

Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis

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This paper discusses some principles, aims and criteria of a critical discourse analysis (CDA). It tries to answer (critical) questions such as what is critical discourse analysis (anyway)? , How is it different from other types of discourse analysis? , What are its aims, special methods, and especially what is its theoretical foundation? Also, it acknowledges the need to examine, in rather practical terms. How one goes about doing a critical analysis of text and talk.

In general, the answers to such questions presuppose a study of the relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships. Power and even power abuse may seem jointly produced, e.g. when dominated groups are persuaded, by whatever means, that dominance is natural or otherwise legitimate. Therefore, although an analysis of strategies of resistance and challenge is crucial for our understanding of actual power and dominance relations in society, and although such an analysis needs to be included in a broader theory of power, counter-power and discourse, our critical approach prefers to focus on the elites and their discursive strategies for the maintenance of inequality.

From a discourse analytical and sociopolitical point of view it is tempting to study the relations between discourse structures and power structures more or less directly. This will often be effective and adequate. For instance, we may assume that directive speech acts such as commands or orders may be used to enact power, and hence also to exercise and to reproduce dominance. Similarly, we may examine the style, rhetoric or

meaning of texts for strategies that aim at the concealment of social power relations, for instance by playing down, leaving implicit or understating responsible agency of powerful social actors in the events represented in the text.

However, the relationships involved and the conditions on reproduction are more complicated than that. For instance, social inequality, at the societal level, is not simply or always reproduced by individual (speech) acts such as commands. This may be obvious from commands appropriately and legitimately executed in relationships of more or less accepted everyday power relations, such as those between parents and children, between superiors and subordinates, or between police officers and citizens. Hence, special social conditions must be satisfied for such discourse properties to contribute to the reproduction of dominance. The same is true for all other properties of text and talk, and hence for all text-context relations. Apparently, It is Involved in dominance are questionable conditions of legitimacy or acceptability, including what is usually called abuse of power, and especially also possibly negative *effects* of the exercise of power, namely social inequality.

Another major complication we must address is the fact that typical macro-notions such as group or institutional power and dominance, as well as social inequality, do not directly relate to typical micro-notions such as text, talk or communicative interaction. This not only involves the well-known problem of macro-micro relations in sociology, but also, and perhaps even more interestingly, the relation between society, discourse and social cognition.

Although often dealing with language, text or discourse in many (usually rather philosophical) ways, most of this work does not explicitly and systematically deal with discourse structures. We had to wait for the various contributions in critical linguistics and social semiotics, first and primarily in the UK and Australia, to get a more detailed view of the other side of the relationship, namely an analysis of the structures of text and

image, even if such linguistics and semiotic approaches usually did not aim to provide sophisticated sociopolitical analyses (Chilton, 1985; Fairclough, 1989; Fowler et al., 1979; Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress and Hodge, 1979).

From a different perspective, the same critical approach characterizes much of the work in some directions of German and Austrian sociolinguistics, e.g. on language use of/with immigrant workers, language barriers, fascism and anti-semitism (Dittmar and Schlobinski, 1985; Ehlich, 1989; Wodak, 1985, 1989; Wodak et al., 1987, 1989, 1990; Wodak and Menz, 1990), some of which goes back to the critical sociolinguistic paradigm of Bernstein (1971-5).

Such a discussion should specify, inter alia, the criteria that are characteristic of work in CDA. Instead, we shall simply, and perhaps naively, summarize such criteria by saying that in our opinion CDA should deal primarily with the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result from it. Let us spell out some implications of such a lofty overall aim (see also Mey, 1985; O Barr, 1984; Steiner, 1985).

First, the focus on dominance and inequality implies that, unlike other domains or approaches in discourse analysis, CDA does not primarily aim to contribute to a specific discipline, paradigm, school or discourse theory. It is primarily interested and motivated by pressing social issues, which it hopes to better understand through discourse analysis. Theories, descriptions, methods and empirical work are chosen or elaborated as a function of their relevance for the realization of such a sociopolitical goal. Since serious social problems are naturally complex, this usually also means a multidisciplinary approach, in which distinctions between theory. Description and application become less relevant. This focus on fundamental understanding of social problems such as dominance and inequality does not mean ignoring theoretical issues. On the contrary, without complex and highly sophisticated

theories no such understanding is possible.

Central to this theoretical endeavor is the analysis of the complex relationships between dominance and discourse. Unlike other discourse analysts, critical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit sociopolitical stance: they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large. Although not in each stage of theory formation and analysis, their work is admittedly and ultimately political. Their hope, if occasionally illusory, is change through critical understanding. Their perspective, if possible, that of those who suffer most from dominance and inequality. Their critical targets are the power elites that enact, sustain, legitimate, condone or ignore social inequality and injustice. That is, one of the criteria of their work is solidarity with those who need it most. Their problems are real problems, that is the serious problems that threaten the lives or well-being of many, and not primarily the sometimes petty disciplinary problems of describing discourse structures, let alone the problems of the powerful (including the problems the powerful have with those who are less powerful, or with those who resist it). Their critique of discourse implies a political critique of those responsible for its perversion in the reproduction of dominance and inequality. Such a critique should not be ad hoc, individual or incidental, but general, structural and focused on groups, while involving power relations between groups. In this sense, critical discourse scholars should also be social and political scientists, as well as social critics and activists. In other words, CDA is unabashedly normative: any critique by definition presupposes an applied ethics.

However, unlike politicians and activists, critical discourse analysts go beyond the immediate, serious or pressing issues of the day. Their structural understanding presupposes more general insights, and sometimes indirect and long-term analyses of fundamental causes, conditions and consequences of such issues. And unlike most social and political scientists, critical discourse scholars want to make a more specific contribution, namely to get more insight into the crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of

dominance and inequality.

Critical discourse analysis is far from easy. In my opinion it is by far the toughest challenge in the discipline. As suggested above, it requires true multidisciplinary, and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture. Its adequacy criteria are not merely observational, descriptive or even explanatory (Fairclough, 1985). Ultimately, its success is measured by its effectiveness and relevance, that is, by its contribution to change. In that respect, modesty is mandatory: academic contributions may be marginal in processes of change, in which especially those who are directly involved, and their acts of resistance, are the really effective change agents. This has become particularly clear from large processes of change such as class struggles, decolonization, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women s Movement.

Yet, although occasionally marginal, academics have also shown their presence and contributions in these movements. Critical discourse analysts continue this tradition: the 1990s are replete with persistent problems of oppression, injustice and inequality that demand their urgent attention.

Such aims, choices and criteria of CDA have implications for scholarly work. They monitor theory formation, analytical method and procedures of empirical research. They guide the choice of topics and relevancies. Thus, if immigrants, refugees and (other) minorities suffer from prejudice, discrimination and racism, and if women continue to be subjected to male dominance, violence or sexual harassment, it will be essential to examine and evaluate such events and their consequences essentially from their point of view. That is, such events will be called racist or sexist if knowledgeable Blacks or women say so, despite white or male denials.

There cannot be an aloof, let alone a neutral, position of critical scholars. Critical scholars should not worry about the interests or perspectives of those in power, who are best placed to take care of their own interests anyway.

Most male or white scholars have been shown to despise or discredit such partisanship, and thereby show how partisan they are in the first place, e.g. by ignoring, mitigating, excluding or denying inequality.

They condemn mixing scholarship with politics, and thereby they do precisely that. Some, even more cynically and more directly, collude with dominance, e.g. by expert advice, support and legitimating of the (western, middle-class, white, male, heterosexual, etc.) power elites. It is this collusion that is one of the major topics of critical discourse analysis.

Most of this has been said many times, in many modes and styles of formulation, both within and outside of science and scholarship. Yet, within the framework of this paper, within this special issue, and within this journal, it does not hurt to repeat such statements, which may be trivialities for some, unscientific slogans for others, and basic principles for us. What counts, henceforth, is only to draw the consequences for adequate critical research.

One crucial presupposition of adequate critical discourse analysis understands the nature of social power and dominance. Once we have such an insight, we may begin to formulate ideas about how discourse contributes to their reproduction. To cut a long philosophical and social scientific analysis short, we assume that we here deal with properties of relations between social groups. That is, while focusing on *social* power, we ignore purely personal power, unless enacted as an individual realization of group power, that is, by individuals as group members. Social power is based on privileged access to socially valued resources, such as wealth, income, position, status, force, group membership, education or knowledge. Below we shall see that special access to various genres, forms or contexts of discourse and communication is also an important power resource (for further details on the concept of power, see, e.g. Clegg, 1989, Lukes, 1986).

Power involves *control*, namely by (members of) one group over (those of) other groups. Such control may pertain to *action* and *cognition*: that is, a powerful group may limit the freedom of action of others, but also influence

their minds. Besides the elementary recourse to force to directly control action (as in police violence against demonstrators, or male violence against women), modern and often more effective power is mostly cognitive, and enacted by persuasion, dissimulation or manipulation, among other strategic ways to *change the mind of others in one's own interests*. It is at this crucial point where discourse and critical discourse analysis come in: managing the mind of others is essentially a function of text and talk. Note, though, that such mind management is not always bluntly manipulative. On the contrary, dominance may be enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine, everyday forms of text and talk that appear natural and quite acceptable. Hence, CDA also needs to focus on the discursive strategies that legitimate control, or otherwise naturalize the social order, and especially relations of inequality (Fairclough, 1985).

Discourse analysis is specifically interested in power *abuse*, that is, in breaches of laws, rules and principles of democracy, equality and justice by those who wield power. To distinguish such power from legitimate and acceptable forms of power, and lacking another adequate term, we use the term *dominance*. As is the case with power, dominance is seldom total. It may be restricted to specific domains, and it may be contested by various modes of challenge, that is, counter-power. It may be more or less consciously or explicitly exercised or experienced. Many more or less subtle forms of dominance seem to be so persistent that they seem natural until they begin to be challenged, as was/is the case for male dominance over women, White over Black, rich over poor. If the minds of the dominated can be influenced in such a way that they accept dominance, and act in the interest of the powerful out of their own free will, we use the term *hegemony* (Gramsci, 1971; Hall et al., 1977). One major function of dominant discourse is precisely to manufacture such consensus, acceptance and legitimacy of dominance (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

The concept of hegemony, and its associated concepts of consensus, acceptance and the management of the mind, also suggests that a critical analysis of discourse and dominance is far from straightforward, and does not always imply a clear picture of villains and victims. Indeed, we have already suggested that many forms of dominance appear to be jointly produced through intricate forms of social interaction, communication and discourse. We hope that critical discourse analysis will be able to contribute to our understanding of such intricacies.

Power and dominance are usually organized and *institutionalized*. The social dominance of groups is thus not merely enacted, individually, by its group members, as is the case in many forms of everyday racism or sexual harassment. It may also be supported or condoned by other group members, sanctioned by the courts, legitimated by laws, enforced by the police, and ideologically sustained and reproduced by the media or textbooks.

This social, political and cultural organization of dominance also implies a *hierarchy of power*: some members of dominant groups and organizations have a special role in planning, decision-making and control over the relations and processes of the enactment of power. These (small) groups will here be called the *power elites* (Domhoff, 1978; Mills, 1956).

For our discussion, it is especially interesting to note that such elites also have special access to discourse: they are literally the ones who have most to say. In our discourse analytical framework, therefore, we define elites precisely in terms of their symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1982), as measured by the extent of their discursive and communicative scope and resources.

We have suggested that one of the social resources on which power and dominance are based is the privileged access to discourse and communication.

In our case it may mean that language users or communicators have more or less freedom in the use of special discourse genres or styles, or in the participation in specific communicative events and contexts. Thus, only

parliamentarians have access to parliamentary debates and top managers to meetings in the boardroom. People may have more or less active or passive access to communicative events, as is usually the case for journalists, professors or bosses when writing for, or speaking to, a more or less passive audience. Similarly, participants may have more or less control over the variable properties of the (course of) discourse and its conditions and consequences, such as their planning, setting, and the presence of other participants, modes of participation, overall organization, turn-taking, agenda, topics or style.

An analysis of the various modes of discourse access reveals a rather surprising parallelism between social power and discourse access: the more discourse genres, contexts, participants, audience, scope and text characteristics they (may) actively control or influence, the more powerful social groups, institutions or elites are. Indeed, for each group, position or institution, we may spell out a discourse access profile.

Thus, top business managers have exclusive access to executive board meetings, in which the most powerful is usually associated with the chair, who also controls the agenda, speech acts (e.g. who may command whom), turn allocation (who is allowed to speak), decision-making, topics and other important and consequential dimensions of such institutional talk. At the same time, managers have access to business reports and documents, or can afford to have those written for them; they have preferential access to the news media, as well as to negotiations with top politicians and other top managers. Similar profiles may be sketched for presidents, prime ministers, political party leaders, newspaper editors, anchor(wo)men, judges, professors, doctors or police officers.

Similarly, lack of power is also measured by its lack of active or controlled access to discourse: in everyday life, most ordinary people only have active access to conversations with family members, friends or

colleagues. They have more or less passive access to bureaucrats in public agencies or to professionals (e.g. doctors, teachers, police officers).

Within our present theoretical argument such examples may be analysed in different ways. Obviously, first of all, they are direct expressions of (political) power, by virtue of the special access representatives have to parliamentary debates (restricted only by the Speaker), and hence to the opinion formation of other parliamentarians, and indirectly to the media and the public. By expressing blatant prejudices, as does Mr Janman in, example 5, such a powerful elite group member at the same time lends weight to the acceptability of racist opinions, and thereby directly enacts discursive discrimination against minorities and immigrants.

Indeed, his contribution to the dominance of the white group most crucially consists of his influence on the Tory party in power, which is able to (and actually does) further restrict immigration. His talk is part of the discursively based decision process itself, and this decision may be racist in its own right when it specifically applies to non-European immigrants. In other words, political discourse directly enacts racism when being part of the decisions for actions or policies that cause or confirm ethnic or racial inequality. Since parliament in a democratic country is (theoretically) ultimately responsible for such decisions, we here witness the enactment of racism at the highest possible level. According to our thesis of the top-down direction of racism, this also means that all lower groups and institutions (e.g. the police) may feel similarly entitled to develop or maintain similar prejudices and similarly engage in discrimination. A most dramatic example of such top-down influence may be observed in Germany, where a protracted discussion by politicians and the press about refugees conditioned the popular racist attacks by skinheads against refugee reception centres in 1991 and 1992.

In other words, the reproduction of racism in parliamentary discourse is not limited to the enactment of inequality by political decision-makers, but also consists in influencing others. if only because of the credibility and

respectability of MPs. MPs not only express their own opinions, or those of their party or social group, but also try to persuade others, such as the opposition, to adopt them. Also, such expressions may be seen as a legitimation or justification of decisions. Most importantly, though, their discourse contributes to the reproduction of racism through their coverage in the media, which spread them among the population at large. If adopted by the media, as is often the case, the negative models of immigrants or minorities underlying such statements will eventually be persuasively presented to the audience of the mass media. We have already seen that due to a lack of alternative, anti-racist elite discourses and media, and because of their own best interests and corresponding ideologies and attitudes,

many members of the audience will tend to adopt such models. Such processes of persuasion involve not only persuasive argumentation and rhetoric, or congenial opinions, but also the authority with which the politicians and the media are able to present such models. The media have their own rich repertoire of means to further enhance and popularize the sometimes abstract and technical language and opinions of the politicians, e.g. by spreading scare stories about massive illegal immigration, welfare cheats, housing and employment shortages attributed to minorities, perceived cultural deviance (e.g. Islam) and especially black crime (drugs, mugging, violence).

To sum up, the enactment of (political) power as part of white group dominance in western countries is not limited to political decision-making and directly restricting the rights of minorities, but also, and perhaps more importantly, justifies and legitimates such acts through the manipulation of public opinion, usually through the mass media. This means that the politicians speak not only for their colleagues, but also for other elite groups, especially the media, and hence for the white population at large. In both

cases the main aim is to form and change ethnic models that may be used to make decisions or develop attitudes that may favor the unequal treatment of the others, and thereby to reproduce white group dominance.

This is also the reason why politicians, as soon as they speak negatively about minorities or immigrants, will use the facts that fit the stereotypical models that are derived from pre-existing popular attitudes they have helped to develop in the first place. Thus, they may invoke such prototypical model-events as refugees living in expensive hotels, increasing unemployment, inner city riots, cultural (religious) conflicts (Rushdie, young Muslim women who are forced to wear the veil, or South Asian women forced into arranged marriages), immigrants bringing in drugs (if not AIDS), welfare scroungers, minorities who lightly accuse us (employers, etc.) of discrimination, affirmative action programmers in employment and education that will favor less qualified minorities, and so on.

Hence, we only mention a few examples. If the matter has become a national issue not from Mr. Honeyford's choice this strongly implies that others, namely his opponents, have made a national issue of it, whereas it also (weakly) implies that Mr. Honeyford's publication in a widely read national newspaper (*Times Literary Supplement*) and later in the *Daily Mail* did nothing to contribute to the national issue. The use of small-circulation as a modifier of publication implies that, given the small audience of the publication (he probably refers to the extremist right-wing *Salisbury Review*), the publication is insignificant and hence not worth all the fuss and certainly not worth the ensuing holocaust. The major presupposition of this speech, however, is embodied in Mr Fox's rhetorical question: Who are the people who have persecuted him? , presupposing that there actually *were* people who persecuted him. Finally, important for the political power-play in parliament are the implications of his categorization of Honeyford's opponents as final remark.

Hence, the dominance expressed, signaled and legitimated in this speech does not merely reside in the political realm of the House of

Commons, for instance in Mr. Fox's role of MP, and as representative of a government party that is entitled to hold a debate about the Honeyford affair in parliament. Similarly, by attacking the Left he not only attacks Labor, as may be expected from a Tory speaker. Rather, the dominance involved here extends beyond parliament, namely to the media and especially to the public at large when Mr. Fox uses his political influence to publicly support a teacher of students whose parents think he writes racist things, and especially in order to discredit and marginalize both these parents and their supporters. Indeed, the rest of this speech, not analysed here, sketches in more detail what he sees as a wonderful teacher, while at the same time denying, as is common in much elite discourse, the racist nature of Honeyford's writings. That is, Mr. Fox's power, authority and dominance is not merely that of being an influential MP. Rather, his authority, namely in establishing what racism is, is that of a member of the white elite. It is in this way, therefore, that such a speech indirectly supports the system of ethnic-racial dominance, that is, racism.

There are many ways to do critical discourse analysis. Paradigms, philosophies, theories and methods may differ in these many approaches, and these may sometimes also be related to national differences, e.g. between French, German, British or American directions of research. Unfortunately, this is also one of the reasons why there has been much mutual neglect and ignorance among these different approaches. International, theoretical and methodological integration would obviously benefit the realization of a common aim, namely to analyse, understand and combat inequality and injustice.

To conclude, a few words of caution and hesitation are in order. We have stressed that, facing the real issues and problems of today's world, discourse analysis, whether critical or not, may not make much difference, unless we are able to contribute to stimulating a critical perspective among

our students or colleagues. To do that, we should persuade them not merely by our views or arguments, but also with our expertise. Although many studies in critical discourse analysis have shown that our results so far are encouraging, our expertise is still very limited.