

## Aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis

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### Abstract

In this paper, I will attempt to provide an overview of some important approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis. Firstly, I will focus on central and relevant concepts and terms; then I will present the historical development of Critical Discourse Analysis and I give some example of CDA in society and media discourse. In conclusion, I would like to summarize some of the most important theoretical and methodological theories within this research paradigm. The terms Critical Linguistics (CL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are often used interchangeably. In fact, recently the term CDA seems to have been preferred and is being used to denote the theory formerly identified as CL. Thus, I will continue to use CDA exclusively in this paper. The roots of CDA lie in classical Rhetoric, Text linguistics and Sociolinguistics, as well as in Applied Linguistics and Pragmatics. The notions of ideology, power, hierarchy and gender together with sociological variables were all seen as relevant for an interpretation or explanation of text. The subjects under investigation differ for the various departments and scholars who apply CDA. Gender issues, issues of racism, media discourses, political discourses, organizational discourses or dimensions of identity research have become very prominent. The methodologies differ greatly in all these studies, on account of the aims of the research and also with regard to the particular methodologies applied: small qualitative case studies can be found as well as large data corpora, drawn from fieldwork and ethnographic research. CDA takes a particular interest in the relationship between language and power. The term CDA is used nowadays to refer more specifically to the critical linguistic approach of scholars who find the larger discursive unit of text to be the basic unit of communication.

### Introduction

#### What is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit

position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately to resist social inequality. Some of the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis can already be found in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School before the Second World War (Rasmussen, 1996). Its current focus on language and discourse was initiated with the 'critical linguistics' that emerged at the end of the 1970s. CDA, as it is commonly abbreviated, has counterparts in 'critical' developments in sociolinguistics, psychology and the social sciences, some already dating back to the early 1970s. As is the case in these neighboring disciplines, CDA may be seen as a reaction against the dominant formal (often 'asocial' or 'uncritical') paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s. CDA is not so much a direction, school or specialization - next to the many other 'approaches' in discourse studies. Rather, it aims to offer a different 'mode' or 'perspective' of theorizing, analysis and application throughout the whole field. I may find a more or less critical perspective in such diverse areas as pragmatics, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, rhetoric, stylistics, sociolinguistics, ethnography, or media analysis, among others.

Deconstructing the label of this research programme, I view CDA basically as a research programme, the reasons for which I will explain below involves our having to define what CDA means when employing the terms critical and discourse. At this point, I would like to stress that CDA has never been and has never attempted to be or to provide one single or specific theory. Neither is one specific methodology characteristic of research in CDA. Quite the contrary studies in CDA are multifarious, derived from quite different theoretical backgrounds, oriented towards very different data and methodologies. Researchers in CDA also rely on a variety of grammatical approaches. The definitions of the terms discourse, critical, ideology, power and so on are also manifold. Thus, any criticism of CDA should always specify which research or researcher they relate to because CDA as such cannot be viewed as a holistic or closed paradigm. I would rather suggest using the notion of a school for CDA,

or of a programme which many researchers find useful and to which they can relate. This programme or set of principles has changed over the years. Such a heterogeneous school might be confusing for some; on the other hand, it allows for open discussions and debates, for changes in the aims and goals, and for innovation. In contrast to "total and closed" theories, like for example Chomsky's Generative Transformational Grammar or Michael Holliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, CDA has never had the image of being a sect nor does it want to have such an image.

This heterogeneity of methodological and theoretical approaches that can be found in this field of Linguistics would tend to confirm Van Dijk's point that CDA and CL "are at most a shared perspective on doing linguistic, semiotic or discourse analysis" (Van Dijk 1993, 131). Below, I would like to summarize some of these principles, which are adhered to by most researchers.

### **The notions of discourse, critical, power and ideology**

CDA sees "language as social practice, and considers the context of language use to be crucial. CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of social practice. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation, institution and social structure which frame it: the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned; it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power.

Discursive practices may have major ideological effects, that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/ cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people. Of course, the term

discourse is used very differently by different researchers and also in different academic cultures. In the English speaking world," discourse "is often used both for written and oral other researchers distinguish between different levels of abstractness: Lemke (1995) defines text as the concrete realization of abstract forms of knowledge (discourse).

Basically, critical could be understood as having distance to the data, embedding the data in the social context, taking a political stance explicitly, and having a focus on self reflection as scholars doing research. For all those concerned in CDA, application of the results is important, be it in practical seminars for teachers doctors and bureaucrats or in the writing of expert opinions or devising schoolbooks. The reference to the contribution of Critical Theory to the understanding of CDA and the notions of critical and ideology are of particular importance.

Thompson (1990) discusses the concepts of ideology and culture, the relations between these concepts and certain aspects of Mass Communication. He points out that the concept of ideology first appeared in late 18th-century France and has thus been in use for about two centuries. The term has been given a range of functions and meanings at different times.

For Thompson, ideology refers to social forms and processes within which, and by means of which, symbolic forms circulate in the social world. Ideology, for CDA, is seen as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations. CDA takes a particular interest in the ways in which language mediates ideology in a variety of social institutions. Thompson (1990) sees the study of ideology as a study of "the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds". This kind of study will also investigate the social contexts within which symbolic forms are both employed and deployed. The investigator has an interest in determining whether such forms establish or sustain relations of domination.

The differences between scientific theories and critical theories lie along three dimensions. First, they differ in their aim or goal, and therefore also in the way they can be used. Scientific theories aim at successful manipulation of the external world: they have Critical theories, thus also CDA, are afforded special standing as guides for human action. They are aimed at producing both enlightenment and emancipation. These types of theories do not only seek to describe and explain, but also to root out a particular kind of delusion. Even with differing concepts of ideology, critical theory seeks to create awareness in agents of their own needs and interests.

For CDA, language is not powerful on its own; it gains power by the use powerful people make of it. This explains why CDA often chooses the perspective of those who suffer, and critically analyzes the language use of those in power, who are responsible for the existence of inequalities and who also have the means and the opportunity to improve conditions. In agreement with its Critical Theory predecessors, CDA emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary work in order to gain a proper understanding of how language functions in constituting and transmitting knowledge, in organizing social institutions or in exercising power.

An important perspective in CDA related to the notion of power is that it is very rare that a text is the work of any one person. Thus, the defining features of CDA are to be seen in its concern with power as a central condition in social life, and in its efforts to develop a theory of language which incorporates this as a major premise. Critical theories aim at making agents aware of hidden coercion, thereby freeing them from that coercion and putting them in a position where they can determine their true interests. Second, critical and scientific theories differ in their 'cognitive' structure. Scientific theories are 'objectifying' in that one can distinguish between the theory and the objects to which the theory refers. The theory is not part of the object-domain which it describes.

A critical theory, on the other hand, is 'reflective' in that it is always itself a part of the object-domain it describes. Such theories are in part about themselves. Third, critical and scientific theories differ in the kind of evidence which would determine whether or not they are acceptable. Power is about relations of difference, and particularly about the effects of differences in social structures. The constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over power and where power is challenged.

Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power both in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated vehicle for differences in power within hierarchical social structures. CDA takes an interest in the ways in which linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations of power. Power is signaled not only by grammatical forms within a text, but also by a person's control of a social occasion by means of the genre of a text. It is often exactly within the genres associated with given social occasions that power is either exercised or challenged. CDA aims at investigating critically social inequality as it is expressed constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use or in discourse.

### **Discourse, structure, history and context**

In CDA, nowadays, a huge continuity, of course, exists with CL. This continuity is visible mostly in the claim that discourses are ideological and that there is no arbitrariness of signs. Functional Systemic Linguistics proved to be most important for the text analysis undertaken by this school. In contrast to other paradigms in discourse analysis and text linguistics, CDA focuses not only on texts, spoken or written, as objects of inquiry. A fully critical account of discourse would thus require a theorization and description of both the social

processes and structures, which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as social-historical subjects, create meanings in their interaction with texts. Consequently, three concepts figure indispensably in all CDA: the concept of power; the concept of history; and the concept of ideology.

Unlike some of the research in Pragmatics and traditional Sociolinguistics in which, according to critical linguists, context variables are somewhat naively correlated with an autonomous system of language, CDA tries to avoid positing a simple deterministic relation between texts and the social. Taking into account the insights that discourse is structured by dominance that every discourse is historically produced and interpreted. And that dominance structures are legitimized by ideologies of powerful groups, the complex approach advocated by proponents of CDA makes it possible to analyze pressures from above and possibilities of resistance to unequal power relationships that appear as societal conventions.

According to this view, dominant structures both stabilize and naturalize conventions, that is, the effects of power and ideology in the production of meaning are obscured and acquire stable and natural forms, they are taken as given. This approach also explains why interdisciplinary is a necessity when undertaking CDA. What is thus considered as context is subject to theorizing.

### **The History of Critical Discourse Analysis**

The 1970s saw the emergence of a form of discourse and text analysis that recognized the role of language in structuring power relations in society. At that time, much linguistic research elsewhere was focused on formal aspects of language which constituted the linguistic competence of speakers and which could theoretically be isolated from specific instances of language use (Chomsky 1957) Where the relation between language and context was considered, as in pragmatics (Levinson 1983), with a focus on speakers' pragmatic, sociolinguistic competence, sentences and components of sentences

were still regarded as the basic units. In such a context, attention to texts, their production and interpretation and their relation to societal impulses and structures, signaled a very different kind of interest. By the 1990s the label CDA came to be used more consistently to describe this particular approach to linguistic analysis. In this contribution, I would like to take up 10 basic principles of a CDA program.

1. The approach is interdisciplinary. Problems in our societies are too complex to be studied from a single perspective. This entails different dimensions of interdisciplinary: the theories draw on neighboring disciplines and try to integrate these theories.

2. The approach is problem-oriented, rather than focused on specific linguistic items. Social problems are the items of research, such as: racism, identity, social change, which, of course, are and could be studied from manifold perspectives. The CDA dimension, discourse and text analysis is one of many possible approaches.

3. The theories as well as the methodologies are eclectic; i.e., theories and methods are integrated which are adequate for an understanding and explanation of the object under investigation.

4. The study always incorporates fieldwork and ethnography to explore the object under investigation (study from the inside) as a precondition for any further analysis and theorizing.

5. The approach is adductive: a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical data is necessary. This is a prerequisite for principle.

6. Multiple genres and multiple public spaces are studied, and inter textual and inter discursive relationships are investigated. Recontextualization is the most important process in connecting these genres as well as topics and arguments. In our postmodern societies, we are dealing with hybrid and innovative genres, as well as with new notions of time, identity and space. All these notions have



undergone significant change; for example: fragmented identities have replaced the notion of holistic identities.

7. The historical context is always analyzed and integrated into the interpretation of discourses and texts. The notion of change (principle 6) has become inherent in the study of text and discourse.

8. The categories and tools for the analysis are defined in accordance with all these steps and procedures and also with the specific problem under investigation.

9. Grand Theories might serve as a foundation; in the specific analysis, Middle-Range Theories serve the aims better. The problem-oriented approach entails the use and testing of middle-range theories. Grand Theories result in large gaps between structure/ context and linguistic realizations.

10. Practice and application are aimed at. The results should be made available to experts in different fields and, as a second step, be applied, with the goal of changing certain discursive and social practices.

### **Discourse analysis and society**

Crucial for critical discourse analysts is the explicit awareness of their role in society. Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a value-free science, they argue that science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of, and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction. Instead of denying or ignoring such a relation between scholarship and society, they plead that such relations be studied and accounted for in their own right, and that scholarly practices should be based on such insights. Theory formation, description and explanation, also in discourse analysis, are socio-politically situated, whether we like it or not. Reflection on the role of scholars in society and the polity thus becomes inherent part of the discourse analytical enterprise. This may mean, among other things that discourse analysts conduct research in solidarity and cooperation with dominated groups.

Critical research on discourse needs to satisfy a number of requirements in order to effectively realize its aims:

1. As is often the case for more marginal research traditions, CDA research has to be better than other research in order to be accepted.
2. It focuses primarily on *social problems* and political issues, rather than on current paradigms and fashions.
3. Empirically adequate critical analysis of social problems is usually *multidisciplinary*.
4. Rather than to merely *describe* discourse structures, it tries to *explain* them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure.
5. More specifically CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of *power* and *dominance* in society.

Fairclough & Wodak (1997: 271-280) summarize the main tenets of CDA as follows:

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse Constitutes Society and Culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action.

Since CDA is not a specific direction of research, it does not have a unitary theoretical framework. Within the aims mentioned above, there are many types of CDA, and these may be theoretically and analytically quite diverse. Critical

analysis of conversation is very different from an analysis of news reports in the press or of lessons and teaching at school. Yet, given the common perspective and the general aims of CDA, we may also find overall conceptual and theoretical frameworks that are closely related.

As suggested, most kinds of CDA will ask questions about the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance, whether they are part of a conversation or a news report or other genres and contexts. Thus, the typical vocabulary of many scholars in CDA will feature such notions as 'power', 'dominance', 'hegemony', 'ideology', 'class', 'gender', 'race', 'discrimination', 'interests', 'reproduction', 'institutions', 'social structure' or 'social order', besides the more familiar discourse analytical notions. It comes as no surprise that also CDA research will often refer to the leading social philosophers and social scientists of our time when theorizing these and other fundamental notions.

More recently, the many studies on language, culture and society by Bourdieu have become increasingly influential, for instance his notion of 'habitus'. From another sociological perspective, Giddens' structuration theory is now occasionally mentioned. These influences also show that one main tradition of critical studies, viz., the neomarxist one, as for instance inspired by Gramsci, has now become increasingly replaced by other approaches. It is the beyond the scope of this chapter to detail (and criticize) these various philosophical and sociological roots and influences in contemporary CDA. Also, it should be borne in mind that although several of these social philosophers and sociologists make extensive use of the notions of language and discourse, they seldom engage in explicit, systematic discourse analysis. Indeed, the last thing critical discourse scholars should do is to uncritically adopt philosophical or sociological ideas about

Language and discourse that are obviously uninformed by the advances in contemporary linguistics and discourse analysis. Rather, the work referred to here is mainly relevant for the use of fundamental concepts about the social order and hence for the meta-theory of CDA.

Language use, discourse, verbal interaction and communication belong to the micro-level of the social order. Power, dominance and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macro-level of analysis. This means that CDA has to theoretically bridge the well-known gap between micro and macro approaches, which is of course a distinction that is a sociological construct in its own right. In everyday interaction and experience the macro and micro level form one, unified whole. For instance, a racist speech in parliament is a discourse at the micro-level of social interaction in the specific situation of a debate, but at the same time may enact or be a constituent part of legislation or the reproduction of racism, at the macro-level. There are several ways to analyze and bridge these levels, and thus to arrive at a unified critical analysis:

(a) *Members-Groups*: Language users engage in discourse *as* members of (several) social groups, organizations or institutions; and conversely, groups thus may act by their members.

(b) *Actions-Process*: Social acts of individual actors are thus constituent part of group actions and social processes, such as legislation, news making or the reproduction of racism.

(c) *Context-Social Structure*. Situations of discursive interaction are similarly part or constitutive of social structure, such as a press conference may a typical practice of organizations and media institutions. That is, local and more global contexts are closely related, and both exercise constraints on discourse.

(d) *Personal and Social Cognition*: Language users as social actors have both personal and social cognition: personal memories, knowledge and opinions, as well as those shared with members of the group or culture as a whole. Both types of cognition influence interaction and discourse of individual members, whereas shared social representations govern the collective actions of a group. Thus, cognition is also the crucial interface (or with a biological metaphor: the missing link) between the personal and the social, and hence between individual discourse and social structure.

More specifically focusing on the discourse dimension of these various levels or dimensions of mediation between the macro and the micro, the same principles may apply to the relations between (a) specific instances of text and talk (e.g., a news report), (b) more complex communicative events (all actions involved in producing and reading news reports), (c) news reports in general, as a genre, and (d) the order of discourse of the mass media.

### **Media discourse**

The undeniable power of the media has inspired many critical studies in many disciplines, not least in the field of mass communication itself. Also linguistics, semiotics, pragmatics and discourse studies have produced critical studies of reporting or TV programs. As we have seen for the media representations of women and minorities, the traditional (often content-analytical) approach in critical media studies has been the analysis of biased, stereotypical- sexist or racist images in the media, both in texts as well as in illustrations and photos. The first studies of media language similarly focused on easily observable surface structures, such as the biased or partisan use of words in the description of Us and Them (and Our/Their actions and characteristics), especially along socio-political lines, for instance in the representation of communists. Great-

Britain is arguably the country with most and most interesting critical media studies.

Perhaps best known outside of discourse studies, is the media research carried out by Stuart Hall and his associates within the framework of the Cultural Studies paradigm. They combined text analysis with analyses of images within a broad cultural approach to the media. Critical analysis of media discourse is dealt with here within a broader perspective of culture as the dialectic between social being and social consciousness (Hall), as interwoven with all social practices, and how people experience their social conditions. Among many other dimensions, such social practices, and especially the 'signifying practices' are examined especially for the ways they reproduce both culture and ideology. In an analysis of the media accounts of the 'riots' during a minority festival, the responsibility of the authorities and especially of the police in such violence may be systematically de-emphasized by de-focusing, e.g., by passive constructions and nominalizations, that is by leaving agency and responsibility implicit. On the other hand, as is the case for the representation of others in general, and for minorities in particular, their negative role in deviance and violence may be emphasized by representing them as responsible agents in topical, subject position. Many subsequent studies of syntactic patterns of out group representations have arrived at similar conclusions.

Elsewhere, critical media studies focused less on discourse structures. In the USA, thus, Chomsky and Herman, in their 'propaganda model' extensively criticized the U.S. media for their collusion with official U.S. foreign policy, and occasionally refer to the use of persuasive and biased words (such as euphemisms for atrocities committed by the U.S. and its 'client states'), but they do not propose a fully fledged analysis of media discourse. Also in most other critical studies of the media there is very little inspiration from linguistics, semiotics or discourse analysis. Analysis mostly does not go beyond (perceptive, but essentially impressionistic) 'readings' of the news or practically

relevant but under theorized stories about well-known cases of bias (Lee & Solomon, 1990).

Undertaken from the point of view, and hence with the methods of the social sciences, there is a remarkable lack of detailed analysis of the actual news stories themselves, whatever the relevance of such work. In sum, together with feminist studies, media studies so far provide the richest ground of critical studies of discourse, but so far few of these studies are based on a systematic theory of the structures of media genres.

However, increasingly the boundaries between media studies, the other social sciences as well as linguistics, semiotics and discourse analysis are being crossed, and a more detailed and explicit attention for the subtleties of texts themselves has been the result. Unfortunately, much of the post-modern work that shows such integration of approaches to discourse across disciplinary boundaries appears to be less interested in a CDA perspective.

### **Some Questions and Perspectives**

Over the years, several issues have arisen as important research areas which have not yet been adequately discussed which certainly present problems not only for CDA but for text and discourse analysis in a much broader sense:

- The problem of operationalizing theories and relating the linguistic dimension with the social dimensions (problem of mediation)
- The linguistic theory to be applied: often enough, a whole mixed bag of linguistic indicators and variables were used to analyze texts with no theoretical notions or grammar theory in the background.
- The notion of context, which is often defined either very broadly or very narrowly: how much extra-textual information do we need to analyze texts, how many and which theories have what kind of impact on the concrete analysis and interpretation of texts?

- The accusation of being biased, how are certain readings of text justified? To justify certain interpretations, the decisions for a particular analysis should be made more explicit.
- Inter- or trans-disciplinarily have not yet been truly integrated into text analysis.

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