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This is the published version of:

Terry, DR, The Critical Discourse Analysis paradox: A brief research reflection, Internet Journal of Language, Culture and Society, (38) pp. 42-44. (2013)

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The Critical Discourse Analysis paradox: A brief research reflection

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Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a means of criticising or critiquing the social order of power, inequality and hegemony in language. Within a doctoral study CDA was used to determine if social power, dominance, and inequality are enacted and reproduced through the text and talk of key participants. A reflection of the researcher experiences is provided as the results were analysed and prepared for publication. The discussion highlights there are other also discourses of power and hegemony which may impact researchers and authors themselves as they report and discuss discourse which marginalises those individuals and groups for whom the research is being conducted. As researchers and academics attempt to articulate and discuss discourse which marginalise and stigmatise, they need to acknowledge and recognise the discourse, which impacts their own ability to advocate for change, adjustment and empowerment.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, hegemony, social power, reflexivity, researcher*

Introduction

Using reflexivity within my own research had made me recently reflect and ponder the experiences of a recent event within my doctoral studies. The use of reflexivity is to show the rigor and validity of qualitative research amongst of the factors (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). In addition, it provides insights into what and how knowledge has been construction and to ensure no bias or ambiguity is present (Jørgensen, 2003; Pillow, 2003). The doctoral journey is full of ups and down, much like a roller-coaster at times. There are outside pressures which impact on one's own performance and there are also internal struggles, which make one doubt and question oneself, yet, many seem to make it through those tough times. Conversely, one can have wonderful, exhilarating and excitement as one continues on this journey (Creedy, 2008). One such experience had occurred recently where doubt had crept in which produced a greater endeavour and conviction to move forward.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Early in my doctoral studies, I was encouraged to investigate Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a method to analyse the data I was yet to collect. This type of analysis focuses on moving beyond describing discursive practices, and is principally concerned with illustrating how discourse is fashioned and wrought by its relationship with power and ideologies (Billig, 2003; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). It therefore inherently incorporates viewpoints such as ideology, hegemony and discourse to explore language and power relationships within societies (Dunmire, 2011; Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Wodak & Meyer (2009, p. 3) highlighted CDA uses problem-oriented approaches and "is characterised by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and retroductable investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken or visual)".

As I read and thought about this method of analysis I found it resonated deeply to the core and with the central beliefs which I have possessed since my childhood. It was slightly amusing for me to 'discover' CDA and that it reverberated with my propensity to view the world, what people say and how they behave. It was as though I was finally able to articulate, express, and to hone those skills of what



I had been doing for a long time – looking at the world differently and observe how language and discourse in society creates dominance and inequality (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Van Dijk, 2001).

Critical Discourse Analysis is a means of criticising or critiquing the social order of power and inequality in language (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Van Dijk, 2001). In other words it is critical because it is rooted in a thorough critique of social relations (Billig, 2003). As such, CDA “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” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). It considers language as social practice where a relationship exists between an event and the situation in which it occurs (Wodak, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The use of CDA within the study was to observe and determine the areas where social power, dominance, and inequality were being enacted, reproduced, and resisted through the text and talk of participants.

In addition, the context itself, where the language being used occurs is seen as being vital. As such, discourse establishes

situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It... helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo [and] can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between... social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258)

Moreover, discourse is “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned [it] is an opaque power object in modern societies” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). CDA thus aims to bring this power out of obscurity and make it more discernible. As Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000, p. 449) state CDA “should have effects in society: empowering the powerless, giving voices to the voiceless, exposing power abuse, and mobilizing people to remedy social wrongs”. Despite CDA being about understanding the relationship between discourse and power within text and speech, it moves beyond this understanding. It aims to be a means to “make proposals for change and suggest corrections to particular discourses. CDA thus openly professes strong commitments to change, empowerment, and practice-orientedness” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449).

Needless to say, data was collected and analysed using a number of methods, including CDA which made me begin to observe more fully the presence and social order of power and inequality in language among a number of the participants under observation (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Van Dijk, 2001). It was within this context I was analysing the data, while evaluating the findings and writing the outcomes of the analysis.

Immobilised by the discourses of power

Not long after, I began to write a journal manuscript which was subsequently reviewed and re-reviewed several times. It was noted some of the impassioned language and generalisations used in the manuscript required modification, which was undertaken. However, I was slightly surprised at the response which I had regarding the manuscript when last reviewed, that those who reviewed it were uncomfortable. It was indicated there was some concern associated with the repercussions of being associated with the manuscript. The manuscript was to give voices to the voiceless and to empower the powerless and highlight the need for change, but I found it had a potential immobilising influence on those around me. Paradoxically I could also see those who were concerned were influenced by a discourse of hegemony and power.

After the initial disappointment of hearing the reluctance, I could see, understand and respect where the others were coming from, as there were future employment and collaborative ventures, which the manuscript in its current form may have impacted on. As a result of this hegemony and power over those around me, I was subsequently being impacted by this hegemony – the irony and injustice, I thought to myself. In an attempt to make others aware of current discourse, to create discussion and to effect change, I was being impacted by these same discourses of power which I was reporting.

After sharing my frustration and disappointment I was reminded by a colleague, “Critical Discourse Analysis is an interesting new field, which has its vigour and controversy. But most important of all, we need conviction to do what we strongly think and feel” (Lê, 2012). So as I continue on with my analysis and endeavour to publish the findings of my doctoral studies, I am reminded that those who study and use CDA are advocates for those groups who are affected by hegemony, but also those who are



immobilised by the discourses of power (Meyer, 2001). As such, further research may be required to determine if this symbolic violence or tacit power is an ongoing phenomenon experienced by CDA researchers (Bourdieu, 1986).

Conclusion

Critical Discourse Analysis is a means of criticising or critiquing the social order of power, inequality and hegemony in language within societies, among professional bodies, media and government. A reflection of a researcher's experiences within a doctoral study and subsequent publication was provided. The experience was regarding the use of CDA examining social power, dominance, and inequality which were enacted and reproduced through the text and talk of key participants. The discussion highlighted there are other discourses of power and hegemony which impact researchers and authors themselves as they report and discuss discourses which marginalise those individuals and groups for whom the research is being conducted. Despite attempting to articulate and discuss those sources of discourse which marginalisation and stigmatisation, researchers and CDA supporters need to recognise and acknowledge those discourses, which may impact on their own ability to be advocates for change, adjustment and empowerment.

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