

Aims of Critical Discourse Analysis

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What is Critical Discourse Analysis?

"Critical Discourse Analysis" (CDA) has become the general label for a special approach to the study of text and talk, emerging from critical linguistics, critical semiotics and in general from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse and communication. As is the case for many fields, approaches and subdisciplines in language and discourse studies, however, it is not easy to precisely delimit the special principles, practices, aims, theories or methods of CDA. Yet, work in CDA is usually characterized by the following criteria (for references, see the Bibliographical Note at the end of this paper):

- It is *problem- or issue-oriented*, rather than paradigm-oriented. Any theoretical and methodological approach is appropriate as long as it is able to effectively study relevant social problems, such as those of sexism, racism, colonialism and other forms of social inequality.
- CDA does not characterize a school, a field or a subdiscipline of discourse analysis, but rather an explicitly critical *approach, position or stance* of studying text and talk.
- In order to study social problems or issues adequately, CDA work is typically *inter- or multidisciplinary*, and especially focuses on the relations between discourse and society (including social cognition, politics and culture).
- Historically and systematically, CDA is part of a broad spectrum of (usually rather marginal or marginalized) *critical studies* in the humanities and the social

sciences, e.g., in sociology, psychology, mass communication research, law literature and political science.

- CDA-studies (may) pay attention to *all levels and dimensions* of discourse, viz. those of grammar (phonology, syntax, semantics), style, rhetoric, schematic organization, speech acts, pragmatic strategies, and those of interaction, among others.
- Many studies in CDA are however not limited to these purely "verbal" approaches to discourse, but also pay attention to *other semiotic dimensions* (pictures, film, sound, music, gestures, etc.) of communicative events.
- When studying the role of discourse in society, CDA especially focuses on (group) relations of *power, dominance* and *inequality* and the ways these are *reproduced* or *resisted* by social group members through text and talk.
- Much work in CDA deals with the discursively enacted or legitimated structures and strategies of dominance and resistance in social relationships of *class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, language, religion, age, nationality* or *world-region*.
- Much work in CDA is about the underlying *ideologies* that play a role in the reproduction of or resistance against dominance or inequality.
- Among the descriptive, explanatory and practical aims of CDA-studies is the attempt to *uncover, reveal* or *disclose* what is implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately obvious in relations of discursively enacted dominance or their underlying ideologies. That is, CDA specifically focuses on the strategies of *manipulation, legitimation, the manufacture of consent* and other discursive ways to influence the minds (and indirectly the actions) of people in the interest of the powerful.
- This attempt to uncover the discursive means of mental control and social influence implies a critical and oppositional stance *against the powerful and the elites*, and especially those who abuse of their power.
- On the other hand, studies in CDA try to formulate or sustain an overall perspective of *solidarity* with dominated groups, e.g., by formulating strategic proposals for the enactment and development of counter-power and counter-ideologies in practices of challenge and resistance.

It goes without saying that not all work in CDA is characterized by all these criteria, which are not merely descriptive of critical studies but also more or less programmatic: This is what CDA studies ideally should try to realize. However, these criteria provide the major traits of an approach that distinguishes it fairly well from other

work on discourse: CDA is essentially dealing with an oppositional study of the structures and strategies of elite discourse and their cognitive and social conditions and consequences, as well as with the discourses of resistance against such domination. In that respect, it goes beyond the usual methodological criteria of observational, descriptive and explanatory adequacy. Adding the criterion of *critical adequacy* presupposes social norms and values and introduces a social or political *ethics* (what we find wrong or right) within the scholarly enterprise as such. It is not surprising that such a view is often seen as "political" (biased) and hence as "unscientific" ("subjective") by scholars who think that their "objective" uncritical work does not imply a stance and hence a sociopolitical position, viz., a conservative one that serves to sustain the status quo. Critical Discourse Analysis, thus, emphasizes the fact that the scholarly enterprise is part and parcel of social and political life, and that therefore also the theories, methods, issues and data-selection in discourse studies are always political. Unlike other, implicitly political studies of discourse, CDA explicitly formulates its (oppositional) stance.

How to do Critical Discourse Analysis?

As much of the scholarly aftermath of the student-revolution of 1968 has shown, lofty ideals do not necessarily lead to good scholarship. This is also true for CDA, and it is therefore crucial to examine in detail *how* critical studies of text and talk may effectively realize the criteria and the tasks spelled out above. At a practical level, for instance, students typically will want to know "how to do CDA," which requires us to formulate proposals for successful research strategies. Theoretically and descriptively we need to explore which structures and strategies of text and talk to attend to in order to discover patterns of elite dominance or manipulation "in" texts. Or conversely, focussing on major social and political problems and issues such as sexism and racism, we need to detail *how* such forms of inequality are expressed, enacted, legitimated and reproduced by text and talk.

In sum, adequate CDA requires good theories of the role of discourse in the enactment and reproduction of social dominance and resistance. More than theories that merely claim descriptive or explanatory adequacy, however, successful CDA must be *effective*: Its conclusions, recommendations and other practical interventions must *work*. These are pretty tough criteria, and we should not have the illusion that they will be met soon. In that respect, CDA is not only a scholarly practice, but also a scholarly *program* of research.

Power, Access and Discourse

Since these few pages do not allow me to develop the many theoretical frameworks involved in an account of the discursive reproduction of dominance and resistance, I shall sketch a few prominent elements of such frameworks. A first major problem to attend to is to examine the nature of social *power* and power abuse, and in particular the ways dominance is *expressed* or *enacted* in text and talk. If social power is (roughly) defined as a form of *control*, of one group by another, if such control may extend to the *actions and the minds* of dominated group members, and if dominance or power abuse further implies that such control is in the *interest* of the dominant group, this means that dominant social group members may also exercise such control over text and talk. That is, discursively implemented dominance involves preferential *access* to text and context taken as a basis or *resource* of power, comparable to such social resources as wealth, income, a good job, position, status, knowledge and education.

Patterns of discourse control and access are indeed closely associated with social power. Thus, whereas ordinary people only have active access to, and control over such discourse genres as everyday conversations with family members, friends or colleagues, and more passive access to institutional (e.g. bureaucratic) discourse and media discourse, the elites have access to and control over a vast array of both informal as well as public and institutional forms of text and talk. Politicians have control over, e.g., governmental and parliamentary discourse, and preferential access to the mass media. Journalists have control over mass media discourse, and preferential access to a host of other forms of official text and talk, such as press conferences, press releases, reports, and so on. Scholars control academic discourse, such as lessons, textbooks, courses, and scholarly publications. Corporate managers control decision making discourse (e.g. boardroom meetings), corporate reports and many other forms of text and talk in business contexts. And judges not only control who can say what in the courtroom, but also have special access to such discourse genres as verdicts.

In sum, the elites have control over, or more or less preferential access to the most influential and important genres of discourse in society. Such access is defined in terms of their (powerful) social or institutional position or function, and vice versa, their control over or access to specific forms of institutional or public discourse sustain and reproduce their power in specific communicative situations. Such control, however, may well be legally or morally legitimate, e.g., when judges control verbal interaction in the courtroom or have the privilege to pronounce a verdict, when police officers interrogate a suspect or when a professor asks questions during an oral exam. Since CDA focuses on *abuse of power*, critical studies specifically focus on the (morally or legally) illegitimate

forms of control and access, e.g., when politicians, journalists, professors, managers or judges prevent others from legitimate forms of text or talk (censorship), or when they engage in talk or text that otherwise limits the freedom or rights of other participants, as when police officers threaten immigrant defendants with expulsion, or when sexist professors threaten female students with a bad grade if they do not consent in sexual favors.

Such patterns of control also extend to the more detailed structures of text and context. Thus context control may consist of control of "calling" a communicative event, making an appointment or setting the agenda. It may involve decisions about time and location, and who may participate in the event and in what role. Similarly, discursive control may apply to all levels and dimensions of text and talk, such as language variants, genres, topics, grammar, lexical style, rhetorical figures, overall organization, local and global coherence, speech acts, turn taking, politeness forms, and so on. Thus, in a parliamentary hearing, in the courtroom, in a police interrogation, during an oral exam or a tax audit, the institutional power holders may oblige participants to use a specific language variant, to answer questions, to provide information, and to use a polite style. In all these institutional communicative events such power may be abused to censor, intimidate or otherwise limit the freedom of less powerful participants. Detailed contextual and textual analysis is necessary to pinpoint the sometimes subtle strategies of such forms of discursive dominance.

Mind Control

Preferential access to, and control over discourse and its properties are forms of the direct enactment of social or institutional power. They allow specific social actors to engage in (verbal) action that is prohibited to others, or they may force or oblige others to engage in discourse or to use discourse properties as desired by the powerful actor, thereby limiting the freedom (and hence the power) of the less powerful.

Discourse, however, is not limited to verbal action, but also involves meaning, interpretation and understanding. This means that preferential access to public discourse or control over its properties (e.g., specific, preferred topics) may also affect the minds of others. That is, powerful social actors not only control communicative action, but indirectly also the minds of recipients. We know that these processes of "influence" are exceedingly complex: The fate of "effect research" in mass communication, or the fuzziness of critical notions such as "preferred meanings" or "manufacturing consent", all show that controlling the mind through text and talk is not a straightforward process. Research on attention, interpretation, comprehension, memory storage, and other aspects

of information processing defining "reception", has shown that these are a function of properties of the text as well as of properties of the context, and especially of the previous knowledge, attitudes or ideologies of recipients.

Yet, we all know that news reports, political propaganda, advertising, religious sermons, corporate directives or scholarly articles somehow influence the "minds" of readers and hearers: They convey knowledge, affect opinions or change attitudes. We also know that recipients, in a specific context and given their extant knowledge and beliefs, may disregard, reject, dis-believe, or otherwise mentally act in opposition to the intentions of powerful speakers or writers. They may have relative freedom to interpret and use discourses as they please and in their own best interests, as is also the case for media messages.

Despite such freedom, however, there are many constraints. These may be a function of the power, as well as the status or credibility, of the speaker/writer, as well as a function of the properties of text or talk: People may be lied to, manipulated, persuaded or otherwise influenced against their best interests, or in the interests of the powerful speaker/writer. People may lack alternative sources of information, or they may lack the knowledge of rules and strategies of grammar or discourse, they may not have sufficient knowledge to detect lies and manipulation, or strong counter-opinions or counter-ideologies to argue against and reject influential text and talk.

In sum, powerful speakers may control at least some parts of the minds of recipients. CDA studies the ways in which such influence and control of the mind is socially or morally illegitimate, e.g., when powerful speakers self-servingly control the minds of others in a way that is in the interest of the powerful. Since action is based on mental models of actors, models which in turn embody social knowledge and attitudes, influencing such models or the beliefs on which they are based may be an effective way to (indirectly) control the actions of other people.

For instance, if European politicians and media attribute major social problems (such as unemployment or a housing shortage) to immigration and immigrants, they may thus influence the beliefs of large segments of the majority, and thus indirectly the models that underlie racist stories or discriminatory action of dominant group members, as well as other expressions of prejudice and resentment that may again be used by the politicians to legitimate political decisions on immigration restrictions.

Again, all this is more or less known in the cognitive and social psychology of language, discourse and communication. What we hardly know, however, is what properties of speakers and especially of discourses are the preferred and most effective means of such forms of mind control. To be sure, political propagandists, advertisers,

journalists or professors have enough practical experiences to have some idea about what kind of messages will have what kinds of effects. They know how to effectively change the knowledge and opinions of recipients, and what kind of social actions will typically result from such mind control. However, such intuitive, practical knowledge is largely implicit, and few theories of communicative influence or discourse processing spell out in detail under which precise textual or contextual conditions, and for what recipients, specific forms of mind control will occur.

Besides spelling out the detailed forms of discourse control and access as described above, CDA needs to focus on the morally illegitimate forms of discursive mind control by the powerful. It needs to specify how powerful speakers control properties of text and talk in such a way that they are able to monitor the mind of recipients in their own interests. For instance, by emphasizing specific topics at the expense of others (e.g., through headlines or summaries) or by preventing others to address other topics, they may influence the overall (mental) model structures that are involved in discourse comprehension. In the example mentioned above, defining immigration as a problem or as a threat (e.g. as an "invasion of refugees") instead of as an economic and cultural contribution to the country or city, is one of the persuasive ways dominant speakers are able to mold the models of (white) citizens, if these have no alternative representations of immigration. In the same way, immigrants and their actions may be described by negative lexical terms or rhetorical figures. Conversely, negative actions of the elites (or of "our own group") may be de-emphasized topically, stylistically or rhetorically, whereas "our" positive actions and properties may be textually emphasized in interactional strategies of face keeping and positive self-presentation.

At all levels of text and talk we may thus postulate structures that preferentially affect the structure and content of mental models, as well as the more general and abstract forms of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes or ideologies that are shared by groups of recipients. For instance, strategic generalizations in discourse ("this always happens like that"; "they are all the same," etc.) may influence the generalization of ad hoc situation models to more abstract group attitudes and prejudices. Specific forms of local coherence may facilitate attributing negative properties to THEM (e.g. "lacking motivation") and positive ones to US (e.g., employment programs) in explanations of minority unemployment. Generally, rhetorical figures such as hyperboles and metaphors may similarly be used to emphasize OUR good properties and THEIR bad ones, whereas figures of mitigation may de-emphasize OUR negative properties and THEIR good ones. Narrative structures may be deployed to detail and structure models of events in specific ways, and generally to enhance credibility, for instance as forms of "personal experience

evidence" in argumentations that emphasize THEIR negative properties. Similar remarks hold for argumentative structures, specific speech acts (e.g., accusations vs. excuses) and many face-keeping strategies in talk. In sum, all other things being equal, we must assume that the vast array of different discourse structures not only function to strategically enact, express, signal, disguise, emphasize or legitimate, social position, and hence power, of speakers, but also to control the minds of recipients in desired ways. As soon as such control is in the interest of the powerful and against the interests of the less powerful (either as recipients or as people talked about), CDA has a task to examine the textual and mental structures and strategies involved in much more detail.

Conclusion

Critical Discourse Analysis, as described above, is a special approach in discourse analysis which focuses on the discursive conditions, components and consequences of power abuse by dominant (elite) groups and institutions. It examines patterns of access and control over contexts, genres, text and talk, their properties, as well as the discursive strategies of mind control. It studies discourse and its functions in society and the ways society, and especially forms of inequality, are expressed, represented, legitimated or reproduced in text and talk. CDA does so in opposition against those groups and institutions who abuse their power, and in solidarity with dominated groups, e.g., by discovering and denouncing discursive dominance, and by cooperating in the empowerment of the dominated.

Such lofty aims and tasks can be effectively realized only when CDA is a thorough theoretical and descriptive enterprise which eschews fuzziness, impressionism or superficiality. CDA therefore presupposes detailed theories of the structures and strategies of text and talk, and especially explicit theories about the roles and functions of such properties in social contexts and cognitive processing. As long as we lack such insights, also CDA will be merely a program and not an adequate social and scholarly practice. On the other hand, CDA has its own aims, research programs, theoretical frameworks and methods. It may focus on properties of language and discourse ignored elsewhere, as has been shown in feminist studies. It may emphasize the relevance of power and dominance in studying text and talk, or of social arrangements and the social order in general in their relation to language use and communication. It hardly needs to be stressed that such a complex and vast program is as yet only in its infancy. Most work in CDA still lies ahead of us.

Bibliographical Note

There as yet no general, book-length introductions to Critical Discourse Analysis. Against the combined background of Marxist and Neo-Marxist approaches to the links between language and social class, of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, of critical sociolinguistics, British Cultural Studies and functional linguistics, among other directions of research too vast to be bibliographically detailed here, one of the first collections of critical linguistics is that of British and Australian linguists *Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew (1979) (see also *Fowler, 1991; *Hodge & Kress, 1988; *Kress & Hodge, 1993), most of whom work in the functional framework of Halliday's systemic grammar and semiotics. Similarly in Britain, and within a more neo-marxist tradition, *Fairclough (1989, 1992) explores the relations between language and power. *Chilton (1985, 1988) specifically focused on critical studies of political discourse, e.g., about so-called "Nuke-speak" (for other more or less critical studies of political discourse, see also *Geis, 1987; *Seidel, 1988; *Wilson, 1990). More recently, such critical linguistics tends to be subsumed under the broader labels of Critical Discourse Analysis or Social Semiotics. In a continental tradition of critical sociolinguistics and text linguistics, Wodak and her associates focus on institutional power, male dominance, racism and anti-Semitism, among many other critical topics (among much other work, see, e.g., *Wodak, 1989; *Wodak, et al., 1987; *Wodak, et al., 1990). My own critical work in Amsterdam focuses on racism and on the media, and more recently on the relations between discourse and ideology (see, e.g., *van Dijk, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1993). A recent issue of *Discourse & Society* publishes several papers of these critical linguists and discourse analysts. Both in North America and in Europe, many papers and some book collections have focused on the study of language and power (*Kedar, 1987; *Kramarae, Schulz, & O'Barr, 1984; *Lakoff, 1990; *Ng & Bradac, 1993), but not always within a discourse-analytic framework. Similarly, also work on professional language and discourse often takes a critical position (*Fisher & Todd, 1986). Mainstream conversation analysis has as yet avoided taking critical positions, but new developments point to an increasing interest in linking the study of talk with social structure (*Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; *Drew & Heritage, 1992). Critical language and discourse studies would have been unthinkable without the powerful example of feminist work in the study of gender, language use and discourse (among many other studies, see, e.g., *Bull & Swan, 1992; *Lakoff, 1975; *Thorne, Kramarae & Henley, 1983; *Fisher & Todd, 1988). For further critical studies on discourse, see also the contributions in *Discourse & Society*. Whereas the references given here are all in English, there is of course a rich tradition of critical studies in Germany,

France, Italy, Spain and Latin America, among other countries, which however cannot be detailed here, except with reference to the work of *Pêcheux (1975; 1982) who inspired much work on language and ideology; of Foucault (e.g., *Foucault, 1980) who is often cited in work on discourse and power, and the work of Habermas (e.g., *Habermas 1991) on communication and its influence on critical pragmatics, among many others.

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