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Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a theoretical approach to studying the role of language in society that originated within linguistics but has found widespread application across the social sciences. The term is also sometimes used to refer only to the methodological framework of CDA that centers on the qualitative linguistic analysis of spoken or written texts.

Background and Key Tenets

CDA became known through the writings of a group of primarily European linguists during the late 1980s, most prominently Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk. Similar but largely independent developments emerged in the United States around the same time through the work of James Paul Gee. The intellectual origins of CDA reach back to British and Australian critical linguistics of the 1970s that researched the intersection of discourse, ideology, and power. Critical linguists were greatly influenced by M. A. K. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, which provides an important foundation for current CDA theory and methodology as well. Although the specific research areas and methods of analysis within CDA are by no means homogeneous, what unites all scholars engaged in CDA is a critical perspective that is geared toward examining the subtle ways in which unequal power relations are maintained and reproduced through language use. Many CDA scholars reject the idea that CDA is an established "school" or "paradigm" and prefer to characterize their work as an explicitly critical and political orientation to studying discourse.

The term discourse is generally understood to refer to any instance of signification, or meaning-making, whether through oral or written language or nonverbal means. In this sense, a dinner table conversation and a newspaper article on globalization are instances of discourse, and so is an advertisement in a fishing magazine, although most CDA analyses rely on written texts or transcripts of oral interactions as data. In CDA, discourse is assumed to be a central vehicle in the construction of social reality. Because different ways of using language are thought to produce different social outcomes, close attention to linguistic properties of texts can shed light on how different outcomes may come about. Most CDA research operates within a moderate version of social constructivism that acknowledges the enabling and constraining effects of existing structural arrangements.

CDA scholars also advocate situating linguistic investigations within social analysis. Their emphasis on interdisciplinarity has resulted in an engagement with a variety of theories outside of the linguistic canon, most often in sociology, cultural studies, and political economy. This fusion has entailed a significant expansion in the conceptual toolkit of the CDA analyst because the goal is no longer linguistic description but rather an understanding of how language-in-use (discourse) contributes to and reproduces social inequality. Concepts such as globalization, power, ideology, and hegemony often figure in CDA studies that attempt to capture the interconnections among discourse, power, and social organization.

Areas of Research and Application

Much of the early work within CDA targeted the political domain. This remains a very active line of research to date, and studies typically scrutinize speeches by key politicians or critique documents published by government agencies, institutions, or international organizations. Many scholars have engaged in researching and critiquing media texts from a CDA perspective, pointing to systematic biases and discriminatory tendencies in news reporting. Examining media images such as advertisements constitutes an important area of visual semiotics, a line of inquiry that has taken CDA tenets beyond the verbal realm. A considerable number of feminist researchers have relied on CDA to produce illuminating analyses of gender-based discriminatory practices in a variety of discourse genres. CDA has been widely applied within research in education, an area not only rife with social problems but also where discursive practices are central and salient. Recently, more CDA studies analyze face-to-face interaction, examining various service encounters or personal narratives produced in research interviews.

Major Theoretical Strands

In addition to methodological and conceptual diversity, CDA as a mode of investigation lacks a unitary theoretical framework, although it is by no means atheoretical. Norman Fairclough was one of the leading developers of CDA's theoretical grounding, and his writings have become standard reference points for many who pursue critical textual analysis. One of the theoretical challenges for CDA as a socially and politically sensitive model of language use has been to explicate the relationship between discourse and social formations while attending to the layered nature of social existence. Fairclough addressed this particular problem by advocating a three-tier organization of social life that is well known within the social sciences: Social events (micro level) are linked to social structures (macro level) by mediating social practices (meso level). Discourse is a part of all three levels; language is seen as a set of structural possibilities from which certain orders of discourse emerge at the level of social practices, which then influence the production and reception of discourse in social events. Importantly, discourse in this sense is not another social practice but rather a part of social practices. As such, it should be analyzed in conjunction with other social elements of events and practices such as material surroundings and participants and their social relationships.

A second theoretical strand within CDA concerns itself with the role of cognition in maintaining oppressive social practices and reproducing ideologies, and the works of Teun van Dijk and Paul Chilton are relevant in this regard. Cognition within CDA is always socially rooted and encompasses shared group norms, beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies. Researchers studying social cognition emphasize that individual or group discriminatory practices, such as acts of race-related violence or anti-immigrant legislation, need to be studied in conjunction with the social cognitions (attitudes and ideologies) that are necessary to produce and maintain them. Many scholars have studied metaphors as a discursive link that mediates between social cognition and social organization. Discourse constitutes an important arena because beliefs and norms are largely disseminated and reproduced through public means of communication, all of which are controlled by the elite. Through their privileged access to outlets of public discourse, elites play an instrumental role in the shaping of public opinion and the production and maintenance of discriminatory and biased beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies.

In their investigations of discriminatory discourses of various kinds, Ruth Wodak and her colleagues developed the discourse-historical approach as a critical mode of inquiry within the larger framework of CDA. Like most CDA research, discourse-historical studies are concerned with social critique through the in-depth analysis of hegemonic discursive practices within particular social domains, most notably politics. Discourse-historical investigations place special emphasis on studying diachronic changes in discourses as well as tracing intertextual connections among areas of social life as a necessary step to uncover how genres and discourse topics spread across time and social domains. Analyses are complex because researchers rely on multiple data sources (e.g., newspapers, legislative texts, individual narratives) to link text-internal analysis to sociohistorical context and draw on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks for interpretation and explanation. Researchers working within this strand have identified systematic ways of using language to discursively construct sameness or difference ("us" vs. "them") that are deployed in racist or nationalist discourses across contexts.

Methodological Principles

Given CDA's disciplinary roots in linguistics and the theoretical import attributed to language, linguistic (grammatical) analysis constitutes a core element of most CDA research. However, there is widespread variation among studies in this regard. Analyzing texts for grammatical structures requires some training in formal linguistics. Scholars who have taken up CDA vary greatly with regard to disciplinary orientation and background in linguistics, resulting in analyses that differ widely in their scope and detail to attention to linguistic properties of texts. Second, in every text, there is a multitude of potentially relevant discourse structures that could be examined so that a full analysis of any piece of discourse is impossible. Third, the type of data used will, to some extent, determine the type of linguistic properties that can be examined. For instance, although a politician's speech may be studied for the intonation patterns and phonetic features he or she employs, such analysis is clearly impossible when one is dealing with newspaper articles.

In line with CDA's explicit commitment to furthering social justice, most investigations start by identifying a social problem that has a discursive aspect. Often the social problem under scrutiny involves some form of systematic oppression or marginalization of particular groups by a dominant group such as racism or nationalism. Studies focus on the discursive manifestations of (hegemonic) oppression within a particular network of practices such as education or the media. The specific social domain will also partly determine what kinds of data are to be analyzed. Studies looking at media representations of minority groups may examine newspaper articles, transcripts of television debates, and/or radio interviews. If the locus of interest lies in the discursive exclusion of immigrant children in mainstream classrooms, the researcher may record class interaction and conduct interviews with teachers. There are no rules for how much data are enough; that decision will depend on the scope of the research project. Analysts can choose to look at how a particular event is reported in several newspapers, compare two textbooks for ideological content, or critically examine a single political debate. Ideally, CDA research is conducted within an ethnographic framework or involves a thorough description of the institutional framework in which the given social practice is embedded. The ultimate goal of analysis is to identify ways of resisting or changing oppressive discursive practices, although this objective often receives only modest attention.

Regarding the analytic procedures of CDA, texts can be examined for a number of properties that are thought to contribute to their ideological shaping. When researching how certain people or events are discursively represented, for instance, one can examine how agentic or salient they appear in a text. One way of doing that is to analyze the grammatical role in which a person is placed (e.g., actor, affected) or whether a person appears as a named individual (e.g., Mr. Brown), as a member of a group (e.g., a policeman), or as a collective (e.g., the police). One can also look at the types of processes that are associated with particular people and look for any patterned differences. In a newspaper article, for example, who typically appears as agents of activities that have negative connotations? A researcher may choose to concentrate on analyzing the argumentation structure of a text and its rhetorical effects. This may entail looking at how clauses and sentences are linked through causal, contrastive, or other relations. The text may also be analyzed with regard to the source of legitimation the author uses to support points and claims (e.g., personal narrative, reference to authority), and an examination of modality (e.g., modal verbs, hedges) can shed light on whether the information is conveyed as a fact, a possibility, or an opinion. Studies that look at conversational interaction will have additional analytic dimensions such as turn taking, interruptions, and the role of nonverbal cues.

Critical Assessments

Critical discourse analysis has gained currency and legitimacy across many disciplines in the social sciences and, due partly to its popularity, has also become the target of substantial scholarly critique. Probably the most serious critique has questioned the assumptions of CDA research regarding the relationship between linguistic form and social function. It is a problem of circularity; CDA claims that no linguistic form has intrinsic ideological function, yet analysts are able to "read off" the manipulative intent of texts. Many critics have also raised the point that, given the analyst's a priori critical and political stance, the analyst is likely to find what he or she is looking for in a text. This also relates to charges against a lack of methodological rigor in data selection/elicitation and analysis that leaves too much room for researcher bias to guide the research process. Finally, a preference for structural and ideological critique within CDA has precluded analyses that highlight the creative power of language that enables people to resist or subvert powerful discourses. Clearly, CDA scholars will need to continue engaging with these critical issues, especially if CDA is to maintain its appeal as a cross-disciplinary framework and advance both theoretically and methodologically.

- discourse

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See also

- Discourse
- Discourse Analysis
- Textual Analysis

Further Readings

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