitative
methods and corpus linguistics to analyze data. Its rigorous and systematic analysis of materials makes it an excellent, path-breaking volume for empirical studies in the field of critical discourse studies. The analysis of discourse from multiple levels and perspectives gives it a hermeneutic advantage and “thicken” it (Geertz 1973). The strength afforded by the triangulation in this volume can minimize interpretative biases and making interpretation process more trustworthy.

The book should well serve multiple audiences, including academic researchers, graduate students, and professional practitioners. The integration of theoretical approaches and methodological orientations provide good examples for researchers in critical study of language. The visibility of methodologies can give graduate students direct access to how research studies are conducted, and provide opportunities for their academic exercises. And, on a practical level, the implication of many studies can be used for intervention by policy makers and practitioners. For instance, the culturally specific procedures of emergency calls can be taught to secondary or primary school students to prepare them for the future in case of disasters, and the study on cockpit/ground interaction highlights the pressing issue of communication skill training in order to prevent similar accidents.

This volume has made a fresh contribution to and enriches the critical study of language and crisis.

References


