

Exploring the Methodological Affordances of Critical Discourse Analysis in Social Research

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Over the last few decades, the social sciences have witnessed a discursive surge triggered mainly by the linguistic turn, "a turn to attention given to language as something that does not simply carry meanings, but makes meanings" (Lawler, 2014, p. 3). This linguistic shift has spawned new possibilities of research in several scholarly disciplines including feminist discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005; Mills, 1997), linguistic anthropology (Duranti, 1997), sociolinguistics (Clark, 1996; Fasold, 1990), gender studies (Butler, 1990; Tannen, 1994), and discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Parker, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) among others. At the core of this intellectual movement is the view that language is a cultural resource (Ahearn, 2001), a mode of social action (Austin, 1962), and a social practice (Fairclough, 2010). According to this social constructionist view, language is not only used to construct various worldviews but is also deeply involved in the politics of representation (Hall, 1997). The way we represent the social world is inescapably ideological as it is always framed within a particular perspective. By ideology I mean those "representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9). It is this ideological aspect of language that is at the heart of my work as a researcher in critical discourse studies. Drawing on the methodological affordances of critical discourse analysis (CDA), I seek to explore and understand the different ways language is

ideologically implicated in the (re)production, transformation, and maintenance of unequal social and power relations. The purpose of this paper is to share with fellow researchers and graduate students who are intending to use CDA in their research studies some of the key considerations to keep in mind as they go about designing their own CDA framework. In doing so, my discussion shall be informed by insights from my doctoral dissertation (work in progress) and from my previous research (i.e., Kharbach, 2020).

The first important step in designing a CDA framework is to provide a clear definition of what discourse means in your research context. Discourse is a context-dependent concept (similar in function to the concepts of terrorism and ideology) that is used in everyday communication yet is hard to define. For instance, "sociologists, political scientists and literary critics generally have different understandings of the term than do linguists" (Chilton & Wodak, 2005, p. xiii). Part of the definitional problems of discourse resides in its semantic fluidity and its interdisciplinarity. Disciplines as distant as social psychology, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, linguistics, among others, all draw on some form of discourse in their investigation of the social and cultural phenomena. While it is an inescapably elusive concept, discourse, however, implies "a general idea that language is structured according to different patterns that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life, familiar examples being 'medical discourse' and 'political discourse'" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1). Along similar lines, Bastow and Martin (2003) describe discourse as the "structured pattern of meanings that frame our perception of, and organises our activity in, the social and natural world" (pp. 7-8). Unlike structuralists who approach discourse from a purely linguistic perspective viewing it as "language above the clause" (Stubbs, 1983, p. 1), I draw on a social constructionist approach that views discourse as a social construct

that constitutes and is constituted by various aspects of social reality (Fairclough, 2003, 2010). In this sense, discourse is considered a form of social action (Austin, 1962) and a "particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1). It is a form of "social semiotic" that enables us to create, interpret, and understand meanings within their socio-cultural contexts (Halliday, 1978).

The second step in designing a CDA framework is to make sure that your analysis is a critical discourse analysis and not merely a descriptive commentary on the content of a particular text.ⁱ According to Fairclough (2010), an analytic study is considered a CDA as long as it meets all of the following criteria:

1. It is not just analysis of discourse (or more concretely texts), it is part of some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process.
2. It is not just general commentary on discourse, it includes some form of systematic analysis of texts.
3. It is not just descriptive; it is also normative. It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them. (pp. 10-11)

Critical discourse analysis approaches the analysis of social phenomena from a discursive critical perspective. It is "fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak, 2001a, p. 2). CDA practitioners analyze discourse in order to uncover the "structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events" that are responsible for the (re)production of social inequality (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 250). Notions of power, ideology, hegemony, and dominance are key macro analytical concepts within any CDA project. These macro concepts

are embedded in generic social and cultural structures and are therefore both constitutive and constituted of discursive practices realized in micro actions (e.g., in everyday conversations) (Fairclough, 2010). As such, critical discourse analysis is a normative analysis which is, more or less, socio-politically motivated but does not necessarily adhere to any specific political agenda (Mills, 1997). It simply seeks "to produce interpretations and explanations of areas of social life which both identify the causes of social wrongs and produce knowledge which could (in the right conditions) contribute to righting or mitigating them" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 8). In this regard, reflexivity is key because "unlike other discourse analysts, critical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit sociopolitical stance: they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). Reflexivity implies that CDA practitioners be aware of their methodological and theoretical biases, identify their subjectivities and be explicitly cognizant of their positionality vis-à-vis the research topic. Also, a critical discourse analyst should always strive for validity in their analysis. A valid discourse analysis is one that "explains things that any future investigation of the same data, or related data, will have to take seriously into account" (Gee, 1999, p. 185).

According to Jørgensen and Philips (2002), critical discourse analysis is both a theory and a method. At the theoretical level, every CDA is informed by a language theory and a social theory (Fairclough, 2010). Identifying the language theory that informs your CDA methodology is an important step in this regard. For instance, the CDA framework I developed for my doctoral research is informed by systemic functional linguistics (language theory) and social constructionism (social theory). Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) views language as a system of interconnected networks of meaning and views text as "the product of ongoing selection in a very

large network of systems" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 23). The grammar of a language, therefore, is not a structural inventory of prescriptive rules but a system of functional choices that "represent an aspect of the meaning potential of the language" (p. 20). Language, from an SFL perspective, is "a resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic choices" (p. 23). The importance of SFL in CDA studies is that it highlights the social aspects of language and analyzes the functions language plays in social interactions (i.e., ideational, textual, and interpersonal). SFL also provides CDA practitioners with an arsenal of linguistic tools to analyze the functional workings of language.ⁱⁱ

Social constructionism is an epistemological stance towards knowledge construction and the means through which we make sense of the world. Crotty (1998) posits that "all reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed" (p. 54). For constructionists, semiosis (meaning making) is a social process in which culture and shared understanding play a decisive role in shaping our knowledge of the world. Social constructionism has an immanent critical character in that it accommodates different versions of reality and does not believe in a single Truth (with a capital letter), hence its relevance to CDA research. While there are multiple frames of meanings and interpretations of social phenomena, as constructionists argue, some of these frames become hegemonic resulting in various modes of manipulation, oppression, and injustice (Crotty, 1998). It is, therefore, the task of critical discourse analysts to untangle these discursive networks of unequal power relations and expose hegemonic discourses and ideologies. It is important to note here that critical discourse analysis goes beyond the mere description of the workings of language, which is what discourse analysis does, to a critical engagement with the social phenomenon under question. CDA is a form of intervention in the social world. As Gee (1999) argues, critical discourse analysts "want to and, perhaps, intervene

in, social, or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world” (p. 9).

At the methodological level, CDA, due to its interdisciplinary nature (Fairclough, 2010), is multi-methodical and involves a triangulation of methods. Since its early beginnings in the last decades of the 20th century, CDA has always operated within interdisciplinary boundaries gleaning insights from various disciplines including linguistics, sociology, history, ethnography, social psychology, among others. According to Fairclough (2010):

CDA is an interdisciplinary form of analysis, or as I shall prefer to call it a transdisciplinary form. What this term entails is that ‘dialogues’ between disciplines, theories and frameworks which take place in doing analysis and research are a source of theoretical and methodological developments within the particular disciplines, theories, and frameworks in dialogue-including CDA itself. (p. 4)

In this sense, CDA is an "integrationist research project...[where] no single discipline can satisfactorily address any given problem on its own" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 8). The textual level in CDA is but an entry level to a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon under study. It is through this 'transdisciplinary dialogue' that analytical categories of CDA are developed (Fairclough, 2005). A CDA framework is composed of multiple levels of analysis. The number and nature of levels of analysis vary from one critical discourse analytic study to the other. The main factor that determines which levels to include in the analytic framework is the research questions. But generally speaking, critical discourse analysis engages at least two forms of analysis: a micro-level analysis which deals with language or textual analysis, and a macro social analysis. The following are two illustrative examples drawn from my own research practice showing how CDA framework is constructed

in accordance with the analytic necessities of the underlying research questions.

The first example is based on my current doctoral research in which I analyze the discursive construction of terrorist identity as framed in the textbooks of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The purpose is to understand whether there is a single coherent ISIS identity or multiple models of identities, and to identify the discursive processes involved in the ideological formation of this(these) identity(ies). Identity here is viewed as a discursive construct produced, perpetuated and transformed through discourse. As such, the main research question informing this study is: What identity models are made available through ISIS' curricular texts and how are these models discursively constructed? To answer this question, I developed a two-level CDA framework. The first level is discursive and is mainly concerned with the analysis of the rhetorical schemes and discursive strategies used in ISIS textbooks. Discussion at this level is informed by the CDA works of Fairclough (2010) and Wodak (2015). The historical level is concerned with the analysis of the historical (and religious) topoi and narratives employed in the construction of ISIS identity(ies) using Wodak's (1996, 2001b, 2015) discourse-historical approach (DHA). According to Wodak (1996), DHA "attempts to analyse discourses by attending to their historical, sociopolitical and setting-specific contexts" (p. 109).

The second example comes from one of my recent research papers where I analyzed the ideological construction of the Gulf crisis in the headlines of Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera news websites (Kharbach, 2020). The analytic framework I designed for this study comprises two levels: textual and socio-cognitive. At the textual level, I examined the following analytic units: lexicon (the terminology used by both websites in the lexicalization of the crisis), word associations, activation processes, transitivity patterns, use of

quotations, and representation of news actors. Findings from the textual level are then socio-cognitively interpreted using Van Dijk's Mental Model theory and his Ideological Square conceptⁱⁱⁱ (2006, 1995) and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory.

In conclusion, critical discourse analysis is a theoretical and analytical framework with huge analytical potential particularly in the realm of the social sciences. It has been successfully applied to the study of various topics across different disciplines including gender studies (Baxter, 2002; Cameron, 1992; Lazar, 2005), social psychology (Parker, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Van Dijk, 2018), identity studies (De Cellia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999; Gee, 2000; Ricento, 2003), media studies (Chouliaraki, 2007; Van Dijk, 1988, 1991; Wodak, 2015), education (Christie, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Luke, 1995; Peters & Burbules, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Rogers, Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O-Garro, 2005), among several others. As CDA continues to make inroads in various spheres of social research, it becomes incumbent upon academics and researchers to extend the boundaries of critical discourse analysis and use it to investigate new topics and approach old ones from new perspectives.

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ⁱ Discourse analysis is a general analytic framework that includes a number of approaches including critical discourse analysis, conversational analysis, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, speech act analysis, among others. Each of these approaches has its own analytical focus and methodology. See Schiffrin (1994) to learn more about the difference between these approaches.

ⁱⁱ For more on systemic functional linguistics see Eggins (2004), Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Martin, Matthiessen, and Painter (1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ideological Square is an analytic framework that conceptualizes ideological discourse in binary oppositions: Us vs Them, in-group vs out-group. According to Van Dijk (1998), Ideological Square comprises four main strategies that explain how in-group bias and out-group depreciation are discursively constructed. These strategies are:

- 1 Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us.
- 2 Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them.
- 3 Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them.
- 4 Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us. (p. 267)