

An Inquiry Into Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Methodology

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Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged as a prominent linguistic paradigm in the late 1970s, with its core focus on the enactment of power through linguistic practices. The text-oriented CDA framework developed by British sociolinguist Norman Fairclough establishes an intrinsic link between language and society, emphasizing both contextually embedded texts and the dynamic process of meaning construction. This paper provides a systematic overview of Fairclough's foundational theoretical system and his influential three-dimensional analytical framework.

Key words: Critical discourse analysis; Discourse order; Social practice; Three-dimensional framework

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1. INTRODUCTION

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, the rise and evolution of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a linguistic paradigm directed increasing scholarly attention to the inherent interconnectedness between language and society. CDA concerns itself with power asymmetries and relational dynamics inscribed in language, seeking to unpack the ideological underpinnings of discourse

and thereby expose latent injustices, discriminatory tendencies, and prejudices (van Dijk, 1993). Fairclough's text-centered CDA framework distinguishes itself by forging a rigorous connection between linguistic phenomena and social structures. It not only prioritizes texts situated within specific social contexts but also accentuates the mechanisms of meaning-making, rendering it highly operational for empirical discourse analysis. This paper offers a concise yet comprehensive account of Fairclough's core theoretical constructs and his three-dimensional analytical model.

2. FAIRCLOUGH'S THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION OF CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

2.1 Discourse Order and Social Practice

Within Fairclough's theoretical architecture, discourse—defined as the actualized use of language in both written and spoken forms—constitutes a product of social interaction. Even monologic discourses, including written texts, inherently presuppose the existence of an intended audience and the social differences between the producer and recipient of discourse (Fairclough, 2003, p.42). This implies that discourse transcends mere linguistic forms, encompassing diverse symbolic elements and semiotic resources embedded in social life. The analysis of discourse thus entails investigating the social conditions that govern the deployment of such linguistic and symbolic resources. In its practical application, language and social reality engage in a mutually constitutive relationship: language functions as a form of social practice, and CDA endeavors to heighten awareness of the often-unrecognized interplay between linguistic structures and social formations. Fairclough posits that individuals' subjective experiences of social life are discursively

constructed and invested with specific meanings. Certain of these experiential constructions tend to become institutionalized or conventionalized within particular social contexts, ultimately integrating into the fabric of social structure and exerting reciprocal influences on the discursive shaping of society. A dialectical relationship persists between discourse and social structure: while discourse is constrained by established norms and conventions, it simultaneously operates as a world-representing practice that interprets and constructs social reality through meaning-making.

Fairclough's CDA research draws substantial theoretical inspiration from Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. Halliday identifies three metafunctions inherent in all texts: the interpersonal, ideational, and textual functions. Building on this, Fairclough conceptualizes discourse order as comprising three core elements—genre, discursive perspective, and style—and maps each element onto Halliday's metafunctional framework. Specifically, genre roughly corresponds to the conflation of interpersonal and textual functions; discursive perspective aligns with the ideational function; and style—encompassing the stance adopted by the discourse producer—materializes the identity function of text, which is subsumed within Halliday's interpersonal function. It is through the interplay of these textual functions that meaning is articulated across multiple dimensions, facilitating the construction of a meaningful social world. In Fairclough's discourse model, the semiotic system, discourse order, and text correspond respectively to social regulative mechanisms, social practice, and social actuality, with social practice functioning as the mediating dimension between abstract social rules and concrete social phenomena. Within specific social contexts, discourse constitutes an integral component of social practice, and its corresponding discourse order maintains a mutually constitutive relationship with other elements of social practice, including material conditions, social relational networks, and value systems.

2.2 The Significance of Critical Research

In Chinese academic discourse, CDA has been rendered into several equivalent terms, such as “piping xing yupian fenxi” (critical textual analysis) and “piping xing huayu fenxi” (critical discourse analysis). From its inception, CDA has embraced an explicit political mandate: broadly construed, it seeks to transform the unequal distribution of economic, cultural, and political capital in contemporary society, foment radical transformations in systems that perpetuate extreme power disparities, and achieve these objectives by analyzing influential cultural artifacts (i.e., texts) to expose the operational mechanisms and consequential effects of such systems—thereby contributing to the establishment of a more equitable social order. The fundamental pathway lies in transformation: destabilizing the existing order,

reconfiguring its components, mitigating its harmful impacts on marginalized groups, and potentially enhancing its benefits for all members of society (Kress, 1996, p.15).

Chouliarakis and Fairclough (1999, p.150) argue that the interconnections between specific discursive formations and social positionalities, as well as between particular discourses and their ideological functionalities, are established, negotiated, and revised through the linguistic processes inherent in specific social practices.

Critical research does not negate the existence of ideology; instead, it acknowledges ideology as an inescapable dimension of social life. The “ideal speech situation”—a utopian form of communication untainted by power relations—remains unattainable in the empirical social world. The primary objective of CDA is to unmask the social essence obscured by ideological constructions. Hammersley (1997) asserts that “we can only comprehend society as an integrated whole, and any specific social phenomenon becomes interpretable only when situated within a broader social context.”

In the process of discourse production, individuals' choices regarding discourse order are constrained by specific manifestations of “power” within given social contexts. “Power,” in this theoretical context, refers to the mutual conditioning forces that operate between parties in social relationships. It is not a tangible entity that can be possessed, seized, or shared, nor something that can be held onto or discarded at will. Within Fairclough's framework, this specific form of power encompasses not only the capacity to manipulate behaviors but also the ability to influence and shape thoughts and value systems. The agents that confer such power may include specific social strata, institutional structures, or dominant value orientations. “Power is implicit in everyday social practices, which permeate every level of all spheres of social life” (Fairclough, 1992, p.12). Importantly, “power” here is not reducible to absolute relations of control and subjugation; it can also manifest through degrees of voluntary compliance and negotiated compromise. These power relations are often implicit, embodying the inherent political character of discourse order. The essence of “critique” lies not merely in revealing superficial relational dynamics but, more crucially, in excavating the latent power structures operating at the ideological level. Fairclough maintains that this constitutes the core critical significance of Critical Discourse Analysis.

3. FAIRCLOUGH'S THREE-DIMENSIONAL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Fairclough's landmark contribution to the field of CDA lies in constructing a systematic three-dimensional

analytical framework. This framework integrates three interrelated dimensions—text, discursive practice, and social practice—into an organic whole, breaking through the limitations of traditional textual analysis, placing language research in a broad social process, and providing an operable analytical tool for comprehensively and in-depth interpreting the complex relationship between discourse and society. The core advantage of this framework is that it not only emphasizes the detailed analysis of the surface structure of language but also focuses on exploring the social context and power logic behind discourse, realizing the organic unity of micro-linguistic analysis and macro-social criticism.

3.1 The Text Dimension

In the three-dimensional analytical framework, the text dimension is the starting point and foundation of the analysis. The concept of “text” here is broad, including not only traditional written documents (such as books, papers, policy documents, news reports, etc.) but also oral interactions (such as speeches, dialogues, meeting discussions, etc.), and even visual symbol texts such as images and videos. Fairclough emphasizes that text is both the final product of the discourse production process and the logical starting point of the discourse interpretation process. Any text carries the “traces” of its production process—these traces are reflected through specific linguistic form characteristics, providing key clues for interpreting the meaning and intention of discourse.

The analysis of the text dimension mainly focuses on the inherent linguistic attributes of the text, with the core goal of identifying formal elements that can reflect discourse characteristics and ideological tendencies. Specifically, the analysis content of the text dimension includes the following aspects:

First, lexical choice. Vocabulary is the basic carrier of meaning, and different lexical choices often convey different ideological tendencies and value judgments. For example, in news reports, using different words such as “rebels” and “rioters”, “liberation” and “invasion” for different groups in the same conflict will directly guide readers to form completely different perceptions and attitudes. In addition, the emotional color (commendatory, derogatory, neutral), abstractness, and professionalism of vocabulary will also affect the meaning construction of discourse and the interpretation method of the audience.

Second, grammatical structure. Grammatical structure is not a mere set of linguistic form rules, but an important carrier of meaning expression. The choice between active and passive voice, the length and complexity of sentence patterns, and the word order arrangement of subject-verb-object may all reflect the stance and intention of the discourse producer. For example, using the passive voice (“Casualties were caused by the accident”) can obscure

the agent, thereby achieving the purpose of concealing responsibility; while using long and complex sentences can enhance the authority and professionalism of discourse, and at the same time increase the difficulty of interpretation for the audience, forming a kind of implicit discourse power.

Third, punctuation marks and rhetorical devices. The use of punctuation marks, although seemingly trivial, can directly affect the tone, rhythm, and meaning expression of the text. For example, the frequent use of exclamation marks can strengthen emotional expression, while ellipsis may imply the unspoken meaning or uncertainty of discourse. Rhetorical devices (such as metaphor, metonymy, parallelism, irony, etc.) are important tools for discourse meaning construction. For example, comparing the “economy” to a “body” and “competition” to a “war” can simplify complex social phenomena into familiar cognitive frameworks for people, while hiding the complex power relations and ideologies behind them.

Fourth, turn-taking mechanisms in interaction. In oral interaction texts, the frequency, duration, and order of turn-taking directly reflect the power relations between participants. For example, in meeting discussions, some participants can dominate turn allocation and have longer speaking time, while other participants can only respond passively or hardly get the opportunity to speak. This turn-taking model clearly reflects the power status differences of participants in the organization.

Fifth, genre conventions and the degree of directness of expression. Different genres (such as academic papers, news reports, advertisements, daily conversations) have specific expression norms and structural models, and following or breaking these conventions may have specific meanings. For example, academic papers usually require objective and logical language; if an academic paper uses a lot of emotional and subjective language, it may be an intentional discourse strategy. In addition, the degree of directness and indirectness of expression is also closely related to discourse power—advantaged groups tend to use direct and clear language to express their demands, while disadvantaged groups may use more indirect and euphemistic language to avoid conflicts or strive for a favorable position.

3.2 The Discursive Practice Dimension

The discursive practice dimension is the intermediary connecting the text dimension and the social practice dimension, mainly focusing on the three dynamic processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, examining how discourse order is constructed, maintained, and transformed through these three processes, and how discourse meaning is produced and reproduced in this process. Fairclough believes that the production and interpretation of texts are not isolated individual behaviors, but collective practices constrained by a series of socio-cultural resources. These resources

include individuals' belief systems, value orientations, social relational networks, subject positions, knowledge reserves, etc.

When elaborating on the discursive practice dimension, Fairclough proposes three core value types contained in discourse, providing specific entry points for the analysis of discursive practice:

First, experiential value. Experiential value refers to the discourse producer's experience and representation of the natural world and social world, including the propositional content, knowledge claims, factual judgments, and belief systems contained in the text. Due to differences in social status, life experiences, and knowledge backgrounds, different discourse producers will form completely different experiential representations of the same social phenomenon. For example, regarding the phenomenon of "globalization", senior executives of multinational corporations may represent it as an "opportunity for economic development", while ordinary workers in developing countries may represent it as a "source of employment pressure". This difference in experiential representation is essentially a reflection of the interest demands and ideologies of different social groups.

Second, relational value. Relational value refers to the social relations and interpersonal dynamics constructed, maintained, or transformed through discourse. Discourse is not only a tool for transmitting information but also an important medium for establishing and regulating social relations. In the process of interaction, people define the type of relationship between themselves and others (such as equal relations, superior-subordinate relations, friendship relations, hostile relations, etc.) through language choices, and maintain or change this relationship through discourse behaviors. For example, in the workplace, superiors use imperative language to subordinates ("The task must be completed by tomorrow"), which not only reflects the superior-subordinate power relationship between the two parties but also strengthens this relationship through such discourse behaviors; while colleagues use consultative language ("Can we discuss this plan together?"), which reflects an equal cooperative relationship model.

Third, expressive value. Expressive value refers to the discourse producer's evaluation stance and emotional tendency towards relevant social realities, which is closely related to the producer's subject position, social identity, and interest demands. Based on their own value judgments, discourse producers make different evaluations such as praise, criticism, neutrality, and questioning of social phenomena. This evaluation stance is reflected through the emotional color, tone, and rhetoric of language. For example, in political discourse, the ruling party often makes positive evaluations of its own policies, emphasizing their effects

such as "benefiting people's livelihood" and "promoting development"; while the opposition party may make negative evaluations of the same policies, emphasizing their "defects" and "harming interests". This difference in evaluation stance is essentially a reflection of the power competition and ideological game between different political groups.

The analysis of the discursive practice dimension also needs to focus on the three core components of discourse order: genre, discursive perspective, and style. Genre is the social functional type of discourse, and different genres correspond to different social contexts and communication purposes (such as academic genres for knowledge production and dissemination, and advertising genres for commodity promotion and consumption guidance). The choice and use of genres reflect the discourse producer's cognition and adaptation to social contexts, and are also constrained by social norms and institutional rules. Discursive perspective is the discourse producer's angle of observing and representing the world, which is affected by factors such as the producer's social status, interest demands, and cognitive level, and determines the meaning orientation and content selection of discourse. Style is the linguistic expression characteristic of the discourse producer, including the formality, tone, and rhetorical preferences of language, which not only reflects the producer's personal characteristics but also reflects their social identity and group affiliation. These three elements interact and restrict each other, jointly forming the basic model of specific discursive practices.

3.3 The Social Practice Dimension

The social practice dimension is the macro level of CDA and the ultimate foothold of discourse analysis. This dimension emphasizes that the interpretation of texts and the analysis of discursive practices cannot be separated from specific social contexts, and must be examined in the broader social structure, institutional arrangements, power relations, and cultural traditions. Fairclough believes that as a form of social practice, the production, dissemination, and consumption of discourse are deeply embedded in specific social environments, constrained by various non-linguistic factors such as politics, economy, and culture; at the same time, discourse exerts an active reaction on social structures and power relations through meaning construction and ideological dissemination.

In the social practice dimension, Fairclough systematically explains the essential characteristics of language as social practice through three interrelated propositions:

First, language is an inherent component of society, not an external addition. Language does not exist independently of society, but is deeply integrated with social structures, institutional rules, cultural traditions, etc., and becomes a core element of social operation and development. For example, legal language is an important

component of the legal system; it is not only a tool for expressing legal norms but also an important carrier of legal power operation; political language is a core element of the political system, which shapes political behavior patterns and the public's political cognition.

Second, language is a dynamic social process, not a static symbolic system. The use of language is a continuously evolving process. With the development of society, the progress of technology, and the transformation of social relations, the form, meaning, and function of language will also constantly change. At the same time, social interaction is also constrained and guided by language—language provides basic rules and frameworks for social interaction, and different language practices will shape different social interaction models. For example, the development of Internet technology has spawned network language (such as emoticons, abbreviations, network buzzwords, etc.), and the popularization of network language has changed people's communication methods and social interaction models, forming a unique network social culture.

Third, language is a socially constrained process, not an absolutely free behavior. The use of language is constrained by various non-linguistic factors such as social politics, economy, and culture, and no discourse practice can exist independently of a specific social context. For example, in an authoritarian political system, media discourse is often subject to strict political control, and its content and form must comply with the requirements of official ideology; in a market economy environment, commercial discourse is constrained by capital logic, often taking profit maximization as the core goal.

Based on this understanding, Fairclough emphasizes that the analysis of the three dimensions of text, discursive practice, and social practice is not a one-way linear process (from micro to macro), but a cyclical and mutually illuminating iterative process. In practical analysis, researchers need to constantly switch perspectives between the three dimensions: identify the formal characteristics and meaning clues of discursive practice through text analysis; reveal the social mechanisms of text production, distribution, and consumption through discursive practice analysis; explore the power structure and ideological logic behind discourse through social practice analysis, and at the same time deepen the understanding of text and discursive practice with the social practice as the background.

4. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS: FROM ACADEMIC RESEARCH TO SOCIAL INTERVENTION

Fairclough's CDA is characterized by strong practical orientation—its goal is not only to “understand” discourse

but also to “transform” society by raising critical awareness. His theoretical and methodological tools have been widely applied in multiple fields, demonstrating significant academic and social value.

4.1 Political and Media Discourse Analysis

In political discourse, scholars use Fairclough's framework to analyze speeches, policy documents, and political news, revealing how politicians use language to construct identities, manipulate public opinion, and maintain power. For example, analyzing the 2021 Christmas speech by the British Queen found that her use of inclusive metaphors (“those who have lost loved ones”) narrowed the distance with the public, consolidating symbolic authority. In media studies, CDA exposes biases in news reporting—such as using different narrative tones for mainstream and minority groups—to promote media literacy among the public.

4.2 Educational and Workplace Discourse Reform

In education, Fairclough's theory has guided the reform of classroom discourse. By analyzing teacher-student interaction, researchers found that authoritarian feedback (e.g., direct negation) undermines student initiative, while guiding language enhances learning effectiveness. This insight has promoted the adoption of more equitable and participatory teaching languages. In the workplace, CDA of corporate documents and meeting discourse has uncovered hidden gender and hierarchical biases, providing a basis for inclusive organizational culture construction.

5. CONCLUSION

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis has constructed a bridge between linguistics and social criticism through its three-dimensional theoretical framework and rigorous methodological system. By treating discourse as a dynamic social practice, it enables scholars to decode the power and ideological mechanisms hidden in everyday language, from political speeches to classroom dialogues. Fairclough emphasizes the need to balance objectivity and subjectivity in analytical practice, acknowledging that all interpretations are inevitably inflected by the analyst's positioned perspective. Absolute objectivity in textual analysis remains an unattainable ideal, as analytical findings are themselves discursively constructed within specific social contexts.

Looking forward to the future, CDA is facing new opportunities and challenges. With the rapid development of new technologies such as the Internet, artificial intelligence, and social media, the production, dissemination, and consumption methods of discourse have undergone profound changes: algorithmic

recommendations have shaped personalized information environments, online rumors and disinformation have proliferated, virtual communities have become new arenas for discourse games, and the influence of visual discourse (such as short videos, images, and emoticons) has become increasingly strong. These new discourse phenomena provide new research objects and topics for CDA, and also put forward new requirements for its theories and methods—future research needs to further expand the connotation of text, incorporating visual texts, algorithmic texts, etc., into the scope of analysis; need to innovate research methods, combining big data analysis, web crawlers, and other technologies to realize the combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of large-scale discourse data.

In conclusion, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis has not only opened up a new academic path for linguistic research but also provided a unique perspective and method for social science research. Its theoretical and practical value has not only been widely recognized in the academic field but also had a profound impact in promoting social progress and social fairness and justice. In future development, CDA needs to continuously respond to new problems brought about by the times, constantly innovate theories and methods, and continue to play its important role in academic research and social change.

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