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To cite this article: Rob Faure Walker (2022): Correcting 'a notional' confusion for critical discourse analysis, Journal of Critical Realism, DOI: [10.1080/14767430.2022.2105617](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2022.2105617)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2022.2105617>



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Published online: 09 Aug 2022.



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Correcting ‘a notional’ confusion for critical discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

The meaning and grammatical status of ‘a notional’ in the schema for critical discourse analysis (CDA) from Bhaskar’s posthumously published *Enlightened Common Sense* (2016) is somewhat ambiguous. An ambiguity that has persisted through a subsequent development of the schema. Following the publication of Bhaskar’s original manuscript, it can now be seen that erroneous grammatical changes were made to the manuscript during the publication process. The original version provides a more coherent schema for CDA. This paper discusses the implications of the original version coming to light. This shows that Bhaskar created a more coherent schema for CDA than the published version indicated. Clarifying the meaning and grammatical status of ‘a notional’ in Bhaskar’s schema for CDA and a schema that was subsequently derived from it is an important corrective for future critical realist critical discourse analysts.

KEYWORDS

Critical discourse analysis (CDA); notional; discourse; schema

The confusion

In my previous paper for The Journal of Critical Realism, ‘The UK’s PREVENT Counter-Terrorism Strategy appears to promote rather than prevent violence’ (Faure Walker 2019), I further developed the schema for critical discourse analysis (CDA) that Bhaskar describes in *Enlightened Common Sense* (2016). Bhaskar’s schema is a development of Norman Fairclough’s schema for CDA, Fairclough being a leading theorist of CDA who had previously developed a critical realist version of this perspective which he referred to as the dialectical relational approach, or DRA (Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2007; Fairclough 2010). Bhaskar also took some aspects of his schema and his particular elaboration of CDA from work done with John O’Regan at the Institute of Education (IOE). O’Regan had shared his notes on critical realism and CDA with Bhaskar during their collaborations on the Critical Realism Reading Group at IOE between 2010 and 2014 (O’Regan and Betzel 2016), a group that I now coordinate with Priscilla Alderson.

Each of the three predominant schema’s for CDA, by Bhaskar, by O’Regan and Betzel, and by Fairclough, added something to the final schema that was developed in my earlier paper, where I merged them to include aspects from each of the preceding

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schema (Faure Walker 2019). For example, O'Regan and Betzel's approach offers the fullest description of Stage 1, so was adopted for this stage; whilst, Bhaskar adds two final stages, Stage 5 and Stage 5*, which were included in full. It is these final stages that this paper is concerned with, as new information regarding Bhaskar's original manuscript has recently come to light and this changes the interpretation of Bhaskar's schema for CDA.

Bhaskar's final manuscript for *Enlightened Common Sense* was, according to Mervyn Hartwig's introduction, dated 30th December 2013. This was not long before Bhaskar was diagnosed with progressive heart failure in January 2014. He died on 19th November of the same year (Hartwig in Bhaskar 2016, xi). According to Hartwig's introduction, he took *Enlightened Common Sense* through to publication in 2016, keeping all of Bhaskar's text and adding text and diagrams from Bhaskar's published writing (Hartwig in Bhaskar 2016, xiv). It cannot be overstated how much of a service Hartwig has provided to the field of critical realism by ensuring that this book was published. *Enlightened Common Sense* stands out from Bhaskar's many other important works for its clarity, which from my interactions with students on the UCL Critical Realism Reading Group has enabled many to access the field despite their struggling to engage with Bhaskar's other texts. One of Hartwig's other great services to the field has been to publish the *Dictionary of Critical Realism* (Hartwig 2007). Without either of these two books, critical realism would be a less accessible field for many. It is for this reason that it is important to rectify the error that crept into the schema for CDA in *Enlightened Common Sense*.

In my aforementioned paper, I included a footnote on Bhaskar's definition of 'notional' in his schema for CDA (Bhaskar 2016, 109; Faure Walker 2019, 509). In light of the recent publication of the original manuscript for *Enlightened Common Sense*, via Hartwig's Academia profile, the meaning and grammatical status of 'notional' in Bhaskar's schema for CDA needs to be reappraised. The relevant text from the original manuscript and that from the published text are copied below and the change that we are concerned with here is the addition of full stops after both occurrences of 'notional'.

My paper from 2019 suggested that 'notional' referred to the 'notional possibility of meta-reflexivity', or the 'notional' concrete utopia that might emerge from the research (Faure Walker 2019, 507–508). With the aforementioned footnote stating that,

This use of 'a notional' is as described by Bhaskar in his final and posthumously published book, *Enlightened Common Sense* (Bhaskar 2016, 109). While using 'notional' as a noun might be unfamiliar, it is assumed that Bhaskar was referring to a notional future and, as that future may not ever exist beyond thought, the use of 'notional' as a noun is applicable. (Faure Walker 2019, 509)

While this is not completely out of line with where one would ultimately get to from following either version of the schema, we can now see that my 2019 interpretation was incorrect. 'Notional' in the original text was not a noun, but an adjective attached to the final stages of the schema, describing 'a notional Stage 5' and 'a notional Stage 5*'. Having approached Hartwig to discuss this inconsistency, he has confirmed that appreciating 'notional' as an adjective is the correct interpretation and that the rogue full stops that change the meaning and grammatical status of 'notional' appeared erroneously during the editing and subsequent publication of *Enlightened Common Sense*. My bringing his

Stage 4: Identify possible ways past the obstacles. This stage is a crucial complement to stage 2 – it looks for hitherto unrealised possibilities for change in the way life is currently organised. This is where concrete utopianism, a theory of transition and a relationship to an on-going depth struggle becomes crucial. We can now define a notional

Stage 5: These unrealised possibilities become the object of an emancipatory practice oriented to the definitive resolution of the social problem or ill, in the context of concrete utopianism and a coherent theory of transition. This will in principle include a moment of self-reflexivity defining a notional stage 5* in which we self-reflect critically on our analysis (1-4), including considerations as to the interest and social positionality of the analyst.

Figure 1. Bhaskar's original manuscript for *Enlightened Common Sense* (working title, *Critical Realism in a Nutshell*).

Stage 4: Identify possible ways past the obstacles. This stage is a crucial complement to stage 2 – it looks for hitherto unrealised possibilities for change in the way life is currently organised. This is where concrete utopianism, a theory of transition and a relationship to an on-going depth struggle becomes crucial. We can now define a notional.

Stage 5: These unrealised possibilities become the object of an emancipatory practice oriented to the definitive resolution of the social problem or ill, in the context of concrete utopianism and a coherent theory of transition. This will in principle include a moment of self-reflexivity defining a notional.

*Stage 5** in which we self-reflect critically on our analysis (1-4), including considerations as to the interests and social positionality of the analyst.

Figure 2. Published text from *Enlightened Common Sense*.

attention to this was the first time that he became aware of this typesetting error (personal communication) (Figures 1 and 2).

The implications of this new interpretation alter the way that one might approach critical realist CDA, placing a greater emphasis on and distinction between both praxis in a dialectical sense (Stage 5) and in consideration of the metaReal sense (Stage 5*). For an example of how these final stages of dialectical and metaReal critique might be applied, see the final chapters of *The Emergence of Extremism* which is broader discussion of my aforementioned paper from 2019 – though without designating each as 'Stage 5' or Stage 5*', due to my lack of awareness of the original manuscript (Faure Walker 2021, 160–202). Having established this more coherent version of the final stages of Bhaskar's schema, we can reproduce the following schema with updated final stages.

A revised schema for critical realist CDA

Stage 1

Focus upon a social phenomenon in its semiotic aspect (Draw upon relevant theories about the phenomenon and look for a semiotic point of entry)

- (a) Step 1 Identify the phenomenon you want to research
- (b) Step 2 Theorize the phenomenon in a transdisciplinary way (Use relevant theory).
Once you have the theory, you can then look for a semiotic point of entry

Stage 2

Identify the causes of the phenomenon and (if relevant) the obstacles to changing it (Why is the phenomenon like this?).

- (c) Step 1 Select texts in the light of the object of research and adopt an analytical framework for categorizing and interpreting their features
Having employed close reading of the texts in Stage 1, as is usual for CDA, corpus linguistics is now employed to show how texts and their meanings have changed over time.
- (d) Step 2 Analyse texts by linking linguistic analysis to interdiscursive and social analysis
Identify obstacles to tackling the phenomenon through an analysis of
 - (1) a network of practices within which it is located
 - (2) the relationship of semiosis to other elements within the particular practices concerned; and
 - (3) the discourse (or semiosis) itself.

Stage 3

Consider whether the social order (network of practice) in a sense 'needs' the problem. Why if at all is the problem 'needed'? What are the mechanisms (somehow) producing and reproducing it? The point here is to ask whether those who benefit most from the way social life is organized have an interest in the problem not being resolved.

Stage 4

Identify possible ways past the obstacles. Can the dominant discourse be contested? This stage is a crucial complement to Stage 2 – it looks to hitherto unrealized possibilities for change in the way life is currently organized. This is where concrete utopianism, a theory of transition and a relationship to an on-going depth struggle becomes crucial. We can now define a notional Stage 5.

Stage 5

These unrealized possibilities become the object of an emancipatory practice oriented to the resolution of the social problem or ill, in the context of concrete utopianism and a coherent theory of transition. This will in principle include a moment of self-reflexivity defining a notional Stage 5*.

Stage 5*

In which we self-reflect critically on our analysis (1–4), including considerations as to the interests and social positionality of the analyst.

Since my previous publication of a critical realist approach to CDA (Faure Walker 2019), it has been brought to my attention that the schema's focus on a (social) 'phenomenon' (Stages 1 and 2), then a (social) 'problem' (Stage 3), then a (social) 'problem or ill' (Stage 5) might cause some confusion. For clarity, the 'phenomenon' investigated in Stages 1 and 2 will likely be subjected to CDA because it is seen as problematic. However, it is only through the analysis carried out in Stages 1 and 2 that this will be corroborated. If it is deemed problematic, then the analysis should continue into the latter stages. Thus, the 'phenomenon' of the earlier stages is only defined as a 'problem' or 'ill' in the latter stages.

Fairclough has latterly engaged in 'CDA as dialectical reasoning' (Fairclough 2017) and it has also been suggested to me that this might offer greater clarity over the type of analysis carried out in Stages 5 and 5*. Dialectical reasoning offers the opportunity of not only incorporating social contestation such as class struggle into the analysis, but also the internal conversations that it is proposed that the analyst might have in these latter stages. The stages of deliberation described in Chapter 7 of *Political Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013) are a particularly useful example of how this might contribute to Stage 5. However, Stage 5* is adopted from Bhaskar's schema for CDA (2016, 109) that was described after his developments of metaReality (Bhaskar 2012; 2002, 339–363). It is thus understood that this self-reflection might result in a moment of non-duality that could result in a shift in the positionality of the analyst away from the dialectic relations or contestation of social and political arguments. At this stage and depending on their positionality, the analyst might choose to adopt or to eschew Fairclough's 'dialectical reasoning'. Thus, while Fairclough's development of dialectical reasoning may be useful to draw on for some approaches to CDA, including those following the schema developed here, it is not incorporated into the schema itself.

Conclusion

This revised schema offers those who adopt and develop a Bhaskarian approach to critical realist CDA a more logically coherent structure to work with. Specifically, by removing 'notional' as a noun, there is a greater sense of process to the final stages of the schema that should better guide future analysis, with Stage 5 offering a moment of dialectical praxis and Stage 5* offering the possibility of the analyst addressing their metaReal self. Fixing these as stages of the schema, rather than as 'notional' possibilities, will assist both the future application and development of this method of critical analysis.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to both Mervyn Hartwig and John O'Regan for their advice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council: [Grant Number ES/W005786/1].

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