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Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis represents a variety of theories, methodologies, and definitions. Encompassing the theoretical concepts of discourse theory and critical theory, as well as suggesting a method for uncovering the relationships among these various perspectives, critical discourse analysis (abbreviated as CDA in most contexts) is the study of texts, speech, and visual images to uncover the shared meanings that contribute to, or represent, social structures and ideologies. CDA is distinguished from discourse analysis by its explicit political and social goals; it assumes that discourse structures constitute social inequality and injustice and seeks to expose those structures in both the production and reception of written, spoken, and/or visual messages. CDA is concerned with studying and analyzing how power relations, inequality, and dominance are created and perpetuated through discourse within various political, social, and historical contexts. By unmasking the workings of such discourse practices, CDA scholars hope to subvert—or at least resist—those practices in the interests of social justice.

CDA does not provide one single or specific theory or research methodology. Rather, various theories and research methods have influenced the development of CDA. Epistemological theories, social theories, sociopsychological theories, discourse theories, and linguistic theories, to name only a handful, can be found in CDA. In essence, CDA brings a variety of theories into play by focusing both on the micro aspects of discourse (e.g., words, sentences, and images) and the macro aspects of social structures (e.g., production and reception of texts within a broader order of discourse). On the micro level, CDA assumes that power manifests in the usage patterns of words and images and that individuals participate in these construction processes in their use of language. On the macro level, CDA assumes that our identities (subjectivities) are constructed in and through the ways we produce and consume discourses and that language constructs our social and cultural worlds. Within both contexts, CDA assumes that social, cultural, identity, and power structures are not fixed—that changes in language usage can and do change that which is constructed. This social change is the goal of CDA.

The key terms of CDA are *discourse* and *critical.* In most usage related to CDA, discourse is distinguished from *texts,* which are specific utterances, images, or writings. Discourse is an overall form of knowledge and an arena that delimits certain expression. According to Michel Foucault, whose work influenced the development of CDA, the use of language and words is regulated through *discursive formations*—conventions and rules that constrain our knowledge and the meanings of things. Discourse, then, is the arena in which social relations, practices, and behaviors are constructed and maintained.

Concerns regarding the manifestation of power and the workings of ideology characterize the critical aspect of CDA. These concerns can be traced to the work of Marxists and the influence of Frankfurt School scholars who argued that certain ideologies are conveyed through textual and cultural forms. Ideology is an important concept in CDA because it is through ideology that power and inequality are maintained. Textual production and reception are social processes. The meanings of texts are often encoded by those in power, although the meanings and effects of language are also products of negotiation between producers, consumers, and the broader social/cultural context. Texts, then, can be open to contestation as various individuals and groups—producers and receivers—struggle over meanings and effects. The role of ideology, however, is to naturalize dominant structures so that the processes of meaning making and social construction are obscured. CDA aims to make these processes visible by asking whether texts serve powerful interests or structures of domination, by evaluating whether one representation or identity is selected or constructed in particular

ways, and by asking who produces the representations and what their motivations might be.

Finally, CDA considers the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts of discourses and how discourses have evolved or developed over time. It is important to understand context in order to analyze *intertextuality,* a concept used by Norman Fairclough to analyze the structure and organization of texts in relationship to other texts and their contexts. Intertextuality refers to the ways that texts are implicated in other texts or draw on prior texts. It is through an analysis of intertextuality that the relationship between texts and social structures may be uncovered. This analysis becomes especially meaningful when the various contexts in which discourse practices and texts occur are taken into consideration.

Concerns and Focus of Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA has several intellectual traditions that have produced various forms of analysis over the years. In addition to Marxist theory and the insights of the Frankfurt School, the work of Jürgen Habermas, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, and British cultural studies scholars have influenced the direction and concerns of CDA since its beginnings in the 1970s. A group of scholars in the United Kingdom, who were influenced by the work of linguist Michael Halliday (although some used approaches from Noam Chomsky, the work of Roland Barthes, and early French semioticians), developed an approach called critical linguistics in the 1970s. Critical linguistics sought to analyze texts as instruments of social and political power. Borrowing from the structuralist-functionalist tradition and Russian formalism, critical linguists used words and sentences as their units of analysis. They structured their interpretations in three areas identified by Halliday: the ideational dimension (which is similar to the ideological focus on the relationship between language and social structure); the interpersonal function (which is that aspect of language that defines how relationships are structured in language—whether one-way or two-way, argument, or dialogue, for instance—and how identities are constructed); and the textual function (which considers the structure and form of the text itself and its genre). Despite the three-pronged analysis, critics charged that this approach was too centered on the text itself and did not consider the practices of production or the possible interpretations of texts, which would lead to an analysis of meaning as changeable and as the result of social struggle. Building on these concerns, Australian social semioticians in the 1980s and 1990s incorporated poststructuralist ideas as well as the insights of French structuralism and semiotics into their work and developed a focus on intertextuality and the ways that discourses constitute identities and subjectivities.

Norman Fairclough built on the work of the Australian scholars to produce his theory of discourse and social change. He combined the mostly linguistic study of words and texts with an emphasis on Foucault's notion of discursive formations to study more specifically the ways that texts are implicated in social and cultural forms. In the late 1980s, Fairclough developed an analytical framework for researching language in relation to power and ideology and in relation to social and cultural change. He also suggested that mass media are powerful sites for research both in their use of language and in their manifestation of particular routines—or practices—that influence the character and meaning of a text. In addition, Fairclough argued that discourses needed to be analyzed within the broader arena of discursive formations and their interrelations (what he called *orders of discourse).* Thus, CDA expanded to include not just individual texts (and the internal linguistic structure of texts) but also the ways in which they intersect with other texts and with other discourses to form powerful, constitutive orders of discourse.

Other scholars have contributed to the theoretical and methodological development of CDA. In the late 1980s, Michel Pêcheux, who also was influenced by Althusser and Foucault, developed the notion of interdiscursivity, noting that various discourses can interact and intersect (for instance, the discourses of economics and politics). During this same period, Teun van Dijk developed cognitive models in order to understand how individuals process the meanings of texts and how meanings circulate socially and culturally. Van Dijk is known for his critical analysis of discourses that encode prejudice and racism, for example. This contribution added to the theoretical base of CDA that concerns itself with the reception and consumption of texts as well as the theoretical concerns regarding the ideological power of texts. The Vienna School of CDA in the late 1990s focused on language use in institutional settings and introduced the historical perspective. In addition, scholars in this tradition study the construction of identity at national and transnational levels. Scholars associated with this school are Ruth Wodak and Gilbert Weiss. At the end of the 1990s, CDA scholars began to turn away from the purely linguistic analysis of texts to include visual texts and the meaning of images. This "semiotic turn" expanded the range of CDA studies to include film, television, and music.

Approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis

Practitioners of CDA use different tools or methods for uncovering the mechanisms by which discourse functions. As defined above, texts are the primary unit of analysis—whether spoken, written, or visual. Analysts consider the various representations in texts, the framing techniques, linguistic features such as grammatical structure and modality, what is excluded from the text, how individuals are implicated in the text, and how texts interact with other texts in a discursive field. The form of a text—or its genre—is also considered. Genres are identifiable, repeated forms of communication such as the news broadcast, the television Western, political speeches, textbooks, business letters, and so on. These forms of communication follow certain conventions; as such, they are seen to have ideological effects. The validity of a message, for instance, may be strengthened if it is delivered in the form of a policy or newscast because individuals are used to hearing and responding to messages of these genres in particular ways. In addition, specific ideas or discourses may be found repeatedly in certain genres; for example, television Westerns feature discourses of gender and heroism; political speeches may contain discourses of patriotism and public service. Thus, in addition to the actual messages contained within them, genres communicate ideas and meanings that are shared socially and culturally because of the form in which they are delivered.

Fairclough's approach to CDA considers three levels of analysis: the text itself; the processes of producing (creating, writing, speaking) and receiving (reading, hearing, interpreting) texts (what he calls *discursive practices);* and the larger social context in which texts are created and consumed. Texts perform the ideational and interpersonal aspects identified by Halliday— that is, they convey certain representations of the world and establish relations among participants. In addition, they provide the building blocks for identity construction, both in the ways that people identify themselves and how they are identified by others. Discursive practices refer to the rules and conventions by which texts are produced and consumed. One may consider, for instance, the economic considerations of producers who tailor their products to fit audience demands as well as the viewing or reading habits of particular demographic groups. But it also implicates the more subtle, socially conditioned ways that messages are produced, circulate, and are interpreted—why some messages predominate, are taken as common sense, or are difficult to dismantle (ideas regarding gender, race, and age are

examples). Texts and their practices of production and consumption are considered within the broader arena of discursive formations and interdiscursivity (orders of discourse) to uncover their ideological and social construction effects. Finally, a consideration of specific political, historical, and social contexts provides a necessary frame for understanding the power and meaning of texts and discourse.

In spite of myriad, interdisciplinary approaches, CDA is unified around basic principles, identified by Ruth Wodak and Norman Fairclough, which include an orientation toward social problems such as racism, sexism, and social change; eclecticism in theories and methods; investigation "from the inside," which means that analysis begins with the textual artifact first, rather than making the data fit a theory; consideration of intertextual and interdiscursive relationships; an accounting of historical context; specification of the precise method of analysis used in a given study (due to the eclectic approach); and application of the results of analysis—often toward the goal of changing oppressive discursive and social practices.

- critical discourse analysis
- intertextuality
- text structure
- discursive formations
- discourse analysis
- discourse
- discourse theory

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See also

- Constitutive View of Communication
- Critical Theory
- Discourse Theory and Analysis
- Language and Communication
- Materiality of Discourse
- Meaning Theories
- Social Justice

Further Readings

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