Critical Discourse Analysis
An introduction to major approaches

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- Abstract -

Meaning is not a monolithic construct; it is a multidimensional and slippery concept with amazing complexity. Understanding the silent meaning of a text, be it spoken or written is a highly-needed skill in the modern era, for the exposure to information and media is so vast that one can never be sure of the validity of the surrounding information. Critical Discourse Analysis along with other related disciplines attempts to reveal hidden meanings, that is, the ideological loads of the discourse. This paper tries to review the origins of CDA and introduces some of the influential theoretical schools on it. Although these approaches differ in terms of the theoretical foundations and analytic tools, they share three concepts of critique, power, and ideology. This article emphasizes two major points. One is the dialectic relation between society, culture, politics, and language that this complex relation requires multidisciplinary research. The other is the fact that CDA cannot be taken as theory due to its tendency to adopt an eclectic approach in the analysis of the data.

1. **Introduction**

Effective discriminative reading is of paramount momentousness in the modern era due to the prevalence of media and enormous exposure to information. Ironically, people and even scholars have turned a blind eye to the intricacies and nuances of discourse production and comprehension. This is due to the fact that language users often do not develop a full competence in the semantic component of the language. Invariably, people are heedless to and unenlightened about the implications of the shades of meanings whilst they are producing discourse or are exposed to it.

The concepts of discourse, genre, and style are intimately connected with each other. They are dealing with the macro and micro levels of sociological and linguistic studies. There is a dialectic relationship between social actors or individuals (micro structure) and the social practices and values (macro structure). In this background, a multiplicity of texts is in close interaction with social parameters to bring about different ideological, identities and power structures. In this respect, the voice given to the macro structures, i.e. government and institutions or the micro structures i.e. individuals is immensely affected by the theorists' ideological orientations.

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) "is the uncovering of implicit ideologies in texts. It unveils the underlying ideological prejudices and therefore the exercise of power in texts" (Widdoson, 2000). This research enterprise attempts to critically analyze the relationship between language, ideology, and society. As Teun Van Dijk (1993) puts it, "critical discourse analysts want to understand, expose, and resist social inequality."

The roots of CDA are in critical theory which is inextricably tied up with Frankfurt School of Social Research. "Critical theory is defined as a research perspective, which has basically a critical attitude towards society" (Langer, 1998, p.3). More specifically, it is used to refer to "any theory concerned with critique of ideology and the effects of domination" (Fairclough, 1995, p.20). In the 1970s a group of linguists and literary theorists at the University of East Anglia developed the idea of critical linguistics. Their approach was based on M.A.K Halliday's Systemic functional linguistics (SFL). This branch of grammar stresses the importance of social context (the context of culture and context of situation) in the production and development of language. In addition, functional linguistics, unlike many branches of linguistics, has always been concerned not only with words and sentences, but also with longer texts and collection of texts (corpora) above the level of the sentence. The foundations of CDA have been laid by critical linguists and theorist, and since the 1980s –

thanks to the works of the British sociolinguist Norman Fairclough – has gained a lot of attention. Fairclough (1995) defines CDA as follows:

> By critical discourse analysis I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony. (pp. 132-3)

In recent years professionals from a variety of backgrounds have become interested in discourse issues. Historians, business institutions, lawyers, politicians and medical professionals to name but a few, have used discourse analysis to investigate social problems relating to their work. Van Dijk (1993), who prefers the term Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) for this reason, described it as "a new cross-discipline that comprises the analysis of the text and talk in virtually all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences."

This paper will introduce different approaches and schools to CDA and will discuss their similarities and differences. These approaches differ in terms of theoretical foundations and the tools they use to analyze discourse, but the concepts of ideology, critique, and power are present in all of them. In addition, it will accentuate the interdisciplinary nature of CDA and showing the dialectic relationship between language, culture, society, and politics.

2. Approaches to CDA

In spite of the fact that all the approaches to CDA have the notions of ideology, Critique, and power in common, they could be classified into three major ones with respect to the differences in their theoretical foundations and analyzing tools.

2.1.   Norman Fairclough: Discourse as Social Practice

The British sociolinguist, Norman Fairclough is one of the key figures in the realm of CDA. In his vantage-point CDA is a method for examining social and cultural modifications that could be employed in protesting against the power and control of an elite group on other people. Fairclough believes that our language, which shapes our social identities and

interactions, knowledge systems, and beliefs, is also shaped by them in turn. Like Kress and Van Leeuwen, he bases his analyses on Halliday's systemic-functional grammar. In Language and Power (1989), he calls his approach Critical Language Study, and considers the first aim of his approach as helping to correct the vast negligence in relation to the significance of language in creating, maintaining and changing the social relations of power. This first goal tends to be the theoretical part of Fairclough's approach. The second one which is helping to raise awareness to the question that how language can influence the dominance of one group of people over the others could be considered as the practical aspect of his approach. He believes that awareness is the first step towards emancipation. To reach the latter goal Fairclough has put a great emphasis on raising the level of people's consciousness, for he assumes that in discourse, the subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing, and they are unaware of the potential social impact of what they do or utter.

2.1.1.   Text and Discourse

Fairclough considers language as a form of social practice. This way of thinking implies some other notions. First, language is a part of the society and not somehow external to it. Second, language is a social process. Third, language is a socially conditioned process, conditioned that is by other (non-linguistic) parts of society (Fairclough, 1989, 22). The remarkable point in Fairclough's view is that all linguistic phenomena are social, but it is not true the other way round. For instance, when we are talking about the political words such as democracy, imperialism, or terrorism we use linguistic elements, but this is only part of the whole politics. Therefore the relationship between language and society does not observe a one to one correspondence; rather, the society is the whole and language is a part of it.

The second implied notion – i.e. language is a social process – is meaningful only when we take discourse as different from text, like Fairclough. Fairclough's notion of text is exactly the same as Halliday's, and this term covers both written discourse and spoken discourse. For him text is a product, not a process. Fairclough employs the term *discourse* to refer to the complete process of social interaction. *Text* is merely a sector of this process, because he considers three elements for discourse, namely *text, interaction,* and *social context*. In addition to text itself, the process of social interaction involves the process of text production and text interpretation. Hence, text analysis is a part of discourse analysis.

Social conditions of production

Process of production

Text

Process of interpretation

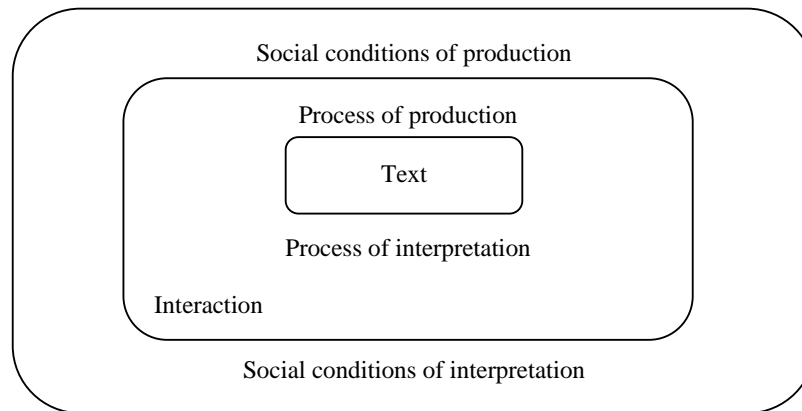Interaction

Social conditions of interpretation

Figure 1. Discourse as text, interaction and context. (Fairclough 1989, P. 25)

In comparison to the three aspects of discourse (shown in figure 1.), Fairclough (1989, pp. 26-27) identifies three dimensions for CDA:

- **Description** is the stage which is concerned with formal properties of the text.
- **Interpretation** is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction by seeing the text as the product of the process of production and as a resource in the process of interpretation.
- **Explanation** is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context, with the social determination of the process of production and interpretation, and their social effects.

In all these stages we are concerned with analysis, but the nature of it is different in each stage. Analysis in the first stage limits its boundaries to labeling the formal properties if the text and regards text as an object. In the second phase, CDA goes through the analysis of the cognitive process of the participants and their interactions. Finally in the third stage, the aim is to explain the relationship between social events and social structures that affect these events and also are affected by them.

2.1.2. Ideology and Power

The roots of the first goal of Fairclough's critical language study can be traced to his expertise and background in sociolinguistics. Fairclough believes that in sociolinguistics – the study of language in the social context – one can propound ideas about language and power;

for instance, in the discussions of standard and non-standard dialects, there is clear-cut evidence that the dialect of the powerful group will gain the reputation of the standard one. By the same token, there are studies that pay attention to the ways in which power is exercised in the people's conversations. All of these studies are concerned with the description of power distribution in terms of sociolinguistic conventions; however, they cannot explain these conventions. Explaining how the relations of power are shaped and the struggle on how power is shaped, does not fall in the realm of sociolinguistics. In his approach, Fairclough endeavors to explain these conventions; conventions which are the upshots of the relations of power and the struggles on them. He accentuates the presuppositions of a common sense present in the interlocutions among people that they are usually blind to their existence. These presuppositions are the very ideology that has a close relationship with power; for these ideological presuppositions exist in the social conventions and the nature of the conventions depend on the power relations that cover them.

The relationship between common sense and ideology was introduced by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. He refers to "'a form of practical activity' in which 'a philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical premiss' and 'a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individuals and collective life'" (Antonio Gramsci, 1971, cited in Fairclough, 1989, p.84). This form of practical activity is the ideology which exists in the background and is usually taken for granted. Fairclough assumes an ideological nature for the common sense, to some extent, and believes that this is the common sense which is ideological in order to be at the disposal of the survival of the unequal relations of power and to be a justification for it.

Fairclough takes a rather traditional approach towards power, and does not agree with Foucault. From Fairclough's (1995, p.17) point of view, Foucault considers power as a pervasive force and symmetrical relations that is dominant over the whole society and is not in the hands of one special group or another; whereas in Fairclough's thinking, the relations of power are asymmetrical, unequal, and empowering that belong to a special class or group.

2.1.3. Naturalization and Neutralization in Discourse

If a type of discourse is dominant over an institution in such a way that other types of discourse are totally oppressed or become a part of that discourse, this issue will not make the discourse seem an autocratic one; rather it will cease to be seen as natural and legitimate. Fairclough, like other critical discourse analysts, calls this phenomenon naturalization. Naturalization has a relation with the ideological common sense, in the sense that by the

naturalization of the discourse, its ideology will change into the ideological common sense. In the process of naturalization and creation of the common sense, the type of discourse appears to lose its ideological character and tends to become merely the discourse of the institution itself instead of looking as the discourse of a special class or group within that institution. In this way, the struggle on power seems to be neutral, and being neutral means being out of ideology, that is to say, having no ideological load. The fact that discourse loses its ideological load, paradoxically, will make a fundamental ideological effect: "Ideology works through disguising its nature, pretending to be what it is not" (Fairclough, 1989, p.92). Now, as long as linguists insist only on the formal aspects of language, they foster the development of this ideological effect. Thus, naturalization occurs in this way and people can hardly, if ever, understand that their routine and usual behaviors makes ideological effects on the society.

2.2.   Teun Van Dijk: A Socio-cognitive Model

Teun Van Dijk is one of the leading figures and pioneers of study and research in domain of CDA. Most of his critical works are concerned with prejudice and racism in discourse. In his early works, he has considered the problem that how Netherlander and Californian Caucasians talk about ethnic minorities, and what role do these conversations play in the reproduction of ideology. In fact, analysis of the topics that people talk about represents the things that exist in their minds. In Van Dijk's viewpoint, those things are mental and personal tenets about ethnic events. He believes that the major premise in talking about others includes positive self-representation and negative other-representation.

In doing CDA, Van Dijk offers some practical principles and guidelines and asserts that he has no special school or approach. He does not consider CDA as a branch of discourse analysis, like conversation analysis or psycho-discourse analysis; for this reason he suggests researchers to look at the CDA as an interdisciplinary, and take an eclectic approach towards it using the findings of other cultures, countries, and other humanities disciplines. On the basis of his interdisciplinary attitude towards the field he labels his methodology as socio-cognitive discourse analysis and states that despite his reluctance to labeling, this label shows to what extent studying cognition is significant in CDA, communication, and interaction. However, this does not mean that CDA should confine its limits to cognitive and social analysis; rather, due to the real world problems, its complexities and people's needs CDA should have historical, cultural, socio-economical, philosophical, logical, and neurological approaches as well.

2.2.1. Discourse, Cognition, and Society

Van Dijk believes that there is not direct relationship between social structures and discourse structures and almost always they are connected to each other through personal and social cognition. This cognition is the lost segment of many critical linguistic studies and critical discourse analysis; therefore he offers the triangle of society, cognition, and discourse. Though Van Dijk puts a great emphasis on cognition, he believes that since the nature of discourse is lingual, CDA needs merely linguistic foundations as well as cognitive foundations.

In Van Dijk's triangle, in a broad sense, discourse is a communicative event that includes oral interactions, written text, body movements, pictures, and other semiotic signifiers. Cognition here refers to personal and social cognition, beliefs, goals, values, emotions, and other mental structures. Society includes both local micro structures and political, social and universal macro structures which are defined in terms of groups and their relationships such as dominance and inequality. In defining the context of discourse in this triangle social and cognitive dimensions are deemed. In fact, context is of two types, micro and macro. Macro context refers to historical, cultural, political, and social structure in which a communicative event occurs, whereas micro context shows the features of the immediate situation and interaction in which a communicative event occurs.

Van Dijk defines micro context based on the concept of cognition and considers it as a form of a mental model of a communicative situation and calls it a context model. Context models are mental representations that control many of the features of text production and comprehension such as genre, choice of topic, and cohesion on one hand, and speech act, style, and imagery on the other. These models exist in people's long term memory; the part of memory in which people save their knowledge and view about the events they experience. In fact, there is no direct relationship between society and discourse and these models explain how discourse indicates the social and personal features in itself, and how in a certain social situation discourse could be different. In other words, devoid of these mental models, it cannot be explained and described that how social structures affect discourse, and get affected in turn.

2.2.2. The notion of *critique*

From Van Dijk's viewpoint, in contrary to other discourse analysts, critical discourse analysts must have a clear socio-political position; they ought to explain their viewpoints, principles, and goals. Of course, in all the stages of shaping the theory and the analysis, their

work is political and their criticisms of discourse will involve political criticism of those who are responsible for the reproduction of ascendency and social inequalities; elite groups who are in power; those who ordain social inequalities and injustice, continue and legitimize them. The ultimate goal of critical discourse analysts is to help the deprived part of the society, the issues that threaten these people's lives, not small issues relating to discourse structures. Critical discourse analysts' criticisms should not be temporary or personal. In other words, CDA goes beyond here and now, and attempts to study the roots of fundamental social problems. CDA's criteria, as acknowledged by Fairclough, too, is not merely observational, descriptive or even explanatory, rather CDA's prosperity is evaluated in terms of the influence that it has on the macro structure of the society and the role that it plays in the line of changing, amending, and removing social inequalities. Van Dijk believes that CDA does not reject having a special direction, and specifies its social and political direction clearly and articulately and is proud of having such a direction.

2.3.   Ruth Wodak: Sociological and historical approach to CDA

Ruth Wodak and his colleagues at Vienna University have chosen to work within the sociological model for their CDA studies. This model is based upon Bernstein's tradition in sociolinguistics and Frankfurt School, especially Jurgen Habermas. Based on this model, Wodak has had some studies on the institutional relations and discourse barriers in courtrooms, school, and hospitals. Recently he has started to work on sexism, anti-Semitism, and racism. In fact, the major goal of him and his colleagues is to put research into practice. They have offered guidelines to avoid using sexist language and some other guidelines for appropriate patient-doctor communication. Anti-Semitism studies after the Second World War, made Wodak and his colleagues to chose "historical approach" to CDA. The distinctive feature of this approach is that it attempts to use all the background information in analyzing different layers of a spoken or written text.

Wodak (2001b: PP. 69-70) has put forward some features for the historical approach to CDA as follows:

1. This approach is interdisciplinary. Like other critical linguists, Wodak acknowledges the intricacy of the relationship between language and society. As a result he believes that CDA is interdisciplinary in nature.

2. This interdisciplinary nature could be seen both in theory and practice. He combines argumentation theory and rhetoric with Halliday's Functional Linguistics.

3. This approach is problem-oriented rather than emphasizing some special language issues.

4. Methodology and theory are chosen through eclecticism.

5. In this approach the analyst is always on the move between theory and empirical date.

6. Historical context will go under investigation and will be incorporated into the analysis of discourse and texts.

2.3.1. Discourse and Text

Wodak believes that historical approach to discourse considers written and spoken language as form of social behavior. Like Fairclough, Wodak acknowledges the dialectic relationship between discourse acts and special areas of action (situations, institutional frameworks, and social structures). In other words, discourse as a social act creates discourse and non-discourse behaviors and in turn is created by them. Wodak distinguishes between discourse and text. He considers discourse as a complex set of synchronic and coherent linguistic acts that emanate in genre and text. Consequently text is seen as the production of these linguistic acts.

3. Conclusion

One could say that in spite of the differences which exist in major approaches to CDA, all of these approaches pursue one common goal that is representing the dialectic relationship between language, power, ideology, and the influential role that language plays in emanation of power and legitimizing social inequalities. For as it was shown the dominant ideology, as a result of excessive use, will be presupposed and it becomes natural and neutral. Therefore, critical discourse analysts are giving a serious effort to clarify and denaturalize the hidden power relations, ideological processes that exist in linguistic text. They attempt to awaken the unconscious of those people who contribute to the establishment and legitimization of ideology through their ignorance.

From CDA vantage-point, language does not possess power per se. It takes its power from the powerful people who make use of it. This is the very reason that why, in a majority of cases, critical linguists pick the view of deprived people and set out to analyze language

critically, because those who are in power are responsible of the social inequalities. Power does not derive from language; rather language is used to fight against power.

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Acknowledgments

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