

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): An Analysis of Social Inequalities and Material Consequences of Discourse in our Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary research field that critically examines how discourses perpetuate social inequalities and material consequences of discourse. It is composed of multiple yet distinct theoretical and methodological approaches used for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities. The study critically analyses the basic approaches or techniques and the relationship between techniques and critical discourse. Each approach has its own particular agenda, yet despite this diversity, CDA scholars commonly view language as a form of social practice, and are concerned with systematically investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse. They are likewise dedicated to examining the social and material consequences of discourse. According to T. S. Elliot, "Criticism is as inevitable as breathing." Semiology is the theoretical approach used for the study. The study attempts to clarify what it means to say that one is doing critical discourse analysis and sheds light on the principles underlying the concept. It also examined the characteristics of CDA and its main aim which is to look beyond the literal meaning of language and explore the links between language use and social practice. The methods and techniques that CDA draws on, as well as the focal approaches to it as have been put forth by many prominent scholars are also analyzed. The study discovers that critical discourse is conditioned by the methods and techniques associated with literature. These methods and techniques of critical discourse provide valuable tools for the study of written texts, with objectivity and precision. The paper concludes with James Reeves idea and assertion that, "We shall enjoy literature (spoken or written) more if we enjoy it critically".

Keywords: Approach, Critical Discourse Analysis, Research, Paradigm and Theory

Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter termed CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain and legitimize social inequalities. It is a methodology that enables a vigorous assessment of what is meant when language is used to describe and explain.

According to Wodak & Meyer in their book, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, Critical Discourse Analysis cuts across several disciplines and is set forth in the early 1990s by a group of scholars such as Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress, Teun van Dijk and Norman Fairclough (29). Theories and methods of CDA have been formulated to differentiate this paradigm from other theories and methodologies in Discourse Analysis. Later on, the term has been known under many designations. Depending on their fields of research or areas of study, some scholars prefer the concept Critical Linguistics (CL), others choose to use the label Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). It follows then from this to argue that CDA is an interdisciplinary approach which, as stated by Bloor Michael in his book titled, *Theories and Approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis*, can be used by professionals from a variety of backgrounds such as historians, business institutions, lawyers, politicians, etc., to investigate social problems relating to their work (19).

According to Fairclough in his book, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, “CDA as discourse analysis aims to systematically explore the relationship of causality and determination between discursive practices, events, texts and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by the relation of power and struggles over power, and to explore how the opacity of this relationship between discourse and society is in itself a factor securing power and hegemony” (33).

Basic Aims and Characteristics of CDA

It is important to mention from the onset that it is not easy to precisely delimit the special principles, practices, aims, theories or methods of CDA, Yet, any research work which claims to be of the CDA paradigm should be characterized by some basic criteria. Those criteria, originally defined by Kress in his book, *Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Cognition* are taken further by Fairclough who established some basic principles of a CDA programme(19).

Also, according to Jorgensen in *Introduction to Social Semiotics*, CDA is a series of interdisciplinary approaches that can be used to explore many different social domains in many different types of studies (22). This means that discourse analysis can be applied to all areas of research, with a method of analysis intrinsically linked to its theoretical and methodological foundations.

Brown & Yule argue in *The Practice of Critical Discourse* that “doing discourse analysis involves not only doing syntax and semantics, but also doing pragmatics”. It follows from this then that the context of occurrence of a piece of discourse should be of particular interest to the discourse analyst. As for CDA, it “focuses on social problems, and especially on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination” (28).

Also, according to Ifejirika in his book, *Introduction to Literary Theory Criticism and Practice*, any reader who does not possess a critical mind suffers from what the Emeritus Catholic Bishop of Awka called in Igbo language, “Akwukwo biara Mentality”. This phrase according to him refers to:

an uncritical and unphilosophical person who receives for example, a quit notice from his landlord, a sack letter from his employer, a letter of termination of appointment from an individual or the government or a divorce letter from the spouse and complies to the demands of the aforementioned letters without asking basic and fundamental questions such as- Am I owing house rent? Am I not executing the contract well? Have I been quarrelling with my spouse? By the way, who wrote the letter? Was the letter endorsed and is the signature consistent? Is there a date on the letter? Etc, etc. These and more are some of the critical questions a critical mind should find answers to before thinking of complying with the demands of any letter (17).

CDA, therefore, sets up a relationship between language and power. In that sense, Wodak in her book *Language, Power and Ideology* regards it as fundamentally concerned with analyzing hidden as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language (42). Critical research on discourse, Van Dijk argues in his book on *Discourse and Power*, needs to satisfy a number of requirements in order to effectively realize its aims:

- a. It is problem-or issue-oriented: any theoretical and methodological approach is relevant as long as it is able to successfully study relevant social problems such as sexism, racism, and other forms of social inequality;
- b. In order to study language or social problems adequately, CDA work is typically inter-or multidisciplinary, and especially focuses on the relations between discourse and society;
- c. CDA does not characterize a school, a field or a sub-discipline of discourse analysis, but is rather an explicitly critical approach, position, or stance of studying text and talk (18).

According to Fairclough in *The Critical Study of Language*, the following characterizes Critical Discourse Analysis:

- a. Discourse understood as an action:

It means that discourse as a form of associate interaction, for example, people who speak or write are not construed as he wrote or spoke. In such an understanding, there are some consequences of how discourse should be viewed. First, the discourse is seen as something that aimed to influence, persuade, argue, support, react, and others. Someone talking or writing has a specific meaning, both large and small. Secondly, the discourse is understood as something that expresses a conscious control, not something outside the control of consciousness.

- b. Critical Discourse Analysis considering the context of discourse, such as backgrounds, situations, events, and conditions. In addition, Critical Discourse Analysis also examined the context of communications: "who is communicating with whom and why; in this type of situation and what audiences; through what medium; How is the different type of communication development associated to each "party". Please note that not all contexts are included in the analysis, only the relevant over production and interpretation of texts that are included in the analysis. There is some context that is important because it affects the

production of discourse. Firstly, participants of discourse, who is producing the discourse, gender, age, education, social class, ethnicity, religion, in many respects relevant in describing the discourse. Secondly, certain social settings, such as place, time, position the speaker and the listener or the physical environment that constitutes a useful context for understanding a discourse.

- c. One important aspect to be able to understand the text is put in a certain historical discourse. For example, we analyze some leaflet made by students who opposed Mr. President/Suharto regime. Understanding of the discourse from this text will only be obtained if we could provide the historical context in which the text was created, how the situation of political space, the atmosphere at the time, and why the language style used.
- d. A Critical Discourse Analysis is also considering elements of the throne (power) in analyzing discourse. Here, every discourse that comes in the form of text, conversation, or whatever, is not seen as something natural, reasonable and neutral but it is a form of power combat. The concept of power is one of the key relationships between discourse and public. As a teacher to his students. This implies that Critical Discourse Analysis views do not limit themselves to the details of the text or discourse structure but also connects with the strength and condition of social, economic, political, and cultural. On the concept of power in relation to discourse produces namely "Control" or Foucault term "Disciplined Body" both mentally/psychic and repressive.
- e. Ideology is the central concept in this analysis, due to text, conversation, and another form of ideology or practice. In classical Ideology theories, it is stated that the ideology was built by the dominant group aimed to reproduce and legitimize their domination. One of the main strategies is to create awareness to the mob that dominance was accepted in and taken for granted, through what is called by Grasim, hegemony and create a false consciousness. Ideology makes a member of a group act in the same situation, be able to connect their problems, and contribute in the form of solidarity and cohesion within the group. In this perspective the ideology has some important implications: firstly, ideology is inherently social, not personal or individual; Secondly, the ideology of social nature, although used internally among members of a group or community. Therefore, ideology not only provided the function of coherence and cohesion but also it formed the identity of the group. In view of this kind of discourse, not understood as something neutral or that takes place naturally, any discourse contained ideology is predominated and jockeying for influence (36-38).

From the characteristics of Critical Discourse Analysis above, it is easier to examine the discourse produced by the elites who create many social inequalities and raises the false consciousness of the community through misinformation, and the ecstasy of communication they make.

The Difference between CDA and DA

Concerning the difference between CDA and DA, Rogers claims in his book *An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education* that CDA differs from other discourse analysis methods in that it includes not

only a description and interpretation of discourse in context, but also offers an explanation of why and how discourses work. According to him, these differences between CDA and other DA, pragmatic and sociolinguistic approaches may be most clearly established with regard to the general principles of CDA. He set forth eight foundational principles of CDA which, “are a useful starting point for researchers interested in conducting CDA” (8-9).

It is expedient to explain what makes CDA critical, that is to elucidate the critical side of the concept. Locke in his book *Analyzing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis* opined that in normal parlance, the word “critical” denotes the habit of evaluating an object or situation in accordance with a system of rules, principles and values. Within CDA perspective however, “critical” is not to be understood in the common sense of the word, i.e., criticizing, or being negative (24). Kendall Gavin in his book, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis* claims that “critical” means not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, challenging reductionism, dogmatism and dichotomies, being self-reflexive in one’s research, and through these processes, making opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest. “Critical”, thus, does not imply the common sense meaning of “being negative” rather “skeptical”. Proposing alternatives is also part of being “critical”. He also believes that within this framework of “critical”, the analyst’s intention is to uncover power relationships and demonstrate inequalities embedded in society (11).

The main **difference** that one can therefore point to is that whereas CDA deals with more issues, such as intertextuality, inter-discursively and socio-historical context of formation and interpretations of texts/discourses, DA in general does not go into such aspects of a given text/discourse.

Practical Techniques of Critical Discourse Analysis

So you have formulated a research question, have collected source material, and are now ready to roll up your sleeves and dig into your sources. But how do you make sure that you have covered all your bases and that you will later be able to make a good case for yourself and your work? The ten steps below will help conduct a systematic and professional discourse analysis.

1) Establish the context

Before you start chiseling away at your source material, jot down where the material comes from and how it fits into the big picture. You should ask yourself what the social and historical context is in which each of your sources was produced. Write down what language your source is written in, what country and place it is from, who wrote it (and when), and who published it (and when). Also try to have a record of when and how you got your hands on your sources, and to explain where others might find copies. Finally, find out whether your sources are responses to any major event, whether they tie into broader debates, and how they were received at the time of publication.

2) Explore the production process

You have already recorded who wrote and published your sources, but you still need to do a more thorough background check. Try to find additional information on the producer of your source material, as well as their institutional and personal background. For example, according to Jager, if you are analysing news articles, take a look at the kind of newspaper that the articles are from, who are the author and the editorial staff, what is the general political position of the paper, and what is its affiliation with other organizations? Are any of the people who are involved in the production process known for their journalistic style or their political views? Is there any information on the production expenditures and general finances of the paper? Do you know who the general target audience of the paper is? In many cases, media outlets themselves provide some of this information online, for instance in the “about” sections of their websites. In other cases, you will find such information in the secondary academic literature. Don’t hesitate to write the editors an email or call them up: personal interviews can be a great way to explore production backgrounds (12-14).

Then according to McLuhan in *Understanding the Media*, once you have established the institutional background, take notes on the medium and the genre you are working with. Some scholars go as far to argue that “the medium is the message” (16), or in other words that the medium in which information is presented is the crucial element that shapes meaning. While the researcher is skeptical of such extreme technological determinism, she does agree that the medium matters: reading an article online is not the same as reading it in a printed newspaper, or in a hardcover collection of essays. Make sure to identify the different media types in which your source appeared, and to also be clear about the version that you yourself are analyzing.

3) Prepare your material for analysis

In order to analyse the actual text, it is wise to prepare it in a way that will allow you to work with the source, home in on specific details, and make precise references later. If you are working with a hard copy I would recommend making a number of additional copies of your source material, so that you can write on these versions and mark important features. If you haven’t already, try to digitalize your source or get a digital copy. Then add references that others can use to follow your work later: add numbers for lines, headers, paragraphs, figures, or any other features that will help you keep your bearings.

4) Code your material

When you code data, it means that you are assigning attributes to specific units of analysis, such as paragraphs, sentences, or individual words. Think of how many of us tag online information like pictures, links, or articles. Coding is simply an academic version of this tagging process.

For instance, you might be analysing a presidential speech to see what globalization discourse it draws from. It makes sense to mark all statements in the speech that deal with globalization and its related themes (or discourse

strands). Before you start with this process, you need to come up with your coding categories. The first step is to outline a few such categories theoretically: based on the kind of question you are asking, and your knowledge of the subject matter, you will already have a few key themes in mind that you expect to find, for instance “trade”, “migration”, “transportation”, “communication”, and so on. A thorough review of the secondary literature on your topic will likely offer inspiration. Write down your first considerations, and also write down topics that you think might be related to these key themes. These are your starting categories.

You then go over the text to see if it contains any of these themes. Take notes on the ones that are not included, since you may have to delete these categories later. Other categories might be too broad, so try breaking them down into sub-categories. Also, the text may include interesting themes that you did not expect to find, so jot down any such additional discourse strands. At the end of this first review, revise your list of coding categories to reflect your findings. If you are working with several documents, repeat the process for each of them, until you have your final list of coding categories. This is what Mayring in his research book titled *Introduction to Qualitative Social Research* calls evolutionary coding, since your categories evolve from theoretical considerations into a full-fledged operational list based on empirical data (23).

5) Examine the structure of the text

Now that you have prepared your materials and have coded the discourse strands, it is time to look at the structural features of the texts. Are there sections that overwhelmingly deal with one discourse? Are there ways in which different discourse strands overlap in the text? See if you can identify how the argument is structured: does the text go through several issues one by one? Does it first make a counter-factual case, only to then refute that case and make the main argument? You should at this point also consider how the headers and other layout features guide the argument, and what role the introduction and conclusion play in the overall scheme of things.

6) Collect and examine discursive statements

Once you have a good idea of the macro-features of your text, you can zoom in on the individual statements, or discourse fragments. A good way to do this is to collect all statements with a specific code, and to examine what they have to say on the respective discourse strand. This collection of statements will allow you to map out what “truths” the text establishes on each major topic.

7) Identify cultural references

You have already established what the context of your source material is. Now think about how the context informs the argument. Does your material contain references to other sources, or imply knowledge of another subject matter? What meaning does the text attribute to such other sources? Exploring these questions will help you figure out what function intertextuality serves in light of the overall argument.

8) Identify linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms

According to Parhan in her book titled *Research in Linguistics and Literature*, the next step in your analysis is likely going to be the most laborious, but also the most enlightening when it comes to exploring how a discourse works in detail. You will need to identify how the various statements function at the level of language. In order to do this, you may have to use additional copies of your text for each work-step, or you may need to create separate coding categories for your digital files. Here are some of the things you should be on the lookout for:

- Word groups: does the text deploy words that have a common contextual background? For instance, the vocabulary may be drawn directly from military language, or business language, or highly colloquial youth language. Take a closer look at nouns, verbs, and adjectives in your text and see if you find any common features. Such regularities can shed light on the sort of logic that the text implies. For example, talking about a natural disaster in the language of war creates a very different reasoning than talking about the same event in religious terms.
- Grammar features: check who or what the subjects and objects in the various statements are. Are there any regularities, for instance frequently used pronouns like “we” and “they”? If so, can you identify who the protagonists and antagonists are? A look at adjectives and adverbs might tell you more about judgements that the text passes on these groups. Also, take a closer look at the main and auxiliary verbs that the text uses, and check what tense they appear in. Particularly interesting are active versus passive phrases – does the text delete actors from its arguments by using passive phrases? A statement like “we are under economic pressure” is very different from “X puts us under economic pressure”... particularly if “X” is self-inflicted. Passive phrases and impersonal chains of nouns are a common way to obscure relationships behind the text and shirk responsibility. Make such strategies visible through your analysis.
- Rhetorical and literary figures: see if you can identify and mark any of the following five elements in your text: allegories, metaphors, similes, idioms, and proverbs. Take a look at how they are deployed in the service of the overall argument. Inviting the reader to entertain certain associations, for instance in the form of an allegory, helps construct certain kinds of categories and relations, which in turn shape the argument. For instance, if I use a simile that equates the state with a parent, and the citizens with children, then I am not only significantly simplifying what is actually a very complex relationship, I am also conjuring up categories and relationships that legitimize certain kinds of politics, for instance strict government intervention in the social sphere. Once you have checked for the five elements listed above, follow up by examining additional rhetorical figures to see how these frame the meaning of specific statements. Things to look for include parallelisms, hyperboles, tri-colons, synecdoches, rhetorical questions, and anaphora, to name only the most common.

- Direct and indirect speech: does the text include quotes? If so, are they paraphrased or are they cited as direct speech? In either case, you should track down the original phrases to see what their context was, and what function they now play in your source material.
- Modalities: see if the text includes any statements on what “should” or “could” be. Such phrases may create a sense of urgency, serve as a call to action, or imply hypothetical scenarios.+
- Evidentialities: lastly, are there any phrases in the text that suggest factuality? Sample phrases might include “of course”, “obviously”, or “as everyone knows”. A related question then is what kinds of “facts” the text actually presents in support of its argument. Does the text report factuality, actively demonstrate it, or merely suggested it as self-evident? One of the strongest features of discourse is how it “naturalizes” certain statements as “common sense” or “fact”, even if the statements are actually controversial (and in discourse theory, all statements are controversial). Be on the look-out for such discursive moves (44-46).

9) Interpret the data

You now have all the elements of your analysis together, but the most important question still remains: **what does it all mean?** In your interpretation, you need to tie all of your results together in order to explain what the discourse is about, and how it works. This means combing your knowledge of structural features and individual statements, and then placing those findings into the broader context that you established at the beginning. Throughout this process, keep the following **questions** in mind: who created the material you are analysing? What is their position on the topic you examined? How do their arguments draw from and in turn contribute to commonly accepted knowledge of the topic at the time and in the place that this argument was made? And maybe most importantly: who might benefit from the discourse that your sources construct?

10) Present your findings

Once you have the answer to your original questions, it is time to get your results across to your target audience. If you have conducted a good analysis, then you now have a huge amount of notes from which you can build your presentation, paper, or thesis. Make sure to stress the relevance, and to move through your analysis based on the issues that you want to present. Always ask yourself: what is interesting about my findings, and why should anyone care? A talk or a paper that simply lists one discourse feature after another is tedious to follow, so try to focus on making a compelling case. You can then add evidence from your work as needed, for instance by adding original and translated examples to illustrate your point. For some academic papers, particularly graduation theses, you may want to compile the full account of your data analysis in an appendix or some other separate file so that your assessors can check out your work.

Some approaches that are commonly used in Critical Discourse Analysis are:

1. Critical Linguistics Approach

A critical linguistic approach emphasizes its analysis on language in relation to ideology. In this case, the ideology has been analyzed from the angle of word choice and sentence structure are used, in other words, the aspect of ideology observed the choice of the language and the structure of the grammar used.

2. French Approach

The French approach assumes that language is a domain of dominant fight. Through the meanings that are created in the discourse, the various groups mutually attempts to infuse their belief and understanding to other groups. Through words and meanings, they create a battle opinion, including the power to determine and establish the position of dominance on the other. In this approach, the language and ideology agree on language use and language materialistic on ideology, both, words used and their meaning.

3. Social Cognition Approach

This approach was developed by Teun Van Dijk and it focuses on the issue of ethnicity, racism, and refugees. This approach is referred to as social cognition, because of an important element of cognition factor in the production of discourse. According to this approach, the analysis of discourse can be used to find out the position of the social groups, both as the ruler/dominant and marginal groups.

4. Socio-Cultural Change Approach; This approach focuses on how the discourse and social change. The discourse here is seen as a social practice. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between the discursive practices with identity and social relations. Discourse is also inherent in the situation, institution, and certain social classes. Approach social change looks at discourse practices of power. According to this approach, the discourse has three effects in social change, namely:

- (a) Gives participation in the construction of social identity and position of the subject,
- (b) Contributes to the construction of social relationships,
- (c) Contributes in the construction of the system of knowledge and belief.

Historical Discourse Approach; According to this approach, the analysis of discourse should pay attention to historical context.

Conclusion

Although Critical Discourse analysis offers a powerful toolbox for analyzing communication, it also has its pitfalls. Aside from being very work-intensive, the idea that you only need to follow a certain number of steps to get your results can be misleading. A methodology is always only as good as your question. If your question does not lend itself to this sort of analysis, or if many of the steps listed above does not apply to you, then come up with an approach that suits your project. Don't be a methodologist: that is, someone who jumps at a set of methods and applies them to everything in a blind fit of activism. Always remain critical of your own work.

This means being mindful of the shortcomings in your approach, so that you do not end up making claims that your material does not support. A common mistake is to claim that a discourse analysis shows what people think or believe (or worse: what entire societies think or believe). Discourse analysis is a form of content analysis. It is not a tool to analyze the impact of media on audience members as no amount of discourse analysis can provide adequate evidence on what goes on in people's heads.

What we can learn from a discourse analysis is how specific actors construct an argument, and how this argument fits into wider social practices. More importantly, we can demonstrate with confidence what kind of statements actors try to establish as self-evident and true. We can also show with precision what rhetorical methods they picked to communicate those truths in ways they thought would be effective, plausible, or even natural. And we can reveal how their statements and the frameworks of meaning they draw from proliferate through communication practices.

Overall, discourse analysis and critical thinking is applicable to every situation and every subject and CDA's research design and methodological processes can be somewhat flexible and adaptive according to the specifics of any given project/research.

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