

Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Cognition

KIERAN O'HALLORAN

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Introduction

I.1 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE ANALYSIS OF MYSTIFICATION

This book is concerned with how news texts can mystify what is being reported, whether intentionally or not. By ‘mystify’ I mean reducing the reader’s understanding of the events and participants being described. This may be highly significant if the rationale for the actions of one group of participants is mystified in a news text when this is not the case for another group of participants. Let us say a particular news text reports a clash between two groups, for example, environmental protestors and police. Let us say also that it does not fully explore the rationale for the protest but is quite explicit on why there was a need for police action. For someone who is reading only for gist, the following may be the case. Given the effort to notice the absence of rationale for the protest, reading of the news text may contain a negative bias with regard to the protestors since the text mystifies their rationale but not that of the police.

In focusing on mystification in news text, this book follows in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This is a branch of linguistics that is concerned, broadly speaking, with highlighting the traces of cultural and ideological meaning in spoken and written texts.¹ News texts, specifically, have been a staple in CDA as a result of their salience in modern culture. Over the last twenty years CDA has established itself internationally, and is now one of the most popularly embraced forms of discourse analysis. It has been used increasingly by practitioners in disciplines other than linguistics, such as media studies, geography and law.² CDA has a number of techniques for uncovering language mystification as well as language manipulation more generally which, in an age of

political spin and soundbites, gives it an obvious appeal. Two main stages in CD analysis of text are as follows:³

1. *Interpretation*: CDA interprets texts on behalf of readers who do not take up a critical position to indicate how such readers can be manipulated unwittingly by the text *or* positioned into a particular reading because of the social values they carry. Analysis of mystification in news text is situated in the interpretation stage of CDA since the latter is concerned with the analysis of the relationship between readers and the texts being read. In the interpretation stage, there has been some focus on the cognition of texts. By cognition, I mean the mental processing involved in reading and understanding texts.
2. *Explanation*: CDA explains connections between texts and the wider social and cultural context *and/or* explains how wider social and cultural contexts might shape the interpretation of a text.

Recent developments in CDA have seen it create a dynamic space for interdisciplinary work in linking linguistic analysis with sociocultural analysis.⁴ As a result of these more recent developments, analysis in CDA has been largely explanation-stage analysis. And because of this focus in recent years, relatively little attention has been given to cognition in the interpretation stage and so there has been relatively little cognitive focus on how text can mystify for readers the events being described. Indeed, there has been little development of this area in CDA since the end of the 1970s. This is because many of the assumptions for how CDA still detects mystifying text result from two seminal books published at the end of that decade: *Language and Control* (Fowler et al. 1979) and *Language as Ideology* (Kress and Hodge 1979). The general approach to cognition which pervades these two books and underpins how mystification is detected and analysed is called *symbolicism* in cognitive science. Symbolic modelling of the mind is based on the idea that mental processing consists of the activation of symbols in accordance with a rule-governed system. It was the dominant cognitive paradigm from after the Second World War until the 1980s. But the symbolism in Kress and Hodge (1979) and Fowler et al. (1979) is taken for granted and almost unrecognised. This is understandable since symbolism was the accepted view of cognition when these books were written and so would have seemed natural in the absence of any competing paradigms. However, symbolism has been challenged and shown to be problematic in developments in cognitive science from the 1980s onwards (connectionism, cognitive linguistics, new evidence in the psycholinguistics of reading, and rele-

vance theory). Since the way in which CDA highlights mystification is based on symbolic assumptions, these challenges to symbolism are significant for CDA.

It is safe to assume that critical discourse analysts spend quite some time in the analysis of text and that this must involve a much higher degree of effort than that invested by, say, readers who are reading for gist. This is particularly the case if analysts are pointing out absences from a sentence which, for them, mean the event being reported is mystified for the gist reader; analysing absences from a sentence in a text is not part of reading for gist. But this all begs the following question, one which is seldom addressed in CDA: how can analysts be sure that the absences from a sentence that they detect would not be generated as inferences anyway by a gist reader via other information in the text? This leads on to more general questions. For example, to what extent is the interpretation a critical discourse analyst makes from a text on behalf of a non-analyst dependent on the longer amount of time and thus larger amount of effort the analyst invests? How do analysts know that they are not *over-interpreting* on behalf of readers who, in reading only for gist, would not invest the same amount of effort? It is not surprising that such questions do not usually occupy critical discourse analysts. Because developments in CDA over the last fifteen years or so have been largely related to linking linguistic analysis with sociocultural analysis, anything to do with cognition in the interpretation stage has not received comprehensive scrutiny. Assumptions in CDA for how readers operate are largely intuitive or undeveloped. Indeed, CDA is largely unaware that it possesses a number of tensions with regard to how it treats the cognition of texts.

1.2 MY AIMS

I want to redress the balance and look at the interpretation stage of CDA from a cognitive point of view.⁵ To do so, I introduce the newer approaches to cognition from the 1980s onwards in order to construct the innovation of a reader framework, crucially one based on reader effort. In line with the strong tradition in CDA of examining news text for language manipulation, my data focus in this book will be predominantly news text too. The reader framework constructed in this book is used to show how more systematic and reliable prediction can be made as to whether or not a news text is likely to be mystifying for a gist reader through what is absent in the report; helps to enhance the interpretative authority of the analyst; and can be used to help prevent over-interpretation of news text on behalf of a gist reader.

More generally, the book brings together linguistic and cognitive approaches which usually do not communicate; shows how the contemporary frameworks – connectionism, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistic evidence for inference generation, relevance theory – challenge symbolic notions of cognition in CDA; and goes on to highlight the implications of these challenges for assumptions of language cognition in CDA, as well as how CDA highlights language manipulation.

The cognition of causal relations (for example, who or what caused an action or event) and how causal relations can be mystified in news text will be a central focus of this book. The generation of inferences in reading with regard to the understanding of causal relations will also be a major focus. But by-products of these cognitive foci mean that cognition in CDA more generally can also be brought up-to-date and made more consistent. While my focus in this book is cognitive, this should not be taken as any kind of implicit denigration of how the socioculturally focused explanation stage has motivated CDA work more recently. Rather, my focus is cognitive because of its relative neglect in the interpretation stage. The constraints of the book mean anyway that I will not be able to explore the explanation stage and thus will not attempt any serious bridging of the interpretation and explanation stages via my cognitive focus.

1.3 THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into three sections. Section A covers the interpretation stage in CDA. In Chapter 2, I introduce CDA and its techniques for analysing language manipulation in the interpretation stage. A key focus of Chapter 2 is to outline a host of assumptions used in CDA for highlighting a particular kind of manipulation: how news text can mystify the nature of the event being described. In Chapter 3, I outline symbolism, and in Chapter 4 I show how symbolism not only underlies much of CDA but also influences what CDA locates as mystifying text.

Section B describes the newer approaches to language cognition and their implications for CDA. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I outline newer approaches to language cognition (connectionism, cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistic evidence for inference generation, respectively) so as to show how they present a direct challenge to symbolism. In demonstrating how these cognitive approaches are in conflict with symbolism, I also show that there are problems with highlighting mystifying text in CDA. After doing this, I argue that what is needed is a way of locating mystifying news text that is *not* based on symbolism, and that such an approach should also make a distinction between the level of effort

invested in reading by analysts who search for absences from a text and that invested by readers who, in reading for gist, do not.

In order to do that, I go on to construct an idealised reader framework in Section C. In Chapter 8, I construct the basis of the reader framework in highlighting compatibilities between the three paradigms outlined in Section B. In Chapter 9, I add a more obvious pragmatic dimension to the reader framework by filtering relevance theory through the compatibilities of Chapter 8. Chapter 10 sees the reader framework comprehensively used to analyse a complete news text so as to get a richer sense of how it is likely to mystify, for a gist reader, through what is absent from the text.

Although my focus is mainly on one part of CDA – mystification analysis in its interpretation stage – I often use the term CDA to refer to practitioners who have been involved in such analysis. Let me be clear that this use of the reference term CDA is only for the sake of convenience. I am certainly *not* dealing with the whole of CDA. However, the book does have ramifications for the interpretation stage more generally. In trying to take the interpretation stage forward from a cognitive point of view, inevitably I will offer criticisms of previous work in CDA. Given the relative neglect of language cognition in CDA, my criticisms are very much in the spirit of raising awareness. They are meant to be constructive; constructive so as to provide, I hope, some enrichment of the interpretation stage, attempting to move it forward in theorising the reader. Indeed, many of these criticisms merely flow from the advantages of hindsight and developments in cognitive science that did not exist when the seminal ideas used in Fowler et al. (1979) and Kress and Hodge (1979) were first formulated.

NOTES

1. The following are a number of books which have helped to establish the field: Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979), Kress and Hodge (1979), Fairclough (1992), Hodge and Kress (1993), Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard (1996), van Dijk (1997a, 1997b), Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), Fairclough (1989/2001).
2. See Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999).
3. In laying out these two stages, I follow the framework in Norman Fairclough's (1989/2001) *Language and Power*. Now in its second edition, this is the seminal work on CDA (Cook 2003: 122), Fairclough being a highly significant figure in this field (Trask 1999: 63). His framework is a standard one in CDA and its influence stretches to the structure and content of introductory textbooks, for example Goatly (2000). Aside from being one of the most cited books in CDA, *Language and Power* is probably the most cited CDA source in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis more generally.

4. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) is a significant advance in this direction.
5. To be clearer, I should say this book focuses on the process of interpretation rather than the process of production (see Figure 2.1). One text production focus of CDA has been on how official texts (such as government documents) are transformed in the tabloids' reporting into a colloquial format with corresponding changes in emphasis and sometimes even meaning (see Fairclough 1995a). But text production has not really received the emphasis in CDA that interpretation has. So when I talk about the interpretation stage of CDA in this book I am talking only about interpretation of texts by non-analysts and analysts, and not about the production process.

SECTION A

The Interpretation Stage in CDA

CDA and Manipulative News Text

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides detail on how CDA highlights manipulative news text, news text having been something of a staple in CDA given its salience in modern culture. As Goatly (2000: 286) writes: 'For many people, newspapers are probably the only regular leisure reading, and are the most widely circulated print medium.' Three types of news text manipulation, whether intended or not, dealt with by CDA are highlighted in this chapter. But there is a strong focus on only one particular type of manipulation: how news text can mystify the nature of the event being reported or who was responsible for actions associated with the event. Part of this chapter involves outlining actual mystification analyses in CDA. To begin with, however, let me provide more detail on what CDA is and where mystification analysis fits into it.

2.2 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

2.2.1 Orientation

In the Introduction I indicated two major standpoints with regard to text: *interpretation* and *explanation*. Figure 2.1 shows in more detail how the interpretation stage and the explanation stage relate to each other.

The other stage – *description* – involves systematically describing what linguistic features are in a *text* (such as news reports, menus, train departure boards or advertisements) as well as highlighting features which are not. A text need not be a string of sentences. Indeed, it could consist of one word or even one letter, for example 'W' on a toilet door. For reading,

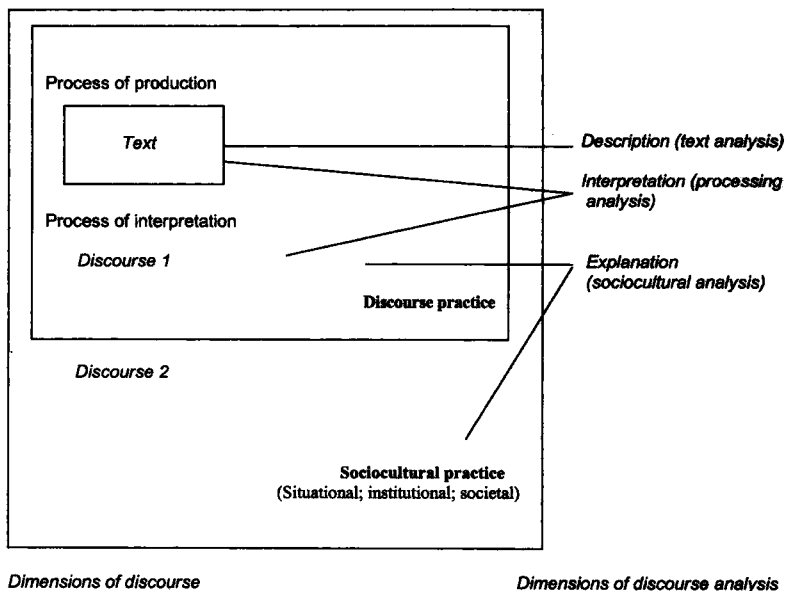


Figure 2.1 Source for original figure: Fairclough 1995b: 98. Some very minor additions have been made. Used with the permission of Pearson Education Ltd.

discourse practice refers to the activity of reading a text, and making a coherent understanding of it in line with the context (for example, reading purpose, spatial location, background knowledge, the nature of the participants). *Discourse* is the result of this: the interaction between text and context. So the discourse a man is likely to make from 'W' on a toilet door is likely to be different from that of a woman since men will normally understand this to mean they should not enter.

Because of the way a particular text, say a news text, is constructed and organised, it may be mystifying of the events being reported. Let us return to the example in the Introduction about the news text which reports a clash between two groups, environmental protestors versus police. As before, suppose that the rationale of the protest is absent from the news text but the text is all the same quite explicit on why there was a need for police action. Now consider a reader who is reading for gist and so is not reading the text in the same way that an analyst would. That is, consider a reader who does not search for absences from a text. I refer to this reader later in this book as the 'non-critical reader'. Of course, I am not saying that people cannot be critical readers, but that any reader, including critical discourse analysts, who analyses a text for its absences will take more time and effort to do this than if reading quickly for gist. So my notion of a non-critical reader here is more akin to a state of