A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR APPLYING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO TEXTUAL DATA

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a stepwise methodological framework for applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to textual data using a toolkit-based model. Grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional framework and informed by van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective, the model provides a structured analytic process that moves from textual features to discursive practice and finally to social explanation. Four analytical lenses consisting of topicalisation, lexicalisation, metaphor and intertextuality serve as the core tools of the framework, guiding the systematic interpretation of the data. A ten-step protocol is introduced to enhance transparency, replicability and procedural clarity while preserving CDA's interpretive depth. A full worked example, using the BBC News report which announced the first UK COVID-19 lockdown, demonstrates the model in practice. The article concludes with reflections on trustworthiness, reflexive validity and epistemological challenges inherent in CDA.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Method, Fairclough, Van Dijk, media discourse, methodological framework.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches language as a social practice, emphasising that discourse participates in constructing, maintaining and challenging relations of power and ideology. However, despite its firm theoretical grounding, CDA is often criticised for lacking procedural clarity (Widdowson, 1998). Researchers frequently struggle to convert CDA's conceptual foundations into a structured, replicable method. The challenge lies in CDA's breadth. It encompasses textual features, discursive processes and socio-ideological explanation, oftentimes leading a methodological drift (Breeze, 2011).

This article responds by proposing a stepwise CDA model that preserves theoretical richness while offering methodological structure. The model integrates Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (Fairclough, 1995) with van Dijk's socio-cognitive orientation (Van Dijk, 1998) and combines them through four analytical lenses and a ten-step protocol. The aim is not to reduce CDA to mechanical coding, but to provide a clear route through which interpretation can proceed systematically.

2.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CDA

Fairclough conceptualises discourse as simultaneously text, discursive practice and social practice (Fairclough, 1995). This three-layered model requires analysis to move triangularly among linguistic forms, interpretive processes and the socio-institutional conditions that shape

discourse. At the textual level, CDA examines concrete linguistic features, such as lexis, modality, transitivity, cohesion, nominalisation and rhetorical structure, to reveal how meaning is encoded. For example, modality (must, should, may) may signal authority or obligation while passivisation obscures responsibility. At the level of discursive practice, the focus shifts to the production, distribution and consumption of discourse, examining how texts draw on pre-existing discourses and genres to achieve legitimacy or coherence. This includes attention to interdiscursivity and intertextuality. Intertextuality refers to how a text draws on or incorporates other texts either explicitly or implicitly. This could be done through quotations, references, presuppositions or echoes (Fairclough, 1992). Interdiscursivity, alternatively, designates how a text is composed of different types of discourses. It accounts for how multiple social discourses are combined to produce a particular meaning or ideological effect. While intertextuality highlights concrete textual traces, interdiscursivity focuses on the broader underlying discursive layers that structure what is said. Together, they reveal how texts are both shaped by and help reshape wider ranges of discourse. Institutional voices, genres or narratives are selectively appropriated or excluded for strategic effect. At the social practice level, interpretation moves beyond the text to address broader structures such as hegemony, ideology and institutional power relations, accounting for how discourse participates in the maintenance or transformation of social realities (Fairclough, 1995).

Van Dijk complements Fairclough's orientation by emphasising the cognitive link between discourse and society (Van Dijk, 1998). He argues that discourse both reflects and shapes constructed realities through a mediation between micro-level linguistic choices and macro-level ideological formations. Textually expressed meanings, such as lexical choices, draw on broader ideological schemata that position social groups, legitimise actions or naturalise hierarchies. Through repetition, thematic organisation and narrative framing, discourse contributes to the cognitive reproduction of dominance, shaping how individuals and groups perceive social issues, actors and events (Van Dijk, 1998).

Together, Fairclough and van Dijk provide a coherent and mutually reinforcing foundation for CDA. Fairclough offers a socio-institutional explanation of discursive processes while van Dijk elucidates the cognitive mechanisms through which discourse becomes socially consequential. In combination, their frameworks enable CDA to reveal how linguistic choices enact, sustain or challenge social structures by linking textual form, discursive practice and ideological effect.

3.0 A TOOLKIT-BASED CDA METHOD

To operationalise CDA as an analytic method, this article adopts four lenses of inquiry: topicalisation and lexicalisation (Van Dijk, 1998), intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992, 1995) and metaphor analysis (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

A/ Topicalisation: What is foregrounded, backgrounded or omitted?

B/ Lexicalisation: How word choice encodes perspective and evaluation?

C/ Metaphor: How figurative framing determines understanding?

D/ Intertextuality: Which voices, discourses or perspectives are included or excluded?

These analytical vantage points form a practical toolkit through which the textual dimension of CDA becomes methodologically productive before being connected to discursive and social practice in subsequent stages.

4.0 A TEN-STEP CDA PROTOCOL

The following ten-step protocol provides a structured analytic workflow that balances systematic procedure with the interpretive demands of CDA. It is designed to enhance transparency, replicability and methodological coherence while preserving CDA's commitment to a contextualised and critical interpretation of discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The protocol moves from research design to textual analysis and then to socio-ideological explanation, ensuring that each layer of Fairclough's three-dimensional model is addressed. The ten-fold protocol is as follows.

1/ Formulate a critical research question or set of questions that foreground relations of power, ideology, representation or hegemony rather than purely descriptive linguistic features (Van Dijk, 1993).

2/ Delimit the corpus and unit of analysis, specifying the dataset to ensure precision and coherence (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

3/ Prepare or transcribe the text producing a clean, stable version of the discourse event. Maintain punctuation and turn-taking features where relevant to meaning. This step is required when the data are not originally in written form.

4/ Build a codebook around the four lenses, clarifying indicators for each lens to guide consistent identification (Fairclough, 1992).

5/ Conduct pilot coding. Test the codebook on a small portion of the data to refine categories, reduce ambiguity and establish analytic reliability.

6/ Code the full text and memo emerging patterns. Apply the coding scheme systematically, documenting interpretive insights, irregularities or emergent discourses.

7/ Interpret discursive practice by examining how the text draws on or reproduces discourses, genres or intertextual resources, in addition to how it is produced, circulated and experienced (Fairclough, 1995).

8/ Explain social practice and ideology by linking textual and discursive findings to broader ideological, institutional or socio-political structures (Van Dijk, 1993).

9/ Ensure reflexive transparency by acknowledging the researcher's interpretive stance, theoretical commitments and potential biases (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

10/ Report findings with traceable textual evidence, supporting each claim with direct excerpts that demonstrate how interpretations are grounded in linguistic and discursive features (Fairclough, 1992).

This protocol offers a replicable analytic pathway that strengthens methodological accountability while protecting the depth, reflexivity and critical orientation that distinguish CDA from purely formal or descriptive approaches.

5.0 WORKED EXAMPLE: BBC LOCKDOWN ANNOUNCEMENT

The following excerpt is taken from a BBC News report issued at the time of the UK's first national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

> From Monday people should stop non-essential contact and travel, the Prime Minister has told the UK. He said: 'You must stay at home' but added: 'If you work in a job that must be done, you can still go to work.' People will be allowed to leave their homes only for food, health reasons, or one form of exercise a day, the PM said. 'If you go out, stay two metres apart from others,' he added. (BBC News, 2020)

The following is an application of the four analytical lenses of the toolkit to the excerpt, before situating the findings at the levels of discursive practice and social practice.

5.1 Topicalisation

The text foregrounds a single, unchallenged theme: state-issued restrictions on mobility and contact. The Prime Minister is positioned as the principal agent while citizens are positioned as collective recipients of instructions. Alternative perspectives, scientific, economic, social or civic, are absent. The sequencing of information places directive action before justification, constructing the measures as already accepted necessities rather than open propositions. Topical emphasis on compliance, rather than debate or contingency, guides interpretation toward a unified national response.

5.2 Lexicalisation

The lexicon is administratively directive. Verbs such as "must stay" and phrases such as "allowed to leave" encode hierarchy and obligation. The adjective "non-essential" categorises human behaviour into legitimate and illegitimate forms, presupposing the state's authority to determine those boundaries. The absence of emotive vocabulary contributes to a neutral, managerial tone that presents the directives as procedural rather than ideological. Lexicalisation thus reproduces a frame in which power is sanitised through bureaucratic register.

5.3 Metaphor

The excerpt relies on a spatial-containment schema rooted in embodied cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The instruction to "stay two metres apart" activates a source domain of physical boundaries and controlled distance, which is projected onto the target domain of public health management. Under this conceptualisation, distance equals safety, and proximity equals threat. The crisis is thus metaphorically constructed as a problem of bounded space rather than, for instance, a structural, medical or socio-economic phenomenon. This spatial metaphor does more than describe behaviour. it organises perception. By coding risk as encroachment, the discourse encourages readers to conceptualise danger as something that

crosses spatial thresholds. As a result, responsibility is individualised. protection is achieved not through systemic or institutional action, but by maintaining one's own perimeter. The metaphor, therefore, obscures other possible framings, such as underfunded health infrastructure or unequal social vulnerability, by locating the solution in regulated personal space.

The source domain of containment also implies that safety is finite, measurable and enforceable. This reinforces the legitimacy of state-mandated limits. It positions compliance as a rational and minimally burdensome civic duty. Within CDA, this reveals how metaphor functions ideologically. By naturalising behavioural regulation as spatial common sense, it narrows the interpretive field and makes alternative framings, structural, political or ethical, less discursively salient.

5.4 Intertextuality

The excerpt contains one voice, the Prime Minister's. No medical experts, affected citizens or institutional counter-voices are present. This monologic intertextual space excludes contestation and constructs authority through singularity. By limiting the discursive space to a single speaker, the text naturalises the government's perspective as the default interpretive stance.

6.0 DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

At the level of discursive practice, the excerpt exemplifies a top-down model of communicative flow, in which institutional discourse is transmitted to the public with minimal discursive interference (Fairclough, 1995). The BBC, in this instance, acts less as a site of dialogic exchange and more as a gatekeeping institution that recontextualises governmental directives into journalistic form. However, this recontextualisation does not problematise the original voice. Instead, it streamlines and amplifies it. By reproducing the Prime Minister's words with little elaboration or counter-voicing, the media outlet functions as a relay of institutional messaging, rather than a forum that stages discursive plurality or deliberation.

The practice is also marked by limited interdiscursivity, drawing almost exclusively on the authoritative register of political crisis communication rather than incorporating scientific, civic or oppositional discourses. As a result, the interpretive scope available to the audience is narrowed, and meaning is driven rather than negotiated. In Fairclough's terms, the BBC contributes to the naturalisation of institutional discourse by embedding the Prime Minister's voice within the genre conventions of objective news reporting, thereby stabilising its authority (Fairclough, 1992). The discursive event is therefore characterised by amplification, legitimation and unidirectionality, rather than contestation, dialogue or ideological debate.

7.0 SOCIAL PRACTICE

At the level of social practice, the text contributes to the legitimation of emergency governance, wherein exceptional measures are normalised under the discursive conditions of crisis (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). By presenting mobility restrictions as necessary, temporary and self-evidently protective, the discourse reinforces a public-health logic in which social order is safeguarded through heightened state intervention. Appeals to collective

responsibility, civic duty and personal restraint serve to ensure compliance while minimising opportunities for deliberation or dissent. Through such framing, the discourse recontextualises constraints on civil liberties as responsible acts of citizenship. This ideological work is subtle rather than overt. It does not promote a specific political programme, but it naturalises a mode of governance in which executive authority supersedes discursive plurality during states of emergency. By privileging safety over contestation and unity over plurality, the discourse aligns with broader socio-political practices that suspend deliberative norms in favour of decisive and centralised action. Thus, the text participates in reproducing the idea that, under a crisis, governance by directive is both legitimate and desirable, reinforcing institutional power and backgrounding the horizon of imaginable alternatives.

8.0 EPISTEMIC RIGOUR IN CDA

CDA operates within an epistemologically hybrid framework. It seeks empirical grounding while advancing a project which at its core is critical and interpretive. This dual orientation generates a tension between demonstration and interpretation. Ensuring trustworthiness, therefore, requires traceable evidence, transparent analytic decisions and acknowledgment of interpretive limits. Reflexivity is central. It requires awareness of the researcher's positionality, theoretical commitments and potential biases. The stepwise analytical toolkit mitigates epistemological challenges by providing structure without reducing CDA to procedural positivism. It maintains methodological transparency, in lieu of pretence of objectivity, as the foundation of CDA.

9.0 CONCLUSION

This article proposes a toolkit-based CDA model that integrates Fairclough's and van Dijk's frameworks into a clear procedural workflow. By applying four analytical lenses and a ten-step protocol, the model enables systematic movement from text to discourse to ideology. The BBC example demonstrates the model's applicability in empirical analysis. The framework offers a replicable and transparent approach for future CDA research on textual data.

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