**INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Critical discourse analysis comprises a suite of methodologies that share several features in common. Specifically, when researchers undertake critical discourse analysis, they closely analyse the words and strategies used in discourse—including speeches, memoranda, newspapers, social media, and other texts. In essence, their goal is often to understand how

* features of these texts, such as words, phrases, or even images, shape the attitudes of readers or listeners and thus can shift the distribution of power
* differences in power, and other social attributes, affect the words and expression of people.

Ultimately, proponents of critical discourse analysis strive to show how subtle features of discourse can foster or maintain inequalities of power. To illustrate, a simple phrase such as “the man claimed”, rather than “the man said”, instils doubt about this person. As a consequence of this awareness, the attempts of specific individuals or bodies to sustain or boost power unfairly may be thwarted, potentially redressing injustice.

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| **Examples of insights from critical discourse analysis** |

Critical discourse analysis originated from several books, including Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew (1979) as well as Kress and Hodge (1979). Nevertheless, along with Teun van Dijk and Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough is often deemed to be a key pioneer or founder of critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 1992, 2001, 2003, 2005). Certainly, many of the most common terms and techniques in this field emanated from his works. Yet, critical discourse analysis is not a unified set of techniques. Therefore, rather than read a specific textbook to learn about this methodology, you could first skim the following table. In particular

* the first column outlines some insights that have emerged from critical discourse analysis
* the second column presents some evidence that has been invoked to generate these insights
* these examples will impart a flavor of critical discourse analysis.

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| Theme | Verbal features invoked as evidence of themes |
| **Shifting blame from perpetrators to victims.** In their speech or writing, individuals often imply the victims were, at least, partly to blame. They might also diminish the responsibility of perpetrators | * “the victim **admits** she had experienced years of abuse”. The word “admits” implies fault and could have been supplanted with “said” (e.g., Easteal, 2018) * “the victim **claimed** she was punched” casts more doubt than does “the victim said” (e.g., Easteal, 2018) * “the victim was **allegedly** stabbed to death”. This stabbing is not merely an allegation but casts some doubt (e.g., Easteal, 2018) * “**domestic dispute**” or “troubling relationship” implies a mutual conflict rather than indicating that one person was the aggressor in a marriage (e.g., Easteal, 2018). * “handed himself to the police” magnifies the surrender, facilitating absolution and diminishing blame (e.g., Easteal, 2018) |
| **Dehumanizing or denigrating victims or patients**. In their speech or writing, individuals often depict victims or patients as objects of inquiry or machines rather than sentient beings. Alternatively, they might depict victims or patients as emotional rather than rationale | * When describing an ill child, professionals ascribes behaviors, such as limited eye gaze, to diagnoses rather than feelings, thoughts, or experiences (Hood, 2016) * “We do not want to upset the parents” implies parents are emotional rather than considered (Hood, 2016) |
| **Stereotyping of social identities**. In their speech or writing, individuals often reinforce stereotypes rather than recognize the diversity and nuances of various ethnicities, genders, and other categories | * In Iranian textbooks, women are often depicted alongside children, reinforcing their role as caregivers (Salami & Ghajarieh, 2016) |
| **Distancing themselves from other collectives.** In their speech or writing, individuals sometimes attempt to differentiate themselves from other groups | * When evaluating children, professionals use the word “we” when describing the opinions of colleagues but “they” when describing the opinions of parents |
| **Avoidance of offence**. In their speech or writing, individuals sometimes attempt to evade contentious issues | * The curriculum about sex education did not include the word “sex” to describe sexual activity (Ezer et al., 2018) * When advertising internships, organizations sometimes avoid references to pay—or facetiously imply that interns will not be paid with references to “free slurpees” (Discenna, 2016) * In addition, organizations refer more to learning than to work—to differentiate the role from paid work (Discenna, 2016) |
| **Sensationalism**. In their speech or writing, individuals often utilize devices to amplify the perceived significance of some event | Word use   * Refererences to unnecessary graphic images, such as “with knife in hand” or “speaking about the horror of the night” (e.g., Easteal, 2018)   Structure   * Use of a delayed lead—in which a newspaper article begins with a powerful or mysterious story before continuing as a typical journalistic article   Placement   * An article might be placed in a section that amplifies sensationalism, such as in the section called “Latest in entertainment” |

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| **Taxonomies to apply** |

**Three levels**

To undertake critical discourse analysis, Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001) encourages researchers to explore three levels, called dimensions (see also Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The following table outlines these three dimensions.

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| Dimensions | Illustrative considerations |
| **1 Text or micro level**. Direct your attention to linguistic features, such as the phrasing or grammar. | Has the speaker or author used   * specific words that could affect the attitudes towards some person or entity? For example, the phrase “the man admitted” implies some confession and thus subtly denigrates the man * grammar or phrasing that shapes attitudes? Passive voice can influence who seems responsible. “The boy was hit by the ball” implies the boy was not responsible * pictures that imply specific norms (e.g., see Salami & Ghajarieh, 2016) |
| **2 Discursive practice or meso level**. Direct your attention to the circumstances in which the text was disseminated as well as consumed—that is, read or heard | Consider   * the format and placement of the text or speech; for instance, an article that is assigned to a section called “Latest entertaining news” implies the issue is not serious—and might be designed to trivialize an issue * the values, interests, and positions of the author, speaker, readers, or listeners. For example, is this text accessibility to all readers and listeners? |
| **3 Social practice or macro level**. Consider how the social hierarchy or norms affects the text | Consider how features at the micro and meso level   * affect social practice—such as the extent to which one party is perceived as more powerful, credible, and moral, for example |

van Dijk (1993, 2003) recommends similar dimensions. However, at the meso level, van Dijk (1993, 2003) suggests that researchers consider the cognitions of authors, speakers, readers, or listeners, especially social cognition. Social cognition refers to shared assumptions, biases, interpretations, and inferences of groups.

**Key analytical frameworks**

In addition to these three dimensions, Fairclough (2003) also encourages researchers to apply several frameworks to analyse texts or speeches. The following table outlines these frameworks. These frameworks can help researchers orient their attention to key features of the text or speech.

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| Framework | Considerations |
| Representation of events | * Are specific people or issues granted prominence? * Are evaluations or value judgments included or omitted? * Are some people depicted as more active or responsible than other people—often by using active voice rather than passive voice? * Is the account concrete and detailed or abstract? |
| Assumptions | * Does the text or speech imply or assume information that is not explicitly stated? * Is some information touted as facts but actually speculations? |
| Style or identity | * Is the writer or speaker depicting themselves as part of a group—perhaps by using the word “we”—or as an individual? * Is the writer or speaker shifting their identity, personality, or style across the text or speech? |
| Inter-textuality | * Does the text or speech include quotes or insights from other conversations or documents? * Does this text or speech contradict or substantiate the speaker or writer? |

**Other taxonomies and approaches**

Many proponents of critical discourse analysis—or even other variants of discourse analysis—apply some of the tools that Gee differentiated, such as social languages, situated meanings, and figured worlds. In particular, when analysing discourse, such as text, researchers should consider

* social languages, or how writers and speakers use language to depict their identities and characteristics
* situated meanings, or how the meaning of language can shift, depending on the circumstances
* figured worlds, or how norms and role models affect interpretations

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| **Procedure** |

When applying critical discourse analysis, researchers can endorse a variety of epistemologies, theories, methods, and procedures. To illustrate a typical sequence of procedures, however, a researcher might

* choose a topic they want to explore, such as domestic violence or retrenchments
* collect some texts that explore this topic, such as a newspaper report, website, advertisement, and so forth. Indeed, Wodak and Meyer (2001) recommend that researchers systematically collect, collate, and contrast a sample of discourses, such as newspapers or advertisements, about a topic
* explore each line of text closely, initially identifying words or phrases that are not routinely used in this circumstance and could thus shape interpretations
* assign codes—short labels—to words, phrases, and sentences that may affect readers or listeners
* arrange these codes into broader categories to uncover vital themes or insights
* although optional, perhaps conduct some interviews to ascertain whether the conclusions of researchers match the perceptions of readers or listeners (e.g., Salami & Ghajarieh, 2016)
* report the analysis, similar to how you would write a typical qualitative report in your field; for example, you might describe your positionality, such as how your own background may be relevant to the topic and may affect your interpretations.

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| **Limitations or criticisms of critical discourse analysis** |

Many criticisms have been levelled at critical discourse analysis. Therefore, if you apply this approach, you should concede some of these limitations. For example

* researchers seldom ask the producers—the writers or speakers—why they utilized these words; they seldom ask the consumers—the readers or listeners—how they interpreted their words. Consequently, the interpretations of researchers are speculative
* researchers tend to disregard other more immediate features of the setting that may have limited the choice of words that writers or speakers could use
* to derive insights from text, researchers cannot apply some methodical, validated procedure; they merely scrutinize the text

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