



Critical Linguistics: Demythologising Society

Sana Haider*

*Research Scholar, Department of Linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

Corresponding Email: *sanahaider.eflu@gmail.com

Received: 01 January 2022

Accepted: 21 March 2022

Published: 26 April 2022

Abstract: Only in the second half of the twentieth century, Linguistics started adopting a functionalist paradigm. Halliday is a crucial figure of this time. By the 1970s, scholars felt the need to analyse language not just in terms of its structure, but also the underlying ideology that each utterance carries. From here, the 'critical' perspective to language analysis got introduced. A critical study assumes that nothing said is neutral; it is always said from a particular point of view along with some aims. This claim is in line with Halliday's argument that language is socially anchored. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) got formalized in 1991. Since language is an indispensable part of society and represents as well as constructs the society, it is only essential that language is critically studied. People using language should be well aware of the ways it can be (mis)used and its speakers be mentally influenced. With this aim of creating awareness, that is, demythologising society, CDA seeks to read between the lines of a discourse and search for the representative attitudes and the underlying ideologies.

Keywords: CDA, Critical Linguistics, Demythologising, Halliday.

1. INTRODUCTION

M.A.K. Halliday

Before understanding the introduction of the 'critical' in linguistic studies, it is important to understand the idea introduced by MAK Halliday in the 1970s. He argued that language is a social practice. Each linguistic element is socially anchored. An utterance is basically a collection of choices made by the speaker based on what he wants to convey. These choices may be unconscious. However, they are always systematic for they represent the underlying thoughts and ideas of the person. Thus, Halliday's notions can be said to play a crucial role in a paradigmatic shift in the study of Linguistics from theoretical approach to a functional approach. In order to analyse the systematicity, Halliday gave a number of parameters to analyse language. The most important are the three language functions introduced by him, namely, ideational, textual and interpersonal.

Ideational function refers to the practice of making meaning of the world and its various phenomena. It would answer the question what. Interpersonal function is the attempt to establish social relations among human beings. It includes how an individual perceives the world and its phenomena, that is, the subjective ideas, interpretations, beliefs and attitudes. Textual function is crucial to both the aforementioned functions for it is through written or



spoken text that the other two functions are performed. Thus, if one can critically analyse the text, one would know how something is understood, the underlying ideology, attitude and beliefs as well as social norms and roles.

Critical Linguistics

In 1979, two path breaking works were published in Linguistics: 1. *Language and Control* by Robert Fowler, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress and Tony Trew. 2. *Language and Ideology* by Gunther Kress and Bob Hodge. These scholars taught at the University of East Anglia in the 1970s. They came from different fields like Linguistics, Social Theory, Literary Criticism, etc. They believed that the current tools of linguistic analysis were not sufficient in order to do a critical analysis of language. As Hasnain (2012) says a critical perspective assumes no utterance is neutral. Thus, it is looked at with the aim of discovering the underlying ideologies, beliefs and norms that it encapsulates.

This thought is in concurrence to the linguistic turn of the twentieth century or what we also know as the turn to discourse. These concepts believe that language not only represents society but also constructs it. Language is a signifying system that influences the way we perceive the world around us. The concept of linguistic determinism argues that the kind of language we are exposed to determines the way we perceive the world. When Verschueren (2012) talks about ideology, he says when we are constantly exposed to a certain kind of language and thus, a certain kind of ideology, we tend to imbibe it. In due course of time, it becomes a naturalized knowledge. It is taken as something naturally occurring. Therefore, it is rarely questioned.

Masses can be made to think in a particular fashion when this process is put to negative use. When masses subscribe to a given idea, it is supposed to have become hegemonic (Fairclough, 1989). Chomsky calls this process manufacture of consent. An example could be massive scale of advertisements extolling white complexion or fairness creams. When these ideas are not questioned, they start gaining acceptance in the society. In due course of time, it becomes a natural belief (that is, an ideology) that white is beautiful. People start using products to achieve the desired results. Such attitudes, therefore, have not only become hegemonic but are also promoting the ideology of racism.

It is with this misgiving that scholars like Fowler, Kress and others felt the need to critically analyse language. They wanted to establish a robust linguistic system that can analyse language for the underlying ideologies. The term 'critical' was introduced in *Language and Control* in 1979. Such a discipline would be called Critical Linguistics (CL).

The formal beginning of the field took place in 1991 at the University of Amsterdam. A group of scholars collected in order to discuss, promote, encourage joint research and exchange programs so that a critical linguistic study could be formalised. Scholars that met were Teun A. van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. They discussed the various approaches being used in Critical Linguistics, their similarities and differences. An ERASMUS exchange programme was proposed along with encouragement to collaborations and joint projects. Van Dijk launched the first journal of the field *Discourse and Society* (1990). The field has since grown and only increased in its interdisciplinarity. Other journals launched include *The Journal of Language and Politics*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, *Visual Semiotics* and *Discourse and Communication*. E journals like CADAAD have also been launched. Currently, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an institutionalized field in many departments across the globe. It is an established paradigm in Linguistics with regular meetings and conferences taking place the world over.

The terms CL and CDA are often confused with each other. One way of understanding is till the



institutional beginning of CDA in 1990, the preferred term was CL. After the formalisation of the paradigm, the preferred term is CDA. However, early practitioners of CL continue to use the same term (Fowler, 1991). On the contrary, Wodak (2009) states the terms are used interchangeably. Recently, however, CDA seems to have been preferred and has taken precedence over CL.

Power and Discourse

Text is the actual instance of language use while discourse is looking at language as used from a specific viewpoint with specific aims. It represents the attitude of the speaker towards a particular event or practice. The attitude, in turn, is a representation of the underlying ideology. For instance, an utterance like ‘immigrants are eating up all our jobs’, suggest that the speaker has a negative attitude towards immigrants and immigration. A larger and a more subtle suggestion is of a racist ideology. Sometimes one utterance is not conclusive for the representations are often subtle and indirect. Therefore, discourse tends to look at larger pieces of text.

Power is the ability that gives you control in a situation or/and in a society. Weber (1922) says power is the ability to do what one wants even in the face of opposition. According to Gramsci (1971), power is of two types: 1. Rule that is overt and is realized by the ones being ruled. 2. Hegemony that is covert. The ones being ruled do not realise that they are not free. Hegemony is achieved by naturalising the ideas that are beneficial to the ones in power. To understand the process of naturalization, Verschueren’s concept of ideology is essential. He says, as explained above, that when people are exposed to the same kind of ideas for a long period of time without much contestation, they tend to internalize the ideas as natural or given. Thus, they become naturalized. That is, now the ideology of the governed is made up of the propagated ideas, which in turn are beneficial to the ones in power. The most striking feature is the stability of this control. As no one realizes that they are being ruled, there is neither contestation nor a change of power. According to Fairclough (1989), rule is either by coercion or by consent. The former is marked by the use of force while in the latter ideology is used. The latter one is what Gramsci (1971) calls hegemony.

Discourse is the site of ideological struggle. Therefore, in order to capture/ manipulate ideology, discourse is manipulated according to the ideas of the ones in power. For instance, if a fashion brand wants to establish itself in society, it will promote advertisements that repeatedly tell the consumers how necessary it is to dress in line with the prevailing trend. They may even associate fashion sense to professional success, better marriage proposals, confidence, etc. When such a discourse has existed in a society for a good period of time, people take it as natural. They start associating confidence and success with fashion, to the advantage of the fashion brand. This is how people are ruled covertly/ by consent.

A CDA would read between the lines, analyse the structure of the discourse of the advertisements, analyse the kind of metaphors used, the slogans generated, the videos used, etc. It will try to understand the kind of attitudes generated and thus, the kind of ideology being subscribed to. Such a study is revelatory in nature. Fairclough (1989) says that the aim of CDA is to generate awareness among the common masses so that they know how language can be used to generate a discourse that in turn leads to their enslavement.

Another important point that CDA looks at is power behind discourse. In a debate, if a news anchor speaks so much that even the participants do not get a chance to express their viewpoint, or if she is accusing the interviewee instead of questioning her, or if she is expressing her opinion instead of conveying neutral facts, she is exerting undue power in the discourse of the news.



However, a critical analysis should not end here, rather it begins here. It needs to ask why she behaves in the way she does. In the answer, one needs to look for the ownership of the news channel, who gives the channel advertisements, etc. Any channel is for profit and runs through funds. The one who can control these, is in control of the news discourse, that is, she exerts power behind the discourse that is reflected in the discourse through the anchors and ultimately manufacture the public opinion. Mesthrie et. al. (2009) have pointed out that a critical sociolinguistics should study power not just in discourse, but also behind discourse.

There is no fixed method to do a critical discourse analysis. Different scholars have used different methods. Fairclough uses a three layered model. The first step is of text (description). It deals with a simple textual analysis and tries to find out the embedded ideology. The next level is of institutional practices. It deals with the ethics, procedures and organization of the institution producing the texts. Such elements play a crucial role in the shaping of the text. The last level is that of sociocultural practices. At this level, CDA extends from the mere text to the macro social structures which the text represents as well as in which it is embedded. For a clear explanation of the text, one needs to study the text in the context of the sociocultural practices in which the text finds its meaning.

Another very extensively quoted scholar of CDA, van Dijk (2009b) gave a model called the Sociocognitive model. It rests on the premise that discourse, cognition and society make a triad that mutually influence and get influenced by each other. When one is embedded in a specific kind of discourse for a considerable period of time, her cognition gets influenced. She tends to perceive the society as the discourse represents it. An ideologically influenced mind, in turn, will produce an ideologically influenced discourse which will eventually have repercussions in the society. Ruth Wodak says that for a wholistic understanding of texts, they need to be seen in their historical context. Each researcher needs to select her own method based on her research objectives.

Principles and Characteristics of CDA

1. CDA focusses on the relations between language in use and society. It regards discourse as a social practice that constitutes society. Moreover, discourse is not just ‘verbal’ expression (at many different levels like phonology, morphology, semantics, theme, topics, etc.) but encapsulates the entire semiotic modes that signify a communicative event. It embodies signification as well as mental representations that produce a particular structure of discourse. Analysis of discourse, understood as wholistically, would include production process as well as reception process, that is, what mental representations the reader/ listener, viewer would make from a particular discourse.
2. Linguistic features and the accompanying semiotic signs are not arbitrary. They are choices made by the discourse producer, whether consciously or subconsciously.
3. Discourse is historical. Its meaning can be most aptly understood when it is seen as embedded in certain social, cultural, political, economic, institutional context in specific time and space.
4. CDA is a problem oriented perspective. Its practitioners are socio-politically concerned and have related goals. They critically analyse discourse. For an adequate study, they may use theoretical frameworks and methods from different disciplines. Therefore, it is said to be a transdisciplinary effort (Fairclough, 1989) and multidisciplinary by van Dijk (2009a).
5. Historically, CDA forms a part of the critical studies, that remained rather marginalized, in humanities. Even sociolinguistics is to some extent a part of this tradition. According to



Deborah (1990), it started as a field demythologizing the rather structural and thus, superficial Linguistics.

6. Another key feature is that of power which translates into control. CDA seeks to analyse if power is being discursively created, maintained or promoted which may sustain the domination, subjugation and thereby inequality in society.
7. Discourse serves as a tool of such promotion via embodying ideologies. These are group beliefs that may subconsciously get naturalized when expressed as a natural phenomenon repeatedly. Thus, control can be physical or mental via manipulating group ideologies (and thus group attitudes) and manufacturing consent.

2. CONCLUSION

Language is the most pervasive aspect of human life. It is a social practice and no society can sustain if language is taken out of it. Humans use language to think. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand language and the various ways it can be used/ misused. Having a critical awareness about how language can be used to play with social norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. by appealing to the ideology via discourse help us find and contest any misuse of language. CDA is thus, a field that demythologizes society. It needs to be promoted in the language departments across universities and colleges. It is a cross disciplinary field that lies at the intersection of linguistics, psychology, social theory, political science, literary criticism, etc. Three most prominent scholars in the field have each devised a method each for doing CDA. Fairclough gave the three layered critical socio linguistic analysis, van Dijk is known for his Sociocognitive Model and Ruth Wodak follows the Discourse Historical method.

3. REFERENCE

1. Cameron, Deborah. (1990). 'Demythologising Sociolinguistics. Reprinted in Coupland, N., Jaworski, A. (eds.), (1997). *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook*. New York: Macmillan.
2. Chomsky, N. (1989). *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*. Toronto: CBC Enterprises.
3. Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse: Textual analysis for social research*.
4. London: Routledge .
5. Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
6. Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news. Discourse and ideology in the British press*. London: Routledge.
7. Fowler, R., Kress, G., Hodge, B., & Trew, T. (1979). *Language and control*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
8. Gramsci, A. (1971). In Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith (Eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (G. Nowell Smith Trans.)*. New York: International Publishers.
9. Halliday, M. (1978). *Language as a Social Semiotic: Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Hodder Arnold.
10. Hasnain, S. Imtiaz. "Social Meaning and Language Use: Critical Discourse Analysis". *Aligarh Journal of Linguistics*, edited by S. Imtiaz Hasnain et al. Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Press, vol 2, no. 1-2, 2012, pp 304-317.
11. Hodge, R. and Kress, G. (1993). *Language as Ideology (2nd ed)*. London: Routledge.



12. Mesthrie, et. al. (2009). *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
13. Sheyholislami, J, (2001). 'Critical Discourse Analysis' excerpts from MA thesis. Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.
14. Van Dijk (2009a). 'News, Discourse and Ideology' in Wahl-Jorgesen and Thomas Hanitzsch (eds.) *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* (2009). New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
15. Van Dijk (2009b). 'Critical Discourse Study: A Sociocognitive Approach' in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (eds.) *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage.
16. Verschueren, Jef (2012). *Ideology in Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
17. Weber, Max. (1968, orig. 1922). *Economy and Society*. New York: Bedminster.
18. Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). 'Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory and Methodology' in R. Wodak & M. Meyer (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage.