

## Critical Discourse Analysis: The State of the Art



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### Introduction

When using language, the speaker or writer should consider both sociocultural and functional aspects of language. Based on these dimensions the speaker or writer, considering contextual elements such as social, political, and cultural context, uses appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and discourse to fulfill the language function in an appropriate way in order to convey his/ her intention (Atkins, 2002). Schaffner (1996) said that any political action is prepared, accompanied and controlled, and influenced by language. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) helps us to uncover the latent meaning in a text behind special words and structure (Atkins, 2002). This paper has tried to figure out the theoretical underpinnings of CDA and its status from the past to the present.

CDA is related to the concepts of manipulation, hidden ideology, hidden meanings, bias, power of language, discursive structures, etc. It is an approach, which equips us with different models and devices to demystify the hidden meanings in different kinds of discourses. Generally, CDA is concerned with discourse in forming and being formed by social-political practices (Fairclough, 2001). It aims to raise the readers' consciousness of the power of language in changing the events and influencing the readers' views. CDA practitioners claim that discourse reveals and contributes to power relations, inequalities, dominance, and discrimination (Fairclough, 2001).

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CDA has its roots in Critical Linguistics (CL), which appeared in the University of East Anglia in the 1970s, by linguists such as Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew who were interested in the relations between language, power, and ideology. These linguists declared a “critical and emancipator agenda for linguistic analysis” (Bloomaert, 2005, p. 22). Their seminal works are Hodge and Kress (1979) and, Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew (1979). Critical linguists' works were based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and social – semiotic linguistics of Halliday (1994). CL believes that “discourse does not merely reflect social processes and structures, but affirms, consolidates, and in this way, reproduces existing social structures” (Teo, 2002, p. 363). Critical linguists were also interested in ‘ideological levels of meaning’. Richardson (2002) states that “one of the tasks of critical linguists is to make present- but- concealed meanings visible” (p. 361).

Fowler (2002) mentions that “in critical linguistics, all representation is mediated, molded by the value-systems that are ingrained in the medium (language in this case) used for representation; it challenges common sense by pointing out that something could have been represented some other way, with a very different significance” (p. 347).

Fjørtoft (2013) states that CDA is “about uncovering complexities, about looking into how ideologies operate in creating meaning and social realities. It should identify how dominating ideologies guide what can be said and what cannot be said in a given discursive event and how dominating ideologies are challenged” (p. 74).

### **Review**

Following this, CDA as a research paradigm emerged in the early 1990s in a meeting at the University of Amsterdam where Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, and Ruth Wodak had the opportunity to discuss their different theories and methodologies of discourse analysis and specifically CDA. The publication of *Language and Power* (1989) by Fairclough is considered to be the landmark of CDA’s start (Bloomaert, 2005).

Moreover, the publications of ‘*Language, Power, and Ideology*’ by Ruth Wodak (1989) and ‘*Discourse and Society*’ by Teun van Dijk (1990) have been very influential in the growth and extension of CDA to many different disciplines. Van Dijk (1998) described CDA as follows:

Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced,

and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take an explicit position and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. (p. 1)

According to Sheykhoulislami (2001), recent studies in CDA are different from earlier works in CL in that the recent works have considered the role of the audience's interpretations and have extended their analysis to the intertextual analysis. One of the major characteristics of CDA is that it is not a single, homogenous method or approach but a paradigm of research, a program, or as Wodak (2001) suggests a 'school', with leading scholars who have different backgrounds of their own and have their own approaches with different analytical tools. However, all of them address the same issues and agree on certain principles of analysis (Bloomaert, 2005). According to Wodak (2001), this *heterogeneous* quality of CDA "allows for open discussions and debates for changes in the aims and goals and for innovation" (p. 8).

Racism, gender inequality, sexism, xenophobia, colonialism, employment, war, nuclear weapons, and nuclear power (Fowler, 2002) are among the topics in which most critical discourse analysts are interested. They also focus on different types of public discourse: newspapers, advertisements, political propaganda, official documents, regulations, and institutional discourse.

Discourse for 'critically-minded discourse analysts' (Teo, 2002, p. 363) is both shaped by and shaping the social processes. Discourse for these scholars is "a major instrument of power and control and critical discourse analysts, unlike Chomsky, feel that it is indeed part of their professional role to investigate, reveal and clarify how power and discriminatory value are inscribed in and mediated through the linguistic tools" (Coulthard & Coulthard, 1996, p. xi). Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 271) provide eight main tents of CDA as follows:

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

CDA supports those groups in society who suffer from inequality, injustice, prejudice, and discrimination, those who are less powerful, disadvantaged and dominated, those who are usually the minorities, and those whose minds and discourses are controlled. On the other hand, it also analyzes the language use of the dominant groups, those in power, and those responsible for the existence of these situations. CDA scholars also aim to recognize how these "situations are reproduced, legitimated or enacted through discourse and, hence, they analyze discourse in relation to the wide social and historical contexts in which it occurs or put it another way round. CDA analyses social life in its discursive aspects, aimed at providing social criticism based on linguistic evidence" (Hernandez, 2008, p. 162). To be practical and influential, it goes further and considers its final goal to be a "wake-up call" (Toolan, 2002, p. xxii) and to raise the people's consciousness about the deceptive use of language and to change the status quo. In Kress' (1996) words:

Critical studies of language, Critical Linguistics (CL), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have from the beginning had a political project: broadly speaking that of altering inequitable distributions of economic, cultural, and political goods in contemporary societies. The intention has been to bring a system of excessive inequalities of power into crisis by uncovering its workings and its effects through the analysis of potent cultural objects-texts and thereby to help in achieving a more equitable social order (p. 15).

Nowadays, CDA has become a known research program that has raised the interest and attention of many scholars in different disciplines: applied linguistics, language and literacy studies, sociology, politics, and media studies. Even in more remote disciplines such as legal studies, medicine, and psychology CDA has become popular (Toolan, 2002, p. xxi).

SFL is a systematic, detailed study of language, which is concerned with language as a whole and not with decontextualized sentences. It focuses on the meaning and the choices people make when making meaning. According to Bloor and Bloor (2007), SFL stresses the importance of social context in the production and development of language both historically and in terms of meaning in individual discourse events (p. 2). It is in general a study of how language is dependent on the context in which it occurs.

Egins (2004), who provides a simpler introduction to Halliday's grammar, states that "from a systemic perspective, text analysis is not an interpretive but an explanatory activity". She mentions

that “while the interpretation of a text would aim to uncover and state what a text means, the systemic analysis of a text aims to uncover and state how a text means” (p. 329).

Halliday (1994) mentions twenty-one possible applications of SFL, the most general application of systemic linguistics is that of explaining “why a text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is” (Halliday, 1994, p. xxiv). He also states that the aim of his SFL is to “construct a grammar for the purpose of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English” (1994, p. xv).

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) make distinctions between three metafunctions of language: the ideational or representational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the textual metafunction. These are simultaneous strands of meanings that are expressed in clause structures.

The ideational metafunction of language is the one that deals with what occurs in the real world.

By this metafunction, people express what has happened to them or is occurring in the world. The linguistic devices which a person has when he/she wants to describe the events of the world are what Halliday’s ideational metafunction explores.

The second metafunction of language is concerned with the ways social identities and the relations between people are shaped (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Moreover, in this metafunction “the ways people express their attitudes, opinions, and judgments are attended to. Textual function of language which is also called the ‘relevance’ or the ‘enabling’ metafunction” (Eggins, 2004, p. 298) makes the constituents of a text organized and ordered. *Theme* system is central in the textual metafunction. The theme is “the point of departure” of the message, it is the element with which the clause is positioned and oriented within its context. Rheme is the remainder of the message, in which the theme is developed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 64).

Having reviewed the related literature about major CDA scholars, their works and contributions to CDA and also different practical CDA studies, now devoting this part to the criticisms of CDA seems to be in order.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The first major critique of CDA, to begin with, belongs to Widdowson, who has been very strident in his taking issue with some of the basic principles of CDA. Widdowson (2002) claimed that there is a great deal of conceptual confusion in CDA. One is related to the concept of 'discourse', being fashionable but so vague: "discourse is something everybody is talking about but

without knowing with any certainty just what it is: in vogue and vague” (Widdowson, 2002, p. 132). The other confusion is related to the distinction between analysis and interpretation, he said. He stated that CDA is an ideological interpretation, not an analysis and it would be better called critical discourse interpretation and, in this sense, it is a contradiction in terms' (p. 134). Widdowson (2002) also mentioned that CDA's commitment to political positions undermines the validity of CDA as an analysis and that CDA analysts arrive at the results of their analyses with their preconceptions and not with a text feature. In the end, he also made some explanations about the authenticity and the appropriate language for learning.

In response to Widdowson's (2002) criticisms of CDA, Fairclough (2002) stated that Widdowson has seriously misrepresented the fundamental issues in CDA. He mentioned that the confusion of discourse as a term is "illegitimately laid at the door of CDA" since this confusion is attributed to other scholars in different fields. Fairclough (2002) also made some points about Widdowson's remarks on the political commitment of CDA as 'its cardinal sin', mentioning that CDA is clear about its political commitment:

Practitioners of CDA are indeed generally characterized by explicit political commitments. They are people who see things wrong with their societies, see language as involved in what is wrong, and are committed to making changes through forms of intervention involving language—e.g., by working on critical language awareness programs for schools, which can point learners towards the possibility of self-conscious language change as a form of social change (p.151).

Toolan (2002) also made some criticisms of CDA. However, he is not that much strident as Widdowson is in his taking issue with some of the basic principles of CDA. Toolan, being the editor of the invaluable collection: *Critical Discourse Analysis: Critical concepts in Linguistics* (2002) emphasized that he is "very much more in favor of CDA than against it" (p. 220). His major points about the shortcomings of CDA are: first, the difference between description and interpretation should be more clarified, secondly, CDA “needs to be more critical and more demanding of the text linguistics it uses” (p. 238), thirdly, CDA should provide more thorough and stronger evidence for its argumentations. Toolan (2002) also pointed to the fact that CDA seems to be often more difficult and complicated than it needs to be and that is so diverse that a call for standardization of its method is badly needed. He claimed that this standardization makes CDA "more teachable and more learnable” (p. 236).

Bloomaert (2005) is another scholar who after reviewing other critics' comments on CDA, sufficed to point to three *big* problems with CDA. The first problem in his view is related to 'the linguistic bias' in CDA and more specifically to its emphasis on Halliday's (1994) SFL as a criterion for a work to be considered 'critical'. He mentioned that emphasizing linguistic analysis means that CDA scholars are constrained only to the available discourse, which is in front of them, and that they do not pay attention to the absent discourse, which can tell them a lot about the conditions under which the discourse is produced. These neglected conditions include the answer to “by whom? when? for what purpose? and who has access to them and who doesn't?” (p. 35). Bloomaert states that “my point will be that if we wish to understand contemporary forms of inequality in and through language, we should look inside language as well as outside it, in society, and both aspects of analysis are not separable” (p. 35). His second point is about CDA's "closure to particular kinds of societies.

He mentioned that major CDA scholars such as Fairclough, van Dijk, Wodak, and Chilton have been very influential in the development of CDA, however, their analysis of discourse is limited in some way, since they consider only the discourse of their own societies which are "highly integrated, Late Modern, and post-industrial, densely semiotized First-World" (p. 35). He stated that the world is larger than Europe and the U.S and that for example the discourse of a small village in Central Tanzania is different from that of these societies but CDA has overlooked this important fact.

The third problem he found with CDA is the absence of a sense of history in CDA. He calls this "its closure to a particular time frame". In explaining this problem, he mentioned that CDA needs to take into account this fact that issues which CDA considers to be its major focus, namely power and inequality are not restricted to the present time and we need to take history seriously, for part of the critical punch of what we do may ultimately lie in our capacity to show that what looks new is not new at all, but the outcome of a particular process which is systemic, not accidental.

Finally, it comes to the most practical part of this review of literature on CDA. This part is devoted to the studies which were conducted on the pedagogical implications of CDA for EFL contexts. They mostly share the view that CDA can be a means for EFL teachers to improve at least the learners' critical reading skills since as Boston (2002) puts it “gone are the days in ELT when grammar patterns, along with some complimentary vocabulary, were seen to be total of what

students needed to be taught” (p. 1). Koupae (2010) investigated the effect of using CDA to raise EFL students’ Critical Language Awareness (CLA). The participants in this study were sixty BA students with an intermediate or advanced proficiency level of English language who was studying English at the University of Kashan. She stated that these levels of proficiency were opted for since teaching CDA tools to students with lower levels may not be appropriate to make use of CDA analytical tools in their reading classes, as “CDA requires at least some ability to distinguish differences between such things as grammar patterns or synonyms” (p. 36). Three paired news articles with the same or similar subjects were given to these students to detect the hidden meaning in these texts once before and once after teaching them some CDA analytical tools from van Dijk’s (1998) framework. Then the participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire to reveal any change in their opinions about English language learning or “any increase in their motivations to learn English” (p. 39). After the analyses of the students before and after the instruction of CDA were examined and their responses to the questions were investigated, it was found that the CLA of about 90% of students improved and their motivation to learn English also increased after they became familiar with CDA in learning English.

Asgharzadeh (2009) investigated the effect of teaching critical reading through CDA on some female high school students’ reading comprehension in Kermanshah. To this aim, a proficiency test was given to one hundred students then fifty students with higher grades were selected as the participants of this study. These selected participants were divided into two groups: experimental and control. Students in the control group were taught reading as it is usual in EFL reading classes, but students in the experimental group were taught reading making use of CDA tools. After this period of instruction, two reading tests were given to the two groups. The results of the tests showed that the students familiar with CDA got higher marks than to those students in the control group.

In his project on the application of CDA to foreign language classes, there were thirteen students from the Teacher Training College. At first, they worked on critical reading of advertisements and then longer magazine articles which they chose according to their own interests. They worked in groups and presented their conclusions to the whole class. During this phase of research, all the learners admitted that using CDA approaches to reading classes made their reading more interesting and motivating. After this, learners were also said to undertake a critical reading project

by themselves outside the classroom. The result showed that these students were able to carry out a careful, detailed analysis of the texts. At the end of the academic term, students were asked to comment on the efficiency of CDA on the development of their foreign language reading skills. Their comments indicated that most of the students (nine out of thirteen) found it advantageous, interesting, and motivating.

Cots (2006) is another study on the application of CDA to EFL classrooms. He stated that: Introduction of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in language classes does not necessarily involve a change in teaching methods or techniques. Rather, CDA offers a new perspective on language, which considers that language use (a) is questionable and problematic (b) reflects social/ideological processes, and (c) constitutes, at the same time, a resource to act upon those processes. (p. 336)

Cots (2006) showed that the choices of the teachers and material developers can be critically investigated in the EFL classes with the company of the learners to develop the learners' capacity to be critical readers of their world. Fjørtoft (2013) believes that in CDA 'to be critical' "should not be understood as mere fault-finding, or something which is true/false, or that one discourse is better than another.

Davis (2015) stated that assessing the perceived effectiveness of learning objectives through CDA can produce analytics from language, discourse practices, and discursive events although using the CDA framework is effective but not efficient for analysis of data. In order to produce a more efficient analysis, an instrument can be developed which may provide results in a timelier manner. Sriwimon and Zilli (2017) suggested that a systematic data collection with a large sample as an adequate representative sample can minimize or even eliminate the potential bias in data selection. It can contribute to enhancing the ability to describe texts, and more importantly convince the reader regarding the stereotypes in politics, which are reproduced and initiated through the language used in media.

In spite of all these criticisms, CDA is still one of the high-standing fields of research available for investigating the relationship between language and society and language and ideology (Fairclough, 2001; van Dijk, 1998; Wodak, 2001). CDA has also proved itself insightful in giving a consciousness-raising about the power of language in changing the perspectives on events in many CDA studies as were reviewed in the previous section (e.g. KhosraviNik, 2010; Yaghoobi,

2009; Ghiasian, 2006). It can be concluded that the only way we, humans begin, as seekers of truth, can get access to the truth of the events around us is that we have to approve the reality from different perspectives, take every variable into account, and examine the true value of the utterances and the source of information which we encounter in our daily lives.

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