

The Critical Element of Critical Discourse Analysis¹

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Summary

This paper is a discussion and presentation of the critical element of critical discourse analysis. To denote something as ‘critical’ can be seen as a desire to indicate that certain linguistic/discursive studies are different, that their methods and theories bring something to the table that others do not. However, what it entails “to be critical” varies, and different scholars emphasize different notions and frameworks related to this subject in their critical work. I here discuss how a critical approach influences both the researcher and the object of study, in a general research setting as well as in relation to my PhD project: *The climate change issue as a communicative arena*.

1 Introduction

In this paper I focus on the critical element of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The word ‘critical’ is part of many compound words that circulate in social sciences and the humanities, such as ‘critical linguistics’, ‘critical applied linguistics’, ‘critical theory’, ‘critical approaches’, ‘critical sociology’, ‘critical discourse analysis’ and so forth. The tagging of certain approaches as being ‘critical’ can be seen as a desire to indicate that these theories and methods have something others do not; in other words, that critical approaches are different. Moreover, choosing to denote something as ‘critical’ is often also seen as an indicator of commonality across different fields and disciplines, where the term seems to signal a specific genre of academic studies (Billig 2007). However, how “to be critical” is understood varies, not only across disciplines, but also within specific approaches or schools, as is the case of CDA. In accordance with philosophical debates on the activity of critique, which CDA is inevitably linked to, it is not possible to generalize or essentialize “the critical enterprise” in absolute terms; rather, the activity should be kept open.

Accordingly, in the CDA literature, notions such as ‘to be critical’, ‘critique’ and ‘criticism’ are, as other often discussed terms such as *discourse*, *analysis*, *text* and *genre*, continuously discussed and redefined. Therefore, as “the critical element” of CDA is not something that is fixed, and consequently often defined and explained differently by different scholars, I see a need to clarify the different components which the critical element of CDA refers to, as well as to establish how these affect both the object of study and my role and position as a researcher. As part of this clarification process I situate CDA within the scientific tradition as well as within the “critical tradition”. Furthermore, I attempt to clarify my own understanding of the critical enterprise, and will thus point to some central “critical notions” relevant for CDA and discuss them in relation to my PhD project entitled *The climate change issue as a communicative arena*.

¹ This paper is a slightly modified version of the compulsory presentation given in connection with a doctoral course in theory of science and ethics for my PhD degree, delivered on December 3, 2012 at NHH Norwegian School of Economics.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: In section 2, I present CDA and frame it within an overall “critical tradition”. In section 3, I try to distinguish between different notions of what “to be critical” entails in the context of CDA. In section 4, I discuss the critical components of CDA and relate them to my own work. Finally, section 5 presents some concluding remarks.

2 CDA in an overall “critical tradition”

2.1 Critical discourse analysis – a short introduction

First of all, what is important to have in mind when discussing the critical element of CDA is that CDA is not one thing; rather, it is an interdisciplinary approach or research program that draws upon a range of theoretical and methodological frameworks from the humanities and the social sciences. This implies that how a specific critical analysis is undertaken and which theoretical and methodological notions are accentuated will differ. In general terms, CDA is an approach that combines some sort of textual (linguistic) theories and analysis with socio-political and critical theories and analysis (Gee 2004). What distinguishes CDA from other kinds of discourse analysis is that it is problem-oriented, that is, it does not focus on linguistic units per se, but on complex social phenomena that have a semiotic dimension (Wodak/Meyer 2009). CDA started out as a reaction to the descriptive nature of scientific observation in language research, and the approach (as one of many) challenged the trend of language analysis in isolation from its social context. As such, it was also part of the move from the study of constructed linguistic units to studies of how social and political factors influence linguistic behavior. CDA is used in a range of fields both in the humanities and in social sciences, and can be said to be part of the linguistic and the discursive turn that have taken place during the twentieth century. Its objective is to de-mystify ideologies and power through systematic and retroductable² analysis of semiotic data (Wodak/Meyer 2009). Moreover, CDA aims to disentangle discourse, to look into what can be said and what cannot be said in a given society at a given time, and “to uncover the techniques through which discursive limits are extended and narrowed down” (Jäger/Maier 2009: 34). To be able to do this, CDA is oriented towards discourse in two senses where ‘discourse’ is understood both as ‘language in use’ and as “patterns and commonalities of knowledge and structures” (Wodak 2011: 39), that is, what makes the world meaningful. The notion of discourse as language in use is important in the sense that it is seen as a form of social practice, which in turn implies “a dialectical relationship between a specific discursive event and its situation(s), institution(s) and social structures where discourse is socially conditioned as well as socially constitutive” (Fairclough/Wodak 1997: 258). The notion of discourse as socially constitutive means that it can help to reproduce or sustain the *status quo*, or it can help to transform it. With regard to issues of power and ideologies, discursive practices can help to (re)produce unequal power relations through the ways things and people are represented and positioned, and similarly, they can work to challenge them (*ibid.*). These elements are particularly interesting for my PhD project, where I will look into how government-produced discourses about climate change in two different cultures and languages (Norway/Norwegian and Bolivia/Spanish) reproduce or challenge what is given/taken for granted in the proposals of solutions to climate change in international politics.

² In the words of Wodak “retroductable” (*nachvollziehbar*) means that critical discourse analysis “should be transparent so that any reader can trace and understand the detailed in-depth textual analysis” (Kendall 2007).

2.2 *The critical element of CDA and the Frankfurt School*

The critical element of CDA is related to a variety of philosophical, ethical, theoretical and methodological concerns. Different CDA scholars will accentuate different ideas of what it entails to “be critical”, as well as define them according to the objectives of their own work and stance. Some adhere to the traditions of literary criticism (e.g. James Paul Gee), where hermeneutics play a crucial part; some base their work more directly on the contributions of the Frankfurt School (the Vienna group represented by Ruth Wodak is an example), while others adhere to earlier Marxist theory, where the perspective is more a top-down and structural view of ideology and power (as in the work of Norman Fairclough). However, at the root of these perspectives lies the work of critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas. So, although CDA and its critical element draw on many different philosophical and epistemological foundations, and the extent to which scholars proclaim adherence to the different aspects of critical theory varies, ideas from critical theory are vital parts of the CDA “skeleton”. I will therefore continue by introducing some general key aspects of critical theory and the Frankfurt School.

The work of the Frankfurt School started out in the early twentieth century with a group of philosophers, social scientists and cultural critics influenced by the dialectical philosophy of Hegel and Marx. Intellectuals such as Max Horkheimer, often referred to as the first generation of critical theorists, Jürgen Habermas, a student of Horkheimer often referred to as the second generation, and Axel Honneth, a student of Habermas who now represents the third generation of this tradition (along with many others), all have taken part in the development of critical theory. In terms of its position within an overall scientific tradition critical theory is effectively a critique of positivism, where taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways in which people read and write science are questioned. The Frankfurt School belonged to an intellectual minority, which opposed the dominant European tradition of neo-Kantianism and logical empiricism, and this is also the context in which reference to the Frankfurt School should be understood (Finlayson 2005: 2). Many of the validity tensions that pervade so much of contemporary scientific debate can be traced back to the Enlightenment, where the positivist perspective gained ground. While the Enlightenment had much to say in opening up spaces for critique *in* science, it also opened up the possibility for questioning the grounds of science itself (Agger 1991: 109). In positivism, only statements that are verifiably true can be regarded as knowledge. This perspective on what constitutes knowledge excludes elements such as normative and metaphysical beliefs, preferences, attitudes, etc. from rational discussion and evaluation. The Frankfurt School, on the other hand, held that scholars in the social sciences should reflect on and develop these important parts of our form of consciousness, which in turn motivated them to seek new approaches for the study of social phenomena (Anthonissen 2001: 18). One of the key concepts in this new critical approach was the rejection of presuppositionless representation, as such representation in itself is seen as politically undesirable and philosophically impossible. Despite the Enlightenment’s efforts to demystify religion and mythology, critical theorists came to consider this very movement as grounded in a positive science that, in their eyes, would turn out to constitute a new mythology and ideology in itself, an ideology that failed to see its own investment in the status quo (Agger 1991: 109). This line of argumentation is crucial to support critical theory as something that belongs to the arena of science and research. The argument is that while critical theory is pronounced value-laden, traditional science is no less so; traditional scientist just fails to recognize this. As such, the Frankfurt School argued that the lack of an explicit value commitment in mainstream science was one of the strongest value commitments of all.

The opposition to the status quo, indicated by critical theorists' rejection of a natural sciences-based positivism, also manifests itself in other dimensions of critical theory. First, critical theorists challenged the formation of increasingly specialized academic domains and promoted interdisciplinary research, where the Frankfurt School set out to connect economic, cultural and ideological analysis. Second, unlike traditional theory, critical theory is reflective, that is, inherently self-aware of the social context that gave rise to the theory, of its functions in society and of the purpose and interests of its practitioners (Finlayson 2005: 3). With regard to the critical element of critical theory, this points to theory not only constituting a theoretical task, but also a practical task. In short, critical theory is social theory that seeks to criticize and change society as a whole. Thus, the objective of theory should not merely be to bring about correct understanding, but also to create conditions that are more conducive to human flourishing than the present ones. The normative aim of critical theory is thus both diagnostic and remedial (Finlayson 2005: 4). It is very important to emphasize that the critical task is hence not only to determine what is wrong with society, but also to identify aspects that can help transform society for the better. Balancing these two normative components has proved to be a challenging task in many of the sub-disciplines that have adopted critical theory. I also see this as relevant within CDA, where there has been much debate about to what extent an approach such as CDA can actually bring about changes in society. I will come back to this debate in section 4.

3 What does “to be critical” entail in the context of CDA?

3.1 The influence of critical theory in language studies and CDA

Critical theory is essential for the critical task of CDA, which starts out from the assumption that social theory should be oriented towards critiquing and changing society, in contrast to only understanding and explaining it. The goal is to “produce and convey critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection” (Wodak/Meyer 2012: 7). To do this, CDA aims to reveal structures of power and unmask ideologies through the study of texts, a method closely related to the linguistic and cultural turn of the humanities and the social sciences. The critical study of language indicates a move from data consisting of constructed linguistic units to data of naturally occurring language, where the key issue is how social and political environments influence linguistic behaviour. Through the influence of critical theory in language studies, a gradual interest developed in language as a social phenomenon, as an instrument that both expresses and shapes societal and cultural identity. Linguists affiliated to the University of East-Anglia in the late 1970's were the first to bring the term ‘critical’ into the arena of language studies (see e.g. Fowler et al. 1979) (Wodak/Meyer 2009: 7). These linguists had a growing interest in how texts work in society and how elements of power work within texts, a key element in today's many versions of CDA. With these considerations in mind, we can now continue by looking more specifically into some of the contexts in which the critical element is discussed within the CDA literature.

3.2 ‘Critique’, ‘criticism’, ‘critical’...

If we look at some of the contexts in which words such as ‘critique’, ‘critical’ and ‘criticism’, which are used more or less interchangeably, appear within the CDA literature, we will see that they point to different methodological, theoretical and ethical concerns. Here are some examples of this in the form of quotes from some of the key scholars (my emphasis):

[...] critique is essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things. (Fairclough 1995: 747)

CDA aims to question and criticize discourses. (Jäger/Maier 2009: 36)

The critical element of CDS characterizes scholars rather than their methods: CDS scholars are socio-politically committed to social equality and justice. (van Dijk 2009: 63)

Adhering to a “critical” stance should be understood as gaining distance from the data [...] embedding the data in the social context, clarifying the political positioning of discourse participants, and having focus on continuous self-reflection while undertaking research. (Reisigl/Wodak 2012: 87)

Fairclough in the quoted example points to the idea that CDA can help to identify relations and structures of power and dominating ideologies that have become naturalized, that is, established yet constructed “truths”. Jäger and Maier point to CDA as a kind of analysis that should question discourses, that is, not take them as “given”, but as constructions that can be challenged. Van Dijk suggests that the position of the researcher is heavily influenced by the critical element of CDA. He points to the ethical and political stance taken by researchers that work within critically oriented research where the CDA researcher makes an explicit commitment to fight inequality and discrimination. Through this, the researcher takes an active stance in the question of what should be the contributions of science; that is, that science should be applied in some way, and that the application should aim to make changes. This has normative implications for the way that the research is conducted, presented and disseminated. In line with the reflexive elements of critical theory, Reisigl/Wodak also point to the responsibility of the researcher, where researchers must continuously reflect on their own position, as indicated in the fourth quotation above. This implies that researchers are equally situated and influenced by their time and situation as their object of research. Because of this, critical researchers must make assessments of the context in which they operate. This implies that CDA is also constructed discourse that is influenced by other discourse, something that is very important to bear in mind because CDA analysts will inevitably make some truth claims in their work. This can for example take place by “making visible”, in Fairclough’s words (Fairclough 1995: 747), how things are interconnected and related, where one’s interpretation may not resonate with how others interpret social reality. The issue of truth claims is also related to the researcher’s possibility to “criticize discourse”, as stated by Jäger/Maier (2009: 36). These aspects, which also have clear normative implications, will be discussed further in section 4.

4 Discussion of the critical components in CDA

4.1 Does the CDA analyst have privileged access to the truth?

Despite the deeply rooted concern with unequal power relations, the analyst does hold a privileged position in CDA. The idea that it is possible to reveal hidden structures of power and dominance through textual analysis assumes the position of the CDA analyst as a conscious language user who can inform other language users about how to interpret communicative events. Some scholars argue that “any form of ideological critique presupposes that the critic has privileged access to the truth, whereas any such claim to truth or knowledge is (as Nietzsche (1886/1990) argued) really just a coded ‘will to power’ (Foucault 1979)” (Fairclough 1995: 16). This sort of argument is related to, in Fairclough’s words, a nominalist and relativist theory of discourse, where different discourses have so many incommensurate ‘language games’ (in Wittgenstein’s terminology), that one discourse cannot be privileged over another (Fairclough 1995: 16). A second point is that CDA analyses are text-reducing and not text-extending (Titscher et al. 2005: 167), that is, they have focus on some specific elements of texts and discourses, which in turn may result in “wrong” or partially correct results. Furthermore, the use of categories that perhaps do not correspond with the text-producers’ and consumers’ experiences might create a distance between the analytical and theoretical work of CDA analysts and the society which they want to influence and change in positive directions.

To avoid taking part in the formation of unfruitful power relations where there is strong segregation between “experts” and “non-experts” there is a need to avoid critical scholars entering positions where they are acting as prophets, telling others what they ought or ought not to do (for an elaboration on this, see for example Boer/Sonderegger 2012). What is important is to work against mechanisms that seek to privilege certain and limited social groups as the **only** holder of the truth, be that the scientific community, policy-makers or big business. As such, my view is that a researcher’s opinion and evaluation of a situation should be accepted as a contribution to scientific and public debate on the same grounds as other opinions and evaluations. What researchers can bring to the table is work that is systematically done and informed both by experience and theory. With regard to this, it is very important to distinguish between an approach claiming that one discourse/interpretation is false while another is true and an approach aiming to see how discourses work ideologically. CDA belongs to the latter type of approach (Fairclough 1995). There is a distinction between interpreting ‘critical’ as “[...] the disruption of power relations [...]” and interpreting it as “the systematic investigation of the relationships among genres, discourses, and style, and how some meanings are privileged over others [...]” (Rogers 2004: 14). However, in my opinion, the analytical focus can be on the latter, but the normative implication of critically oriented research makes it difficult to completely withstand the former. CDA will inevitably make some normative truth claims, and how these are justified depends on the researcher (some refer for example to external norms such as human rights or other laws, while other may refer to the normative work of Habermas).

4.2 CDA – a successful medium for social transformation?

On the one hand, CDA has been successful in for example the application of suggestions regarding non-sexist guidelines, educational reform, communication strategies in institutionalized settings, etc. (Kendall 2007). On the other hand, there is a clear gap between its wide-ranging objectives and the actual outcomes. Moreover, a lot of societal changes have taken place since the initial phases of critical theory (e.g. in terms of access to information through the internet), and today critical perspectives have also been disseminated successfully to other fields of research. In light of this it is legitimate to ask whether critically oriented research has problems finding new targets. Typical CDA topics include issues such as racism, discrimination and gender equality, and it is possible to question whether analyses of such topics are able to point to hidden elements that are unknown or whether the analyses just confirm ideas that are now commonly well-known (though not necessarily focused upon). Constructive/remedial work can be done through the focus on texts produced by those in power, which is the most frequent path to pursue within CDA. In such practice, the analyst makes suggestions for change based on the results (which draw on both empirical findings and theoretical contributions). Or, the critical analysis can be done by identifying critical practices as they are undertaken by actors in society, which has been a less commonly applied approach. CDA has traditionally been more concerned with the deconstruction of negative power in (over and of) discourse than of positive power in (over and of) discourse. CDA is a problem-oriented approach and has generally been concerned with the language use of those who are in power, and in how discursive structures play a part in maintaining unequal power relations. One initiative that attempts to move away from the track of deconstructing discursive patterns that disempower and oppress and rather looks at patterns that are examples of empowerment and positive power use is Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) (Martin 2004).³ The introduction of PDA as a counterpart to CDA is, however, not

³ Martin’s work is also inspired by the work of G. Kress, another contributor to the CDA approach (Kress 2000).

always welcomed. Wodak (Kendall 2007) rejects the introduction of positive DA as an opposition to CDA, because in her opinion, 'critical' in CDA should not be considered equal to 'negative'. I think that this is a fair point and support the need to draw a line between being critical and being negative. Fusing these two elements leads to misconceptions and a reduction of what CDA is about. However, despite the perhaps ill-chosen name of Martin's response to CDA, I also believe that such initiatives are valuable. As already stated, PDA wants to move away from deconstructing processes and discourses that disempower and oppress, and look more closely into cases that are examples of empowerment and positive power use. Two examples of such attempts are the work of Martin and Rose (Martin/Rose, 2007) analysing the writings of Mandela and Tutu in relation to the processes of truth and reconciliation, and the work of Anthonissen (Anthonissen 2004), which discusses resistance strategies to media censorship in South Africa during Apartheid. Instead of looking into aspects of discourses and language use that are valued negatively by the researcher, PDA analysts value some aspects of discourse positively. This perspective can help to identify and renovate discourses that enact a better world (Martin 2004: 197 cited in Alba-Juez 2009: 257). As such, this method can be one possible way to look into critical practices as they are realized in society, in order to contribute to positive change.

4.3 The climate change issue as a communicative arena

In my PhD project I intend to look into international climate change negotiations (CCN) as a site of ideological struggle. The underlying assumption is that the communicative activities that take place in CCN are not solely related to finding effective solutions to climate change, but rather, they are connected to multiple social, political and cultural ends. I see the climate change issue as a discursive door-opener that serves to establish communicative arenas where multiple topics can be addressed and where actors that traditionally have been excluded from international politics can voice their opinion. The project has a double focus; first, it sets out to consider how discourses about climate change solutions are influenced by dominating economic and political structures; second, it seeks to identify techniques that are used to extend discursive limits in discourses about climate change solutions (which possibly can be part of opening up new political spaces). The ambitions of my PhD project are related to the dual ambitions of CDA, as I do not only want to deconstruct misuse of power, but also look into how social actors construct positive contributions, both in the texts that are produced by the Norwegian and the Bolivian government's representatives. This can partly be seen as a wish to distance myself from an idea of critique as mere fault-finding. Such practice moves from a focus on negative values in discourse towards positive values in discourse. The researcher can as such be aware of the difficulties of bringing about social and political emancipation, while focusing on actual critical practices. This does by no means imply that I favour a strict positive analysis, but that the balance between this perspective and a focus on negative power can be improved. With regard to the critical mission of CDA, I see the analyst as less prominent and less idealized through such an approach, as the analysis draws more heavily on social critique as it is actually realized in society.

As regards CDA's objective of social transformation, it is difficult to state in advance what I would like to change. Rather, I believe that this should be a consequence of the analytical work. However, an underlying normative notion is that climate change solutions should not be restricted by economic or ideological power structures, and therefore it becomes necessary to detect how such structures work and how they are challenged. With regard to the ambition of undertaking committed and self-reflexive research it could be mentioned that I have been involved in activist work, both in Norway and in Latin America. In the preparation of a PhD project proposal, it has been important for me to focus on a topic that is related to societal

contexts that are familiar, but at the same time have some distance to the selected object of study. I am familiar with political and social relations in Norway and Bolivia, but I have not worked with the issue of climate change. This can perhaps help me to prevent potential pre conceptions and bias in the analytical work, however the most important aspect is surely to remain reflexive and challenge both the studied material and my own interpretations during the analytical process.

5 Concluding remarks

The critical element of CDA can be related to many aspects. It can be related to aspects such as: to investigate the workings of power relations; to be self-reflexive; to seek social transformation; to work in an interdisciplinary way; to take an explicit stance; to challenge the status quo; to take measures to hinder biased research (e.g. to find a balance between commitment and distance to the research object). How each and every CDA researcher relates to these components of the critical element of CDA varies. In my opinion, what is important to acknowledge is that “to be critical” should not be understood as mere fault-finding, or as stating that something is true/false, or that one discourse is better than another. 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, e.g. “the given social realities”, are challenged. While CDA traditionally has had a stronger focus on “those in power” and the discursive patterns that maintain unequal power relations, rather than on “those who are not in power” and the constructive patterns that challenge unequal power structures, I see it as necessary and fruitful to focus upon both of these aspects.

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