

A Critical Interpretation on *Language and Power*

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Abstract

There is a growing tendency among Chinese students to apply concrete theories by scholars with different backgrounds and predilections in Critical Discourse Analysis (hereinafter referred to as CDA) to conduct academic research. Seen from a general picture, CDA regards “language as social practice” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) and takes consideration of the context of language use to be crucial (Wodak, 2000). More importantly, CDA takes a particular interest in the relation between language and power. This paper intends to offer a basic overview of the constituent content in the landmark masterpiece *Language and Power* in CDA’s programme as well as a critical view on this influential book.

Key words: *Language and power*; Norman Fairclough; Critical Discourse Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

As popularly recognized, CDA is actually a cover term for a trans-disciplinary research project which investigates how power relations in society are established, maintained and reinforced by language use (Grady, 2019, p. 462). This new discipline centers on unveiling the ideology in the discourse, among which what concerns the majority of critical linguists is how discourse is able to become a site

of meaningful social difference, of conflict and struggle, and how this bring about many socio-structural effects.

With respect to its developmental trajectory, Chinese scholar Liu (2008) remarks that as early as 1970s, the focus of discourse analysis has been shifted from formal properties of language to the non-linguistic factors like “power relations”, “ideology” in the language. Furthermore, means of interdisciplinary development involving British Systemic Functional Linguistics, insightful ideas of Bakhtin, Bourdieu & Harbemas also precipitates the emergence of critical theories. It is thus based on these plentiful advancements that discourse analysis has tremendously broadened its range and deepened its explorations. Critical Linguistics (hereinafter referred to as CL) is consequently developed by a group of “socially-directed” and “politically-aware” scholars like Roger Fowler, Bob Hodge and deemed as the precursor to CDA. Later, CL was merged with social and critical theory and re-emerged as CDA. As Blommaert (2005, p.23) once put it, “Fairclough’s *Language and Power* (1989) is commonly considered to be the landmark publication for the start of CDA.” It consists of accessible yet challenging accounts of the most important issues to consider when examining the relationship between language and society, bringing ideological factors especially power relations to the forefront. In consideration of its magnitude in course of CDA’s evolution, this paper aims to explore what linguistic assumptions held by Norman Fairclough, a leading scholar dedicated to critical language study, and a corresponding critical review of its major pros and cons when applied in empirical researches.

AN OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE AND POWER

Primarily motivated to examine the ways we communicate are constrained by the structures and forces of those social institution, Fairclough intends to set up a framework

that helps correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power. Taken from a general picture, this book is composed of nine chapters that will be illustrated in sequence.

The first chapter serves as an introductory part. In the wake of clarifications of its writing objectives, both systematically and practically, and its focus in the process of writing this book, it also offers a brief characterization of existing approaches to language study. Although comparatively tenable in themselves, such theories as linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics are unsatisfactory from a critical point of view, which helps precipitate the emergence of Critical Language Study (hereinafter referred to as CLS). It is fully elaborated as “a broad conception of the social study of language at the core of language study.” (Fairclough, 1989, p.13) The common ground existing in previous theories lies in their relegating the social nature of language to a sub-discipline whereas CLS sets out to place a broad conception of the social study of language at the core of language study.

The second chapter gives a general picture of the place of language in society. On the whole, four pairs of relationships related to “language”, “discourse” and “society” are meticulously pinpointed. As for the relationship between language and discourse, when involved in CLS, the conception of language should be transformed to “discourse”, which is, in this sense, recognized as “a form of social practice”. In terms of “discourse” and “orders of discourse”, the latter referring to conventions as clustering in sets or networks, moreover, they embody particular ideologies. To be more precise, “social conditions of discourse” and “actual discourse” is determined by underlying conventions of discourse. How discourse are structured in a given order of discourse, and how this structuring change over time are determined by changing relationships of power at the level of the social institution. The third one is concerned with class and power in capitalist society. Ideologically, “orders of discourse” are shaped by power relations in social institutions. The last relationship deals with the dialectic of structures and practices in that discourse has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change.

The most salient achievement of Norman Fairclough is his three-dimensional model of discourse, as shown in the figure below. Here, discourse involves social conditions, specified as “social conditions of production” and “social conditions of interpretation”. These social conditions relate to three different “levels” of social organization: the level of the social situation, or the immediate social environment in which the discourse occurs; the level of the social institution which constitutes a wider matrix for the discourse; and the level of the society as a whole.

Methodologically speaking, these three dimensions of discourse correspond with three stages of critical discourse analysis. The first phase is description in which formal feature in the level of vocabulary, grammar, sentence of a specific text are detected and analyzed; the second stage is interpretation that is related to the relationship between text and interaction in the sense of seeing the text as the product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation; the last stage is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context, with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation and their social effects.

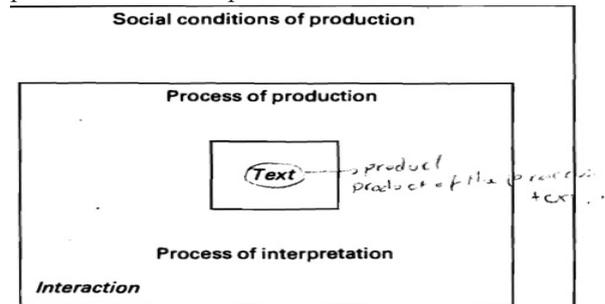


Figure 1
Social conditions of interpretation context

The third chapter focuses on two exceedingly pivotal concepts that are “discourse” and “power”, mainly to explore various dimensions of the relations of power and language. Within the discourse are two types of power: “power in discourse” and “power behind discourse”. The former signifies that discourse is seen as a place where relations of power are actually exercised and enacted; the latter spotlights how orders of discourse, are themselves shaped and constituted by relations of power. Sparkly different from face-to-face interactions where power is explicit represented, power relations in mass media presents themselves as implicitly inclined, or what Fairclough considered as “hidden power relations”.

The fourth chapter further discusses the view of “ideology” and its relationship to discourse. More specifically, the conventions routinely drawn upon in discourse embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere “common sense” and which contribute to sustaining existing relations. To start with, making sense of a whole text necessitates establishing a fit between “text” and “world”. That is to say, the sense of a whole text is generated when readers put together “what is in the text” and “what is already in the interpreter” that is the common-sense assumptions and expectations of the interpreter. Regarding that none of assumptions is asserted, a powerful way of imposing assumptions upon readers emerges, which is placing the interpreter through textual cues that someone have to entertain these assumptions. Except that, seen as “implicit philosophy” in social life, ideology is thought nothing of and even taken for granted that connects it to “common sense”. To put it another way, ideology is most effective when its workings are

least invisible and it is brought to discourse not as explicit elements of the text, but as “background assumptions”. Taking into account of the presence of a myriad of discourse types, Fairclough suggests that supposing a discourse type so dominates an institution that alternative dominated types are suppressed, it will become natural and legitimate. That is how the naturalization and absolute consolidation of a specific discourse type entrenches. Nevertheless, naturalization is not carved in stone, but a matter of degree, and the extent to which a discourse type is naturalized may change in accordance with the shifting balance of forces in social struggle. The more mechanical the functioning of an ideological assumption in the construction of coherent interpretations, the less likely it is to become a focus of conscious awareness.

The fifth chapter presents the first stage of critical discourse analysis advocated by Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of discourse, namely the description of texts whose attention is paid to how a close analysis of texts in terms of such features that contribute to our understanding of power relations and ideological processes in discourse. It organizes ten questions asked of text with their corresponding answers blazing a trail for detecting ideology-laden expressions. A bundle of analytical categories or concepts are briefly introduced and exemplified. It is noted that formal features are not chosen for causal purposes. The set of formal features can be regarded as particular choices from among the options available in discourse types. Possible analytical methods are offered through which some ideologies or implicit assumptions are to be revealed.

The sixth chapter deals with processes of producing and interpreting texts, and the analysis of their social determinants and effects. The relationship between text and social structure is indirectly mediated, with discursive practice serving as the intermediary agency lying in the middle. It is first of all mediated by the discourse, because the values of textual features only become socially operative under the condition that they are embedded in social interaction where texts are produced and interpreted against a background of common-sense assumptions giving textual features their values. It is mediated secondly by the social context of the discourse. It is reflected in the explanation stage of analysis in that “social values” can only be achieved as they are parts of institutional and societal processes of struggle.

Chapter seven explores changes in discourse always in sync with changes in society. Emphasis is particularly put on individual creativity and its social conditions, with a case study of the political discourse of Thatcherism. A series of questions pertinent to the interview are proposed for the purpose of digging out what power relations are embedded in this broadcasting interview and what efforts Thatcher pays to coordinate and entrench her “subject position” as a political leader. At the level

of interpretation, Thatcher has beneath her superficial acceptance of the interviewer’s definition of purposes, an unacknowledged strategic purpose, to make a politically favorable impact on the members’ of the public in the audience. At the stage of explanation, Thatcher’s discourse is treated as potentially ideologically determinative with respect to social relationships insofar as it effects a particular articulation of authority and solidarity in relations between Thatcher simultaneously as a political leader and “the public”.

In chapter eight, its focus shifts to large-scale discursive dimensions of major social tendencies so as to determine what part discourse has in social change. Extra attention is given to changes in the societal order of discourse during a particular period. Broadly speaking, contemporary capitalism is characterized by a degree of “colonization” of people’s lives by economic factors like money and power whose operation scheme lies in societal order of discourse. It also witness a prominent tendency for discourse types of consumerism, most notably the discourse of advertising and bureaucracy, is gaining ground within the order of discourse.

In chapter nine, broadly speaking, it looks at how CLS can contribute to struggles for social emancipation, especially for language education in schools. Critical language awareness, based on CLS, should be a significant objective of language education. Ultimately, the foundation of a theory is poised to upgrade our social practice within which we are all close members.

To put it in a nutshell, this book stands to examine the ways in which the public communicate are constrained by the structures and forces of social institutions within which we live and function by sorting out these relationships among “society”, “language” and “discourse”. To encapsulate, its main focus lies on “social determination of language use” and the “linguistic determination of society”, with its emphasis on ideological properties of discourse. In contrast to previous linguistic view concerning language, these relationships mentioned therein are anything but one-way, but feature as dialectical and dynamic.

A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THIS BOOK

Following the basic introduction of its core assumptions are a critical review of its pros and cons combined with other publications by Norman Fairclough.

On the plus side, there are some points that merit further mention. Firstly, it indeed underlines the essential role of language in maintaining power relations. The dialectical relationship claimed by Fairclough is really a progressive and thought-provoking advancement in course of CDA’s development. Secondly, the combination of social theory and linguistic theory really injects a

refreshing power to theoretical establishment of CDA. On the methodological level, it presents quite a diverse picture. To note, the use of Systematic Functional Linguistics (hereinafter referred to as SFL) is prominent, helping to lay a solid foundation for his establishment of a methodological blueprint for CDA in practice. To conclude, this theory is a highly acclaimed one whose major accomplishments are embodied in his three-dimensional framework for conceiving of, and analyzing discourse. According to Blommaert (2005, p.29), “The most elaborate and ambitious attempt towards theorizing the CDA programme is undoubtedly Fairclough’s theory”.

However, this theory has also ever come under severe assault for its theoretical insufficiency. Firstly, it puts an exceedingly high price on linguistic-textual analysis, especially on SFL. Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999, p.139) believe that whether to apply SFL in conducting critical language study is settled as an important criterion for the assessment of work aspiring to be “critical”, as shown below:

It is no accident that critical linguistics and social semiotics arose out of SFL or that other work in CDA has drawn upon it — SFL theorizes language in a way which harmonizes far more with the perspective of critical social science than other theories of language.

To put this theory in perspective, it assumes to casually relate CDA’s presumably unique critical capacity to Hallidayan SFL. It displays a predication of exclusion from other related theories while CDA strives to cultivate an open environment and embrace inter-disciplinary combination of different theories.

The second drawback lies in its closure to particular kinds of societies. Although it makes many accurate observations about discourse in society, but only about society in Britain. There is even less reason to assume that descriptions of such a society can usefully serve as a model for understanding discourse in the world today;

The third one rests with its closure to a particular time-frame. There is hardly any analysis of historical developments in CDA. In essence, it is attributed to the absence of a sense of history. It can be down to two facts: a focus on the linguistic artefact, which almost invariably forces temporal closure on the analysis, restricting it to the here-and-now of communication; and a focus on contemporary developments in one’s own society again.

CONCLUSIONS

Fairclough’s theory has contributed to the development of perceiving language as an ideological one and propel the comprehensive development of critical discourse studies. Seen from the big picture, media research gradually opens up to more interpretative, contextual and constructivist approaches to data collection and analysis. Firstly, rather than just quantifying textual features from which meanings are derived, this theory offers interpretations of

the meanings of text; secondly, it situates what is written or said in the context in which it occurs instead of simply summarizing patterns in texts; thirdly, readers are entitled to have different interpretations with considerations of an interaction among the producer of the text, text itself and the reader or consumer of the text. All these advancements have brought the critical discourse analysis to a new level.

Fairclough’s theory brings to light a new perspective for doing discourse analysis from the critical view. With the disclosure of the hidden ideological factors in news discourse, the public are capable of objecting to the “absolute facts” purported by the news reporters. It is also inductive to cultivate a critical and objective view when exposed to any public information. Besides, it will also assist audience in paying more heed to varied “pitfalls” in news coverage and the invisible “common-sense assumptions” mistakenly and tendentiously guiding the readers’ perceptions.

Language and power is a pioneering attempt to sketch a framework to conduct discourse analysis from a critical view. Language is no longer seen as the unbiased recording of “hard effects”. Laying bare the ideologies at work in public discourse, Fairclough proposes that language has its ideological property and thus shape the society. This view echoes with Fowler (1991, p.1), one of the well-known representatives in CL, who maintains that “language in the news is not neutral, but a highly constructive mediator”. *Language and power*, essentially, is reflective of a proposition that language is power. As a power of special sort, language continues to shape the institutional environment and contribute to be a rising concern for contemporary society.

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