



Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department

PhD Studies / Discourse Analysis

What Is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Dr. Muhammed Badea Ahmed

What Is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) 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.

One widespread misunderstanding of CDA is that it is a special Method of doing discourse analysis. There is no such method: in CDA all methods of the cross-discipline of discourse studies, as well as other relevant methods in the humanities and social sciences may be used.

As an analytical practice , CDA is not one direction of research among many others in the study of discourse. Rather, it is a critical Perspective that may be found in all areas of discourse studies, such as discourse grammar, Conversation Analysis, discourse pragmatics, rhetoric, stylistics, narrative analysis, argumentation analysis, multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics, sociolinguistics, and ethnography of communication or the psychology of discourse-processing, among others. In other words, CDA is discourse study with an attitude

Its current focus on language and discourse was initiated with the critical linguistics that emerged (mostly in the United Kingdom and Australia) at the end of the 1970s as a reaction against the dominant formal (often “asocial” or “uncritical”) paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s, for instance in structural and generative linguistics as well as later text grammars and Conversation Analysis.

Critical research on discourse has the following general properties, among others:

It focuses primarily on social problems and political issues rather than the mere study of discourse structures outside their social and political contexts.

This critical analysis of social problems is usually multidisciplinary

Rather than merely describe discourse structures, it tries to explain them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure.

More specifically, CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) summarized the main tenets 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.

1 Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Since CDA is not a specific direction of research, it does not have a unitary theoretical framework. There are many types of CDA, and these may be theoretically and analytically quite diverse. Critical analysis of conversation is very different from an analysis of news reports in the press or of lessons and teaching at school. As suggested, most kinds of CDA will ask questions about the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance, whether they are part of a conversation or a news report or other genres and contexts. Thus, the typical vocabulary of many scholars in CDA will feature such notions as “power,” “dominance,” “hegemony,” “ideology,” “class,” “gender,” “race,” “discrimination,” “interests,” “reproduction,” “institutions,” “social structure,” and “social order,” besides the more familiar discourse analytical notions.

Macro vs. micro

Language use, discourse, verbal interaction, and communication belong to the micro-level of the social order. Power, dominance, and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macrolevel of analysis. This means that CDA has to theoretically bridge the well-known “gap” between micro and

macro approaches, which is of course a distinction that is a sociological construct in its own right. In everyday interaction and experience the macro- and microlevel (and intermediary “mesolevels”) form one unified whole. For instance, a racist speech in parliament is a discourse at the microlevel of social interaction in the specific situation of a debate, but at the same time may enact or be a constituent part of legislation or the reproduction of racism at the macrolevel.

There are several ways to analyze and bridge these levels, and thus to arrive at a unified critical analysis:

1. Members–groups: Language users engage in discourse as members of (several) social groups, organizations, or institutions; and conversely, groups thus may act “by” their members.
2. Actions–process: Social acts of individual actors are thus constituent parts of group actions and social processes, such as legislation, newsmaking, or the reproduction of racism.
3. Context–social structure: Situations of discursive interaction are similarly part or constitutive of social structure; for example, a press conference may be a typical practice of organizations and media institutions. That is, “local” and more “global” contexts are closely related, and both exercise constraints on discourse.
4. Personal and social cognition: Language users as social actors have both personal and social cognition: personal memories, knowledge and opinions, as well as those shared with members of the group or culture as a whole. Both types of cognition influence interaction and discourse of individual members, whereas shared “social representations” govern the collective actions of a group.

- A central notion in most critical work on discourse is that of power, and more specifically the *social power* of groups or institutions . We will define social power in terms of *control*.
- Thus, groups have (more or less) power if they are able to (more or less) control the acts and minds of (members of) other groups. This ability presupposes a *power base* of privileged access to scarce social resources, such as force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information, “culture,” or indeed various forms of public discourse and communication.
- Different types of power may be distinguished according to the various resources employed to exercise such power
- The coercive power of the military and of violent men will rather be based on force,
- The rich will have power because of their money, whereas the more or less persuasive power of parents, professors, or journalists may be based on knowledge, information, or authority
- Note also that power is seldom absolute. Groups may more or less control other groups, or only control them in specific situations or social domains. Moreover, dominated groups may more or less resist, accept, condone, comply with, or legitimate such power, and even find it “natural.”
- The power of dominant groups may be integrated in laws, rules, norms, habits, and even a quite general consensus, and thus take the form of what Gramsci called “hegemony” (Gramsci 1971). Class domination, sexism, and racism are characteristic examples of such hegemony .

Note also that power is not always exercised in obviously abusive acts of dominant group members, but may be enacted in the myriad of taken-for-granted actions of everyday life, as is typically the case in the many forms of everyday sexism or racism .

Similarly, not all members of a powerful group are always more powerful than all members of dominated groups: power is only defined here for groups as a whole.

For our analysis of the relations between discourse and power, thus, we first find that access to specific forms of discourse, e.g. those of politics, the media, or science, is itself a power resource. Secondly, as suggested earlier, action is controlled by our minds. So, if we are able to influence people's minds, e.g. their knowledge or opinions, we indirectly may control (some of) their actions, as we know from persuasion and manipulation

□ **The issue of discursive power can be split up into two basic questions for CDA research:**

- 1 How do (more) powerful groups control public discourse?
- 2 How does such discourse control mind and action of (less) powerful groups, and what are the social consequences of such control, such as social inequality?

Van Dijk addresses each question in terms of Control of public discourse as well as Control Minds

1.2.1 Control of public discourse

According to Van Dijk (1996) the power base of a group or institution, is defined as *access to or control over* public discourse and communication, it is an important "symbolic" resource, as is the case for knowledge and information

Most people have **active control** only over everyday talk with family members, friends, or colleagues, and **passive control** over, e.g. media usage

□ **The issue of discursive power can be split up into two basic questions for CDA research:**

1 How do (more) powerful groups control public discourse?

2 How does such discourse control mind and action of (less) powerful groups, and what are the social consequences of such control, such as social inequality?

Van Dijk addresses each question in terms of Control of public discourse as well as Control Minds

1.2.1 Control of public discourse

According to Van Dijk (1996) the power base of a group or institution, is defined as *access to or control over* public discourse and communication, it is an important "symbolic" resource, as is the case for knowledge and information

Most people have **active control** only over everyday talk with family members, friends, or colleagues, and **passive control** over, e.g. media usage

- Ordinary people are more or less passive targets of text or talk , e.g. of their bosses or teachers, or of the authorities, such as police officers, judges, who may simply tell them what (not) to believe or what to do whereas members of more powerful social groups and institutions, and especially their leaders (the elites), have more or less exclusive access to, and control over, one or more types of public discourse.
- Those who have more control over more – and more influential – discourse (and more discourse properties) are by that definition also more powerful.
- One of the tasks of CDA to spell out these forms of power. Thus, if discourse is defined in terms of complex communicative events, access and control may be defined both for the **context** and for the **structures of text and talk themselves** .