

Critical Discourse Analysis

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What Is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to studying language in relation to power and social issues. It examines how discourse (spoken and written communication) reflects, reinforces, or challenges social structures, power relationships, and ideologies.

CDA researchers take an explicit position, wanting to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality.

CDA goes beyond simply analyzing the words themselves; it also looks at the context in which the language is used. This includes things like the speaker's and audience's social identities, the historical and cultural background, and the broader power structures at play.

CDA recognizes that language use, discourse, verbal interaction, and communication belong to the micro-level of the social order, while power, dominance, and inequality between social groups are terms that belong to a macro-level of analysis. One of the tasks of CDA is to bridge this micro-macro gap.

For example, CDA might study how the structure of a racist speech in parliament (micro) contributes to the reproduction of racism in society (macro).

There are a number of characteristics of CDA research, including:

1. **Power dynamics:** Instead of just looking at the words and grammar, CDA tries to understand how power dynamics shape the way we use language. CDA is inspired by philosopher Michel Foucault, who argued that language reflects how power is used in society.
2. **Social problems:** CDA researchers are interested in how language plays a role in social issues like discrimination, inequality, and abuse of power. For example, CDA might look at how politicians use language to divide people or how the media portrays certain groups in a negative light.
3. **Context of language:** To understand a text or conversation, CDA takes into account the social, historical, and cultural background. Imagine trying to understand a joke from a hundred years ago – you would need to know about the culture and events of that time to get it.
4. **Practical relevance:** CDA is not just about analyzing language for the sake of it. Researchers want their findings to be useful in addressing real-world problems. For example, CDA research could help develop strategies to combat hate speech or promote more inclusive language.

5. **Critical and questioning:** CDA researchers take a critical stance, questioning assumptions about language and power. They are skeptical of claims that language is neutral and objective. Instead, they see language as a tool that can be used to reinforce or challenge power structures.

Power As Control

CDA recognizes that language is not neutral but reflects and reinforces existing power structures within society.

Language shapes society because by controlling discourse one can control how another person thinks.

Dominant groups, often holding positions of authority in institutions like government, media, or education, use discourse to maintain their control and influence.

CDA researchers often examine how dominant groups control the text and context of public discourse to control the minds and actions of less powerful groups. CDA also examines how the properties of discourse used by members of powerful groups, such as using formal language or controlling turn-taking, can be a form of power abuse.

Dominant groups exert control over discourse in various ways:

- **Access to Discourse:** Dominant groups have more access to influential genres of discourse. For example, professors control scholarly discourse, teachers control educational discourse, journalists control media discourse, lawyers control legal discourse, and politicians control policy and other public political discourse.
- **Control of Context:** Dominant groups can determine the time and place of communication, the participants and their roles, and what knowledge or opinions those participants should or should not have.
- **Control of Text and Talk:** Dominant groups can control the genre, speech acts, topics, and even the style and meaning of discourse. For example, a teacher or judge may require a direct answer, and not a personal story or argument.

- **Formal language:** The use of formal language can be a tool for powerful groups to assert their dominance and create distance. By using specialized jargon or complex language, they can make it difficult for those outside the group to understand or participate in the conversation. For instance, professionals in fields such as law, education, or academia may use technical language to solidify their authority and control access to information.
- **Controlling Turn-Taking:** Powerful speakers may abuse their position by dictating who speaks and when in a conversation. For example, a police officer might use their authority to demand a direct answer from a suspect during an interrogation, preventing them from explaining their side of the story.

Examples

- CDA could be used to examine how politicians use language to divide people into “us” and “them”. Or, it could investigate how certain words and phrases in a news article about immigration can shape readers’ opinions on the topic.
- CDA could investigate how certain words and phrases in a news article about immigration can shape readers’ opinions on the topic.
 - For example, CDA research on dominant discourse on immigration shows that headlines and leads of news reports express semantic macrostructures (main topics) as defined by the journalists and may give rise to preferred macrostructures of mental models.
 - Negative actions of immigrants or minorities tend to be enhanced by their salient expression on the front page and in headlines defining immigration as an invasion of aliens.

Hegemony and Consent

Hegemony, a concept developed by Gramsci, centers on how dominant groups achieve and maintain power not primarily through coercion, but by gaining the consent of subordinate groups.

This is achieved, in part, through persuasive discourse that effectively obscures the dominant group’s power.

This concept of hegemony is closely tied to the idea of ideology in the Marxist tradition, which posits that dominant social classes employ ideology to present their interests as universal truths.

The more effectively dominant groups can present their values and beliefs as common sense, the more successfully they can rule through this manufactured “consent”.

Macro versus Micro

Critical discourse analysis examines both big picture stuff (macro) and smaller details (micro) to understand how language connects to power, especially how powerful groups use language to control others.

Macro is like looking at a whole forest. Think about things like laws, media, and education systems. These big systems can be unfair to certain groups of people. For example, laws about immigration might be unfair to immigrants.

Micro is like looking at one tree in the forest. Think about the specific words, phrases, and grammar people use in conversations, articles, and speeches. For instance, if a politician keeps interrupting his opponent during a debate, that’s a micro example of power in action.

Macro and micro levels of society are not separate things but work together in everyday life. They form a unified whole, with each level influencing the other.

CDA wants to understand how the whole forest (macro) affects each tree (micro) and vice versa. Imagine a news article about a protest.

- **Macro:** CDA would ask: Who owns the newspaper? What political views do they usually support? Are they likely to be biased for or against the protesters?
- **Micro:** CDA would analyze the words used to describe the protesters (e.g., “rioters” vs. “concerned citizens”), the quotes included (whose voices are amplified?), and the overall tone of the article (sympathetic or critical?).

By looking at both the big picture and the details, CDA helps us understand how language is used to maintain power and how this affects people’s lives.

How To Perform CDA

Norman Fairclough's CDA provides a framework for understanding how language functions as a form of social practice, intertwined with power relations, and shaped by broader historical and cultural contexts.

This approach offers valuable tools for analyzing how discourse constructs, maintains, and potentially challenges social inequalities within various social contexts.

Description

The first dimension involves analyzing the text itself, examining features like linguistic choices, sequencing, layout, and how meaning is conveyed through these elements. This dimension aligns with the idea that language choices are not accidental but reflect broader social and historical influences.

- **Formal properties:** Consider the text's formal properties, such as its linguistic features.
- **Language choices:** Analyze the language used, including specific word choices and phrases, to reveal the text's attitude towards its subject. For instance, describing the president as "the goofball in the Oval Office" indicates a sarcastic and critical attitude, while "the leader of the free world" conveys respect.
- **Grammar:** Examine grammatical structures like verb tenses, active or passive construction, and the use of imperatives and questions, as these can reveal aspects of intended meaning.
- **Text structure:** Analyze how the text is structured, including its layout, the sequencing and juxtapositioning of elements, and how these elements create emphasis or build a narrative.
- **Genre:** Consider the text's genre and its associated conventions and communicative aims. For example, analyze how a text aligns with the conventions of political speeches or tabloid newspaper articles.

Interpretation

The second step explores the relationship between the text and interaction. This stage focuses on the social processes of text production and reception.

- **Production and reception:** Analyze how the text was produced and how different audiences might receive it. This involves looking at the text as a resource in the process of interpretation.
- **Social context:** Consider the social context in which the text was created and received, as this context shapes how the text is understood. For example, the interpretation of the Standard Bank's Domestic Promise Plan advertisement might differ between South African and Australian audiences because they draw on different social discourses.
- **Cognitive processes:** Consider the cognitive processes involved in interpreting the text. This involves examining how the text might mystify the events being described to influence the reader's understanding.
- **Assumed interpretations:** Analyze any assumptions the text makes, as these can reveal implicit biases. For example, a story beginning with "The savages attacked the unarmed settlers at dawn" presents a biased interpretation of indigenous populations compared to one that starts with "The natives and settlers made a peaceful arrangement".

Explanation

The final stage connects the interaction to the broader socio-historical conditions that shape both the production and reception of the text.

- **Social and historical context:** Analyze the text's relationship to the broader social and historical context to understand how it might contribute to social change or reinforce existing power structures.
- **Power dynamics:** Consider how the text is implicated in relations of power. Ask questions like: How is the text positioned? Whose interests are served or negated? What are the consequences of this positioning?.
- **Cultural traditions:** Analyze how the text reveals or shapes cultural values and traditions within a specific community or culture. This involves examining how the text's creator feels about these traditions and how they influence the culture's development.
- **Social effects:** Examine the social effects of the production and interpretation of the text. This involves understanding the consequences of the language used and how it might impact different social groups.

By engaging in these three stages of analysis—description, interpretation, and explanation—CDA seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language functions within its social context and how it contributes to the maintenance or transformation of power relations.

Research in Critical Discourse Analysis

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality research examines how language contributes to the creation and maintenance of social inequalities between men and women.

This research explores how gender is constructed and maintained through talk in various contexts, including families, friendships, and workplaces.

Researchers are increasingly interested in the ideologies underpinning everyday interactions, particularly how dominant ideologies of gender and sexual behavior influence communication patterns. This includes examining how language and gender ideologies evolve across time and cultures.

There is a growing emphasis on intersectionality, recognizing the interconnectedness of gender with other social categories like race, class, and sexuality. This approach highlights how these intersecting identities shape experiences and influence language use.

Early research:

- Driven by the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, early research focused on how language use contributed to women's subordinate position in society.
- Researchers analyzed everyday interactions to identify instances of male dominance over women in conversations, such as interruptions. Studies revealed a pattern where men interrupted women significantly more than vice versa in mixed-gender conversations.
- Studies expanded beyond interruptions to encompass other aspects of conversational dominance, including holding the floor for extended periods, taking more turns, and dominating online discussions.

Evolving perspectives:

- Shifting from a focus solely on dominance, researchers started examining same-sex interactions and conversational strategies employed in everyday talk, adopting a “difference” or “two-cultures” approach.
- This approach highlighted the strengths of linguistic strategies employed in same-sex conversations, particularly in all-female talk. Researchers observed differences in communication styles attributed to gender-specific socialization, with girls and women often prioritizing connection and cooperation, while boys and men emphasized status and competition.
- Contemporary research emphasizes the social construction of gender, recognizing gender as fluid and multifaceted rather than a fixed binary. It acknowledges the existence of a wide range of femininities and masculinities. Studies focusing on the language used by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of gender and discourse.

Ethnocentrism, Antisemitism, Nationalism, and Racism

Numerous studies on ethnic and racial inequality demonstrate a striking resemblance in the stereotypes, prejudices, and other types of verbal denigration employed across various discourse types, media, and national borders.

Discourse analysis proves to be a valuable tool for uncovering how language contributes to the construction and perpetuation of these forms of prejudice.

One research program initiated in the early 1980s examined how minorities and ethnic relations are portrayed in diverse settings, including conversations, everyday narratives, news reports, textbooks, parliamentary debates, corporate discourse, and scholarly text and talk across Europe and the Americas.

This research analyzed a range of discursive features, such as:

- **Stereotypical topics:** These center around the differences of “Others,” emphasizing their distance from the “we-group,” their deviant behavior, and the threat they pose.
- **Story structures:** These differ from typical narratives, often omitting resolutions to emphasize unresolved problems attributed to the “Other”.
- **Conversational features:** Hesitations and repairs when mentioning “Others” were observed.

- **Semantic moves:** These include disclaimers like, “We have nothing against blacks, but...”, which precede the introduction of prejudiced statements.
- **Negative lexical descriptions:** The use of terms like “illegals” to dehumanize and marginalize outgroups.

Key Findings:

- **Racism as a System:** This research emphasizes that racism, including antisemitism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice against racially or ethnically defined groups, is a complex system of social domination perpetuated through discourse, especially within elite discourses.
- **Discursive Reproduction:** Racist discourse, whether explicit or subtle, plays a crucial role in expressing and reinforcing underlying prejudices and ideologies about other groups within society.
- **Media’s Role:** Studies have focused on racist representations in the mass media, highlighting its power in shaping public opinion and perpetuating negative stereotypes.
- **Elite Discourse:** Researchers emphasize that elite discourse, encompassing political speeches, media pronouncements, and academic texts, plays a significant role in influencing public opinion and shaping societal attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities.

Unresolved Questions:

- What distinguishes the various forms of racism (genetic, culturalist, institutional) and what factors contribute to their emergence?
- How do these forms manifest across different discourses globally?
- Is it possible to differentiate racism from related prejudices like antisemitism, nationalism, ethnicism, and sexism?
- What criteria can be used to distinguish between these “-isms” and identify intersectional and compound discrimination?

Addressing these complex issues necessitates a multidimensional approach that considers the interplay of social, cultural, historical, and political factors.

Benefits of CDA

CDA aims to uncover hidden power dynamics and social inequalities within various discourse types, making it particularly useful for addressing social problems and promoting social change.

CDA views language as a form of social practice embedded in historical contexts and influenced by power relations.

It examines how language constructs, reinforces, and legitimizes social disparities, focusing on the interests served and negated within specific discourses.

This approach enables researchers to expose hidden ideologies and power structures embedded in everyday and institutional communication.

CDA's problem-oriented approach helps analyze and understand how societal issues manifest in discourse.

By focusing on social problems like poverty, inequality, or racism, CDA attempts to identify obstacles to their resolution by examining relevant discourses.

This critical lens allows researchers to explore potential solutions by analyzing how language shapes perceptions and actions surrounding these problems.

CDA's interdisciplinary nature provides a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena by integrating linguistic analysis with insights from sociology, psychology, and other relevant fields.

This approach acknowledges the complex interplay between language and social structures, enabling researchers to analyze discourse within its broader socio-cultural context.

CDA provides practical tools for analyzing real-world issues and developing interventions.

By examining texts like advertisements, screenplays, or political speeches, CDA helps identify cultural values, traditions, and power dynamics.

Researchers can then apply these insights to real-world problems and develop interventions aimed at addressing social injustices.

CDA offers a systematic and rigorous approach to analyzing discourse, drawing on linguistic categories and theories to uncover hidden meanings and power relations.

By analyzing linguistic features like pronouns, attributes, verb modes, tenses, and argumentation strategies, CDA uncovers how language shapes social realities.

This approach emphasizes the importance of linguistic expertise in selecting and analyzing relevant items based on specific research objectives.

CDA research utilizes diverse data sources, including spoken and written texts from various genres and contexts, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation.

This approach allows for the analysis of a wide range of data, including everyday conversations, institutional interactions, media texts, and online communication.

By examining diverse discourse types, CDA researchers gain insights into the pervasive influence of language on social practices and power dynamics.

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Examples

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Journals

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