

## CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ITS CRITICS

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### Abstract

This article briefly reviews the rise of Critical Discourse Analysis and teases out a detailed analysis of the various critiques that have been levelled at CDA and its practitioners over the last twenty years, both by scholars working within the “critical” paradigm and by other critics. A range of criticisms are discussed which target the underlying premises, the analytical methodology and the disputed areas of reader response and the integration of contextual factors. Controversial issues such as the predominantly negative focus of much CDA scholarship, and the status of CDA as an emergent “intellectual orthodoxy”, are also reviewed. The conclusions offer a summary of the principal criticisms that emerge from this overview, and suggest some ways in which these problems could be attenuated.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis; Analytical methodology; Corpus linguistics; Reader response theory; Critical paradigm; Contextualisation.

### 1. Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis has now firmly established itself as a field within the humanities and social sciences, to the extent that the abbreviation “CDA” is widely used to denote a recognisable approach to language study manifested across a range of different groups. Indeed, some scholars have even suggested that critical discourse analysis is close to becoming “an intellectual orthodoxy” (Billig 2002: 44), an institutionalised discipline with its own paradigm, its own canon and conventionalised assumptions, and even its own power structures. Since CDA is now part of the intellectual landscape, there is a certain tendency for it to be taken for granted, simply accepted as a valid way of thinking and researching, alongside the other paradigms that have attained intellectual respectability.

It is therefore interesting to note that even scholars who would define themselves as critical discourse analysts feel some degree of discomfort at the status accorded to CDA as a critical paradigm. Some feel that the respectability of CDA entails a contradiction of the critical enterprise itself, or that its new-found status alongside other conventional disciplines is likely to close the door on the reflexivity that is an integral part of its critical agenda (Billig 2002: 36). Others emphasise the internal inconsistencies among researchers who are associated with CDA, either stressing the need for further debate and discussion before CDA can be defined as a school or rejecting the desire for consensus as illusory (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 271; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; van Dijk 2003: 352). Still others are disappointed by the largely negative nature of the body of work produced within the field of CDA, and

call for critical scholars to pay more attention to positive or potentially transformative uses of discourse (Martin 2004: 183-4; Luke 2002: 106-7).

At the same time, linguists and others who position themselves outside the borders of CDA have kept up a barrage of informed criticism which has pointed to many of the inconsistencies within the field of CDA. These critics have brought to light problems with the epistemology and theoretical framework, most particularly the instrumentalisation of theory and the failure to establish an objective standpoint for research. But they have also criticised the type of linguistic methodology that is often applied, as well as the underlying theories of language and communication, and they have shown how CDA researchers may fail to integrate context and audience satisfactorily into their analytical framework, leading to naively deterministic assumptions about the workings of discourse and social reproduction.

For these reasons, it is useful to review briefly the rise of Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly with a view to identifying its key tenets and teasing out its heterogeneous intellectual antecedents, before carrying out a more detailed analysis of the various critiques that have been levelled at CDA and its practitioners, from both within and outside its disciplinary boundaries.

## **2. A brief overview of critical discourse analysis**

### ***2.1. Defining critical discourse analysis***

In common with much of the bibliography on this subject, the introduction to this paper refers to Critical Discourse Analysis as an entity, a recognisable approach to language study or “program” (Wodak 2011: 50). It should be stated at the outset, however, that although such an approach undoubtedly exists and occupies a more or less defined area of the intellectual landscape, many scholars, particularly those working within this paradigm, feel that it is incorrect to refer to CDA as a unitary, homogeneous entity. It is important to emphasise that, although for the purposes of the present study we shall consider “critical discourse analysis” as one tendency or movement which is both recognisable from the “outside”, as having common features, and self-aware, in the sense that its representatives believe themselves to be working within a “critical” paradigm as far as discourse analysis is concerned (Wodak 2011: 50), there are several identifiable “schools” or groups within CDA, and not all the points that will be made apply equally to all the groups or individual practitioners. It is particularly important to distinguish between the initial British approaches embodied by Fairclough (1985, 1989) and Fowler (1991) and its later, more developed and coherent form explained in Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999); the so-called “sociocognitive model” of critical discourse analysis epitomised by van Dijk (1991) and his group; and the Viennese “discourse historical school” led by Wodak (Wodak et al. 1990; Wodak 1996, 2007). However, Wodak (2011) also distinguishes a French school of CDA that can be traced back to Pêcheux (1982), and to the influence of Bakhtin; a Duisburg school (Jäger 1999) which centres particularly on media language viewed in a Foucaultian perspective; and the approach advocated by Maas (1989) which scrutinises the way in which contradictions in society are inscribed in texts, and the way that readers are led to collude in ideological discourses. For reasons of space, it will not be possible here to address each of these schools separately on all occasions; however, where possible,

criticisms levelled at particular groups of analysts will be outlined, and exceptions identified.

For the purposes of the present paper, the term CDA will therefore be used in an inclusive sense, to mean the broad body of theory and research generated by specialists who regard themselves as critical discourse analysts in one sense or another. This obviates the necessity to reduce the scope of reference constantly to “many critical discourse analysts” or “most people working within the CDA paradigm”. However, since the use of CDA as an umbrella term entails the risk of over-generalisation, an attempt will be made to identify specific particular sub-groups or authors within the CDA tradition when this proves necessary.

As a self-conscious movement with an explicit agenda, CDA abounds in definitions of what it purports to be and do. These declarations range from the highly politicised: “to explain existing conventions as the outcome of power relations and power struggle” (Fairclough 1989: 2), to the almost anodyne “to answer questions about the relationships between language and society” (Rogers 2005: 365), depending on the stance of the individual researcher. However, the general consensus is that Critical Discourse Analysis contains two essential elements: A more or less political concern with the workings of ideology and power in society; and a specific interest in the way language contributes to, perpetuates and reveals these workings. Thus the more explicit definitions all emphasise the relationship between language (text, discourse) and power (political struggle, inequality, dominance).

“CDA takes a particular interest in the relationship between language and power (...). This research specifically considers more or less overt relations of struggle and conflict” (Weiss and Wodak 2002: 12).

“CDA involves a principled and transparent shunting backwards and forth between the microanalysis of texts using varied tools of linguistic, semiotic and literary analysis, and the macroanalysis of social formations, institutions and power relations that these texts index and construct” (Luke 2002: 100).

These initial definitions raise a large number of questions regarding what is meant by key terms such as “politics”, “power” and “ideology”, not to mention “critical”, “discourse” and “analysis”, which will be explored in the next section, in which the intellectual history of CDA will be briefly reviewed.

## **2.2. *Intellectual antecedents***

It is uncontroversial to state that the movement which is now recognisable as Critical Discourse Analysis began to gain momentum in the late 1970s, in a series of publications which initially set out to bring Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics into a more broadly social perspective capable of taking in political issues of power and control. “Language and Control”, by Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979) and “Language as Ideology”, by Hodge and Kress (1993), were seminal works which laid many of the foundations for CDA without using the term itself. The term Critical Discourse Analysis itself appears to have first been used by Fairclough in an article published in 1985 (Fairclough 1985: 739), but was popularised by the highly influential book ‘Language and Power’ (Fairclough 1989). The term was consolidated by the

publication of 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (Fairclough 1995), which was subtitled 'The critical study of language'. As one critic has pointed out, the use of the definite article in the subtitle seems to imply that the multiplicity of critical approaches outlined in previous works by the same author had "coalesced into a uniformity which could be identified as the critical study" (Billig 2002: 35). Although this is arguably an exaggeration, it is none the less true that Fairclough's term took root. Moreover, despite the proliferation of publications in this area, Fairclough's two books mentioned above are perhaps still the best known source books for CDA, and are frequently cited across a range of disciplines (Rogers et al. 2005: 365, 371).

From the point of view of linguistics, CDA bears traces of the reaction against structural linguistics that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Systemic Functional Linguistics, pragmatics, conversation analysis and ethnography, CDA offered a theory of language that took the social functions of language seriously. However, unlike SFL, CDA rejected descriptive linguistics and the structuralist thinking which underpins much SFL research. Importantly, CDA differed from the other approaches in its particular interest in power, and its underlying assumption that the social relations reflected in language phenomena were part of a larger pattern characterised by unequal power relations. It thus began life looking out to social and political theory, seeing language not in itself, but as evidence for what is happening across a much wider network.

Most histories of CDA trace the origins of this politicised concern with society to authors working within a Marxist or neo-Marxist tradition, and most specifically to the Frankfurt school, particularly Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer. The Frankfurt school consisted of a group of thinkers who were interested in the way Marxist theory could shed light on twentieth-century developments in capitalism. They perceived that the economic determinism proposed by Marx was no longer relevant to current circumstances, and so they focused their attention on changes in capitalism which, they felt, led to the perpetuation of oppressive structures by ideological means. To understand the relevance of this background, it is important to emphasise that Marxist theorists differed from other sociologists of the day in their normative tendency: Whereas most social scientists believed that their role was to observe and interpret, rather as natural scientists might observe and interpret the natural world, Marxist social sciences believed that their task was to judge and to prescribe. Thus their stance was "critical" because they felt that they were authorised to evaluate what was happening in society, and because they felt that they had appropriate standards by which they could perform such evaluations. In short, theorists of this school believed that they had access to knowledge not only of how society is, but also of how it could and should be.

Although there are no particularly direct links between the Frankfurt school and most critical discourse analysts, with the evident exception of the discourse-historical school (see below), the common terminology and the shared background in Marxist approaches to late capitalism have led many CDA practitioners to claim a strong intellectual affinity with this group (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). However, the trends originating with the Frankfurt school are far from being the only streams of thought that have influenced CDA. The general "critical" turn of many of the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s was doubtless an important factor. Moreover, it obviously owes a particular debt to specific authors, such as Gramsci, to whom it owes the insight that oppression in society is often realised through internalised hegemony, involving aspects of coercion and consent (and by implication, using language);

Bourdieu (1984a), from whom it took the notions of habitus, symbolic capital and systems of meaning; and Habermas, who stressed the crucial role of communication in modern social systems. However, since these theorists, though concerned with language, were not linguists, their influence on CDA is mainly confined to the interpretations they offer of society, and to their insights into the workings of ideology in creating and maintaining social systems. It has been left to critical linguists to identify and explore the actual linguistic manifestations of these phenomena.

On occasions, attempts have also been made to situate CDA in a longer linguistic tradition. Luke (2002: 97) goes one stage further in his outline of CDA's intellectual antecedents, situating CDA in what he terms "a distinguished if incomplete history of attempts at a normative political linguistics", which he traces in a direct line from Voloshinov and Bakhtin. Luke claims that these tendencies, taken together with CDA, constitute a "sustainable counter-tradition in linguistics" (Luke 2002: 97) which rejects approaches in the social sciences in general, and linguistics in particular, that are based on liberal or neo-liberal theories of the individual and society. In his view, CDA is not a formal school of thought, but rather a range of stances which can roughly be grouped together as advocating analysis of the role of language in society within an explicitly political perspective, concentrating particularly on the way the interests of dominant groups are furthered through discourse. Within this "critical" or "non-liberal" perspective, it is particularly important for many CDA specialists to distinguish their own activities from those of "non-critical" linguists or discourse analysts by insisting that their analyses move beyond the mere description and interpretation of the role of language in society, to an explanation of how and why language does what it does, and what is behind this (Fairclough 1989). In Fairclough's words, "critical implies showing connections and causes that are hidden" (1992: 9), which means decoding the operations of ideology, for the discursive patterns of ideology conceal the power struggles that are taking place in the social world.

One final important influence on CDA, though one which is not entirely compatible with those mentioned above, is the post-structuralism of Foucault. Foucault reacted against structuralist theories of society such as Marxism, which assumed that regular, observable relationships existed between structures within systems, and that human beings could gain knowledge of these. Foucault's critique of structuralism emphasised the slippery nature of social constructs, the shifting nature of power relations, and the central role of discourse in configuring social relations (Foucault 1969: 25-28). In Foucault's view, discourse moves back and forth, both reflecting and constructing the social world of the different agents who use it, or are situated by it. Orders of discourse are the discursive practices of a society or an institution, which are interrelated and interwoven. However, in Foucault's view, it is not possible to access meaning (Foucault 1981: 54). Instead, he concentrates on analysing the conditions of existence for meaning and the principles of producing meaning. He strives to avoid interpretation, and rejects the aims of hermeneutics, centring on discursive practices in a world in which all discourses are relative and constantly changing. The centrality accorded to language by Foucault has been taken up in a fundamental sense by the proponents of CDA, who base most of their research on discourse phenomena. In the definition offered by Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 258), discourse is important because it works ideologically, configuring and conditioning society and culture, creating and perpetuating power relations, while remaining curiously transparent or invisible even to the people who use it. However, the inherently destabilising relativist message of

Foucault's theory is generally disregarded by CDA practitioners in favour of a more stable or normative approach to the interpretation of social phenomena.

### **3. Criticism of Critical Discourse Analysis**

#### **3.1. *Criticism of the underlying premises***

As we have seen, those working within the field of CDA have rarely been slow to defend their own political standpoint, their own belief that research must be "critical" in all the senses outlined above. It is also evident that the heterogeneous nature of CDA's intellectual inheritance sets a complex task for the researcher trying to trace exactly what the justification for a particular stance or interpretation might be. This has led some critics to accuse CDA of operating somewhat randomly, moved by personal whim rather than well-grounded scholarly principle, while others have made attempts to uncover and explicate the precise philosophical and sociological basis, concluding that its foundations are by no means as sound as its practitioners appear to believe.

Hammersley (1997: 237-248) attacks the founding assumptions of CDA, accusing Fairclough and others of asserting the need for a critical approach as though this were quite obvious and unproblematic. First of all, Hammersley argues, orthodox Marxist theory is now discredited: It has been discarded by philosophers, historians and economists, who have rejected most of Marx's ideas as mechanistic, unfounded and irrelevant to an understanding of society today. He then takes the arguments back to an analysis of the Frankfurt school, which, as we have seen, is generally claimed to provide immediate antecedents for CDA. He insists that the Frankfurt school in no sense constitutes a solid basis for CDA's critical enterprise, because the changes wrought on Marxist theory by Adorno and Hochheimer were extremely radical, reaching far beyond economic factors to issues related to alienation, rationality and human nature. They believed alienation to be "a product of the distortion of Western rationality, in particular the latter's pursuit of control over nature, including human nature" (Hammersley 1997: 242), which begs a large number of unresolved questions about the essentially rational nature of scientific enquiry. Moreover, the type of critique proposed by Adorno, for example, would seem to undercut the ground for privileging one agent over another, and casts doubt on the possibilities of attaining emancipation. The Frankfurt school may have been interested in explaining social change, and may have offered a thorough critique of orthodox Marxism, Hammersley argues, but it certainly does not provide an effective philosophical basis for "critical" research of the type carried out by critical discourse analysts. None the less, although Hammersley's main contention that CDA's philosophical foundations are "simply taken for granted, as if they were unproblematic" (1997: 244) is borne out in many studies associated with CDA, this does not necessarily mean that a more thoroughly grounded approach can be ruled out; nor does the intrinsic difficulty of an approach built on a critique of Western rationality mean that such analysis is not possible. In the last analysis, perhaps Hammersley's most telling criticism is that levelled at the ambitious claims made by CDA practitioners to offer a comprehensive understanding of society as a whole and how it functions, which is "superior" to other positions precisely because it is conducted in a spirit of self-reflexive critique (1997: 244-5). Since a large part of its claim to legitimacy rests on this

assertion, CDA specialists need to pay special attention to this aspect of the epistemological underpinning of their work, and to its methodological implications.

At this point, it is interesting to note that the term “critical” itself has a special role in the history of the Frankfurt school. The word itself is thought to have been adopted when members of the Frankfurt school were exiled in the USA, where the original descriptor “Marxist” was deemed unacceptable (Scholem 1982: 210). As we saw above, in this first sense, “critical” means the capacity to evaluate society from a specific standpoint, in this case, Marxism. There is actually a long history of use of the term “critical” that extends back to Kant, who used it to signify that his analysis was based on rational a priori principles “without the aid of experience” rather than the uncritical dogmatism of his predecessors (Kant 1781: 3; Bilig 2002: 37). In its post-Frankfurt after-life, the word “critical” has been adopted by a range of approaches in the social sciences, most notably by critical psychology, which also claims intellectual descent from the Frankfurt school (even though many of its approaches appear to have little in common with the work of these theorists), and which also operates on the premise that academic research should criticise the existing conditions of social life with the aim of improving those conditions (Gergen 1994: 11-20). In the field of education, the word “critical” is associated with Paulo Freire’s “critical pedagogy”, which again states the aim of challenging domination and empowering the oppressed by encouraging the development of critical consciousness. The term “critical” is thus employed across a range of disciplines, used loosely to mean “critical of the status quo” or “critical of liberal humanist perspectives”, usually with a view to highlighting commitment to social change.

To complicate matters, however, there are at least another two potential meanings of the word “critical”. On the one hand, the Frankfurt school theorists themselves recognised that their work was “critical” in another sense, that is, it provided a critique on what they perceived as the authoritarian positivism of orthodox Marxism (Shaw 1985: 165). In other words, they felt that they should be critical of received ideas, and hoped to develop new, deeper and broader understandings of developments in capitalism that would extend far beyond straightforward Marxism. In doing this, they should also be self-critical, and should aim to subject their own work to rigorous intellectual standards. This aspect of the “critical” heritage from the Frankfurt school does not figure largely in most approaches associated with CDA, which tend rather to assume their own left-wing political standpoint uncritically. One notable exception to this general trend is found in the discourse historical approach (Wodak 2001; Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 32-35, 2009: 86-89), which distinguishes three dimensions of critique, namely textual, socio-diagnostic, and prospective/retrospective, and advocates critical self-reflection at multiple stages along the analytical route. Another is that advocated by Gloy (1998) and the so-called Oldenburg school (Bredehöft 1994: 4; Bluhme 2000: 10-13), who acknowledge that analysts participate in the discourses which form their object of study, and insist that scholars must therefore always reveal their own perspectives and show how they are grounded, in order to give their views validity on an intersubjective level.

On the other hand, to the multiple connotations of the term “critical” in this context, we also have to add a further sense: In the classic liberal education in most English-speaking countries, students are encouraged to “be critical”, that is, to think for themselves rather than to take what they read at face value – an intellectual skill that does not presuppose any particular ideological affiliation. One senses intuitively that the

polysemy of the term “critical” may have led to certain confusions regarding what the role of the discourse analyst is, and what if any political stance she ought to take. Many scholars feel that they are generally “critical” because that is what their education has encouraged them to be; others define “critical” as meaning critical of society from a neo-Marxist standpoint; while still others see themselves as “critical” because they adopt a critical stance to some neo-Marxist positions. The outcome is a merging of meanings, with the consequent loss of clarity and intellectual precision. It is scarcely surprising, given the problems of definition that lie at the very basis of CDA, that the enterprise may sometimes seem to lack coherence.

At the same time, there is a major contradiction, alluded to above, between the Marxist and post-structuralist strands in CDA’s intellectual antecedents. While Marxists rely on a normative theory of history and society, authors within the post-structuralist or post-modern movement see all such totalising meta-narratives as invalid and potentially manipulative. Moreover, on the level of individual political decisions, in the post-modern philosophical landscape it is hard to justify adopting a particular meta-narrative to interpret the phenomena one has observed. Foucault, for example, at one time notoriously refused to commit himself to value judgements about the discourses that he studied (Foucault 1969). Instead, in a post-modern framework, it has been suggested that one simply “chooses” particular values or stances, in a process of existential self-definition which is sometimes referred to as decisionism (Habermas 1976; Macintyre 1981). In this perspective, although we may try to form our commitments by following “rational” procedures, the fragmentation of the moral and intellectual order is such that it is hard to find consistent grounds for a rational politics, or for reasoned political discourse, and there is little real hope of furthering human emancipation.

Faced with these seemingly contradictory scenarios, Hammersley asks whether it would perhaps be more appropriate to situate CDA researchers on the post-structuralist side of the fence, as people who have chosen a particular standpoint by an act of will, rather than as a result of extended deliberation based on examination of the facts and issues. If this is the case, he argues (1997: 242-245), then there is no particular reason why readers should accept CDA’s political stance rather than any other, and CDA’s claim to “interpretive power” and “emancipatory force” can be regarded as mere assertions that one can accept if one chooses to share their point of view, or not, as the case may be.

The consequences that this would have for CDA’s status as an approach are far-reaching. As Hammersley points out, if the political stance on which CDA is founded turns out not to be well founded, but merely a product of decisionism, this fits ill with the strong claims made by CDA for itself and its own activities. If a central tenet of critical research is that research should be explicitly designed to fulfil political functions (exposure of inequality, dominance, injustice), rather than what would be the more conventional purpose of research (to observe and interpret phenomena), then there has to be a sound justification for this. If, in the end, the justification is only a matter of individual choice, then there is little incentive for the reader to take this type of research seriously.

CDA researchers are usually careful to make their own political commitments quite explicit before they embark on the interpretation and explanation of social phenomena. Fairclough, for example, tends to stress his old-Left leanings, even though in principle he agrees that critical research need not be left-wing, and that right-wing forms of CDA are perfectly conceivable (Fairclough 1996: 52). Two points should be



made here. One is that, if this is so, then Fairclough's and others' interpretations must be quite open to argument, because any left-wing interpretation might equally be challenged from the right, or from any other political dimension that might exist. Thus the whole scholarly project of CDA can be seen as heavily conditioned by political choice, rather than scientific criteria, which might be thought to take on a secondary role. Secondly, the fact that CDA's adherents regularly bow in the direction of transparency and truthfulness by stating their political affiliations does not somehow mean that they are absolved from the need for objectivity in their research. Bourdieu has alluded to the perfunctory nature of many declarations of this kind, and to the role that self-definitions play in academic power struggles (1984b: 308). Indeed, in various types of post-modern framework, it is common for writers to try to circumvent serious epistemological difficulties by taking an explicit stance from the outset. This is particularly common in areas such as post-modern approaches to feminism (Harding 11-12), where the usual justification given is that a feminist perspective is needed redress the balance in a system that has been dominated by patriarchy. However, whether or not the epistemological problems of post-modernism are resolved by this, such gambits do not free the author to misrepresent the data, or to interpret the data in any way he or she chooses for some particular political purpose.

Given the striking heterogeneity of CDA's intellectual sources, it is at least surprising that there is little debate within CDA circles about their relevance or, indeed, their compatibility. As Slembrouck points out (2001: 40-41), "CDA continues to be unclear about its exact preferences for a particular social theory." Indeed, trends over the years seem to have broadened rather than narrowed its intellectual base. So while Fairclough (1989) is largely informed by neo-Marxism with a Gramscian view of hegemony, in which naturalised "common sense" is the vehicle of ideology and text is a site of struggle, ten years later, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) construct a research agenda that is engaged in ongoing dialogue between late modernity, feminism and post-modernism. CDA is thus able to draw on a vast and somewhat contradictory panorama of ideas about society, encompassing thinkers from Marx, through Gramsci and Horkheimer to Giddens, and an enormous diversity of approaches to language and communication, which take in Bakhtin, Foucault, Habermas and Halliday, seemingly without ever perceiving the need to justify this eclecticism, or to systematise its intellectual base, other than by linking these notions vaguely to the phenomena associated with late modernity (consumer capitalism, marketisation, achievement and consolidation of hegemony through ideological manipulation). Indeed, Weiss and Wodak (2002) go one step further, to declare that the theories or constructs gleaned from different philosophical or sociological thinkers are simply tools, just as linguistic approaches are also seen to be instruments, to be used by the analyst as appropriate in any given situation: "one can speak of a theoretical synthesis of conceptual tools (...). Tools of this kind are, for example, Foucault's discursive formations, Bourdieu's habitus, or register and code as defined by Halliday and Bernstein" (2002: 7). On the strength of statements such as this, critics have noted that CDA habitually operates in the interface between an array of ideas and the world of discourse, using the one to explain the other, without addressing either of these on its own terms (Slembrouck 2001). In effect, this could lead to a situation in which the arguments from philosophy, politics and sociology are not fully worked out in terms that would be satisfactory to specialists in these disciplines, nor are the bases for language analysis firmly established in a way that is recognised by linguists.

In view of the above situation, it is necessary to return to the basic question of whether the diverse range of theories that are drawn on by different CDA researchers is a strength or a weakness. According to some authors, the fact that the findings of CDA researchers can be related to a range of different philosophical and sociological concepts means that the field has a strong base. It would be regrettable, they argue, to limit the possibilities of CDA to a particular interpretative school, or to a specific theory of language or society. Many discourse analysts feel that this openness is a strength rather than a weakness (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Weiss and Wodak 2002). Even in the early days of CDA, Fairclough (1989: 10) asserted that the critical enterprise was “not just another approach to language study (...) but (...) an alternative orientation to language study”. CDA is a broad church, it seems, and can contain multitudes. However, the situation has also had its critics within the fold of CDA. Fowler commented more negatively (1996: 8-12) “it seems that anything can count as discourse analysis (...) There is a danger of competing and uncontrolled methodologies drawn from a scatter of different models in the social sciences.” The consequences of operating in such an eclectic framework are obvious: Lack of coherence, indiscriminate mixing of incompatible concepts, unsystematic application of methods, and so on. Moreover, intellectual rigour aside, there are issues of disciplinary self-definition or self-understanding which clearly have yet to be resolved.

### 3.2. Description of the text: Criticisms of method

In “Language and Power” (1989), Fairclough sets out a method for the analysis of texts which is based on classic discourse analysis techniques, and which owes much to Halliday and Systemic Functional Linguistics. Key figures in the genesis of CDA such as Fowler (1996) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) directly claim Halliday’s framework as the intellectual underpinning for their analyses. The general structure used is the familiar three-level framework: Language operates on an ideational level (construction and representation of experience in the world), a relational level (enactment of social relations) and a textual level (production of texts). Language connects meanings with their spoken and written expressions. Both meanings and expressions interface with phenomena outside language, particularly with social life, to such an extent that “the social is built into the grammatical tissue of language” (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 140). According to these authors, by looking carefully at specific instantiations of language – texts or interactions – researchers can discover the social relations which they reflect, configure or reproduce, and learn about the social context in which these relations are embedded. In their view, such analysis must be objective and rigorous, and may apply a variety of linguistic research techniques, ranging from qualitative methods proper to conversation analysis to quantitative approaches found in corpus linguistics.

It would therefore seem that the linguistic framework and analytical method that CDA researchers claim to use are uncontroversial. Yet some of the most vociferous criticism that has been levelled at CDA has focused on precisely this area: The framework may be sound, the method appears promising, but in practice, much CDA research has deep methodological flaws.

The main problem here appears not to be a lack of awareness of the need for rigour. In a review of 20 articles published in *Discourse and Society*, Fairclough (1992)

argues that their analyses would have been more convincing had closer attention been paid to textual and intertextual properties. However, his review is symptomatic in that rather than decrying this lack of rigour, he merely regrets that an opportunity to support specific conclusions was lost, to the extent that “the entire exercise (...) looks like a community-building effort rather than a search for enhanced understanding” (Verschueren 2001: 67). A similar lack of scholarly rigour in applying linguistic methodology has been detected in many publications that purport to apply critical discourse analysis. For example, in a review of 40 articles using CDA in the field of education published up to 2003, Rogers et al. (2005: 385) noted that one quarter of the articles included no discussion of language theory, while the others made reference to CDA, SFL and discourse theory, many in rather general terms, and few included detailed discussion of the linguistic evidence. Other scholars have pointed out that critical analysts often state that they are using methodology proper to the ethnography of communication, but fail to present the description of situations or the ways in which such information was obtained in a manner that would be acceptable to ethnographers (Blommaert 2001: 14-17).

These methodological shortcomings are generally recognised as existing on the level of how the data are actually obtained, and how they are subsequently interpreted. I shall focus here on the way CDA researchers obtain their data. In the section which follows this, I shall turn my attention to the issue of interpretation and the related question of reader response.

One of the most outspoken critics of CDA in this area has been Widdowson (1998, 2005). In a review of three representative studies published in the 1990s, Widdowson homes in on what he feels to be the unsystematic nature of some CDA research. He quotes Fowler (1996: 8) as stating that “critical linguists get a very high mileage out of a small selection of linguistic concepts such as transitivity and nominalisation”, which he interprets as meaning that “analysis is not the systematic application of a theoretical model, but a rather less rigorous operation, in effect a kind of ad hoc bricolage which takes from theory whatever concept comes usefully to hand” (Widdowson 1998: 136). Widdowson goes on to cite Fowler as stating that other analytical approaches (CA, schema theory, etc.) could equally well be put to use, provided they were brought into the “critical” model. Any method will do, he implies, as long as the results are the right ones.

Widdowson revisits CDA’s analyses of various key texts at length in order to illustrate what he feels to be the lack of impartiality in the way that method is applied. By focusing on particular lexical items, or by focusing on certain grammatical features (passives, nominalisations), it is possible to reach certain conclusions about ideology in the text. But, he asks, is this legitimate? Given that these features have been chosen, he feels, more or less randomly, because the researcher feels intuitively that they will provide results that have ideological meaning, it is possible that the rest of the text, which may contain contradictory data, is ignored. Widdowson does not reject the possibility that there might really be certain grammatical features (such as passives, for example) that genuinely have a “greater ideological valency” (1998: 148). But in his view, critical discourse analysts have so far not succeeded in proving that this is the case, or even addressed the issue as to how this could be proven. He proposes that corpus methodology might go some way towards resolving the problem, since its samples are larger and its methods more systematic. The results of such studies would be less likely to suffer from the “randomness” and openness to bias that Widdowson

perceives in studies by Fowler (1996), Fairclough (1996) and van Dijk (1996). It should be noted at this point that Widdowson himself is unable to show scientifically that such “randomness” exists in the selection of data, which somewhat undermines his point. However, the basic idea that discourse analysts should strive to implement objective standards and apply thoroughly scientific methods (for example, by engaging with larger samples of text or using corpus tools) is one which has informed much of the more recent work by CDA scholars (see below). Widdowson’s critique is much more pertinent when applied to the early days of CDA, and particularly to British authors such as Fowler and Fairclough.

This problem of potential analytical bias is addressed by other authors, such as Toolan (1997) and Stubbs (1997), who centre their arguments on the idea that CDA, at least in its early stages, often failed to approach texts systematically. Stubbs argues for a comparative approach based on large, representative samples. In this, he addresses the issue of method by tackling what many discourse analysts call the level of “description”. In Fairclough’s classic definition (1989), description means ascertaining what experiential, relational or expressive values the words or grammatical structures in the text have, and what textual structures or interactional conventions can be observed. In practice, many discourse analysts choose to focus on just one of these features, or one aspect of one of the features, such as the use of passives or nominalisation (Fowler et al. 1979; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1992a, 1992b). In Stubbs’s view, the claims being made by discourse analysts on the basis of such analyses are not tenable, because the method is often simply impressionistic, or because the sample of texts is small and obtained unsystematically. Stubbs cites a study by Fairclough (1995), who claims that public language (academic writing, political debate) is becoming less formal. The essence of Stubbs’s criticism is that Fairclough provides no quantitative evidence for this, and particularly, no quantitative diachronic evidence that the degree of informality is increasing. In fact, although Fairclough’s claims would seem plausible, the methods he uses to obtain his evidence are not explained, and his findings are not set out in such a way that anyone else could challenge them. In fact, when some CDA studies are examined closely, it turns out that much of the argument hinges on just a few words (such as the example of the word “enterprise” in Fairclough 1995). Yet, as Stubbs reminds us, “registers are very rarely defined by individual features, but consist of clusters of associated features which have a greater than chance tendency to co-occur” (1997: 3).

Although it is impossible to generalise about the methods used in CDA, the main force of Stubbs’s argument holds, because some critical analysts, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, paid scant regard to issues of methodological consistency, and provided little if any justification of their own methods. Although their work may contain genuine intuitions, it lacks the kind of rigour expected in academic research. Stubbs points out that “there is very little discussion of whether it is adequate to restrict analysis to short fragments of data, how data should be sampled, and whether the sample is representative” (1997: 7). What is more, there is a danger that fragments can be presented as representative, without any explanation as to how this representativeness has been established.

Stubbs is not intrinsically hostile to CDA, but the main brunt of his argument is that the methods used are not sound enough to justify the results that are supposedly obtained, with the consequence that the interpretations and explanations must be regarded as suspect. His manifesto for a methodologically-sound version of discourse

analysis is doubtless coloured by his background in corpus linguistics, but is none the less useful:

“the text analyses must quite simply be much more detailed. Analyses must be comparative: individual texts must be compared with each other and with data from corpora. Analyses must not be restricted to isolated data fragments: a much wider range of data must be sampled before generalisations are made about typical language use. And a much wider range of linguistic features must be studied, since varieties of language use are defined, not by individual features, but by clusters of co-occurring features: this entails the use of quantitative and probabilistic methods of text and corpus analysis” (Stubbs 1997: 10)

In fact, by the time that Stubbs was writing, many discourse analysts had already become sensitive to the need for a more systematic approach applied across larger, more representative samples of discourse (cf. Wodak et al. 1990; van Dijk 1993; Hoey 1996: 154; Wodak 1996). In fact, there has been a growing trend to draw on corpus methodology to provide a more solid methodological framework for use in CDA (Mautner 2001: 122; Partington 2003: 12; Partington 2006: 267; Baker et al. 2008: 277-283). Fairclough himself, who formed the butt of much of the original criticism regarding methods in CDA, subsequently published a study of the language of “new Labour” based on large quantities of empirical data and incorporating the use of corpus linguistic tools in order to obtain a more representative picture (Fairclough 2000: 17).

In fairness to Fairclough and CDA in general, it must be said that Stubbs’s background in corpus linguistics would tend to bias him in favour of studies based on large samples of text, particularly contrastive studies that are designed to bring out the distinctive features of different genres or registers, using statistical methods to establish significance. However, this is far from being the only way to study language data. It would certainly be wrong to rule out qualitative approaches to textual analysis, since it is clear that these offer a viable alternative to quantitative methodology, which also has many flaws and inconsistencies. Similarly, it would be wrong to discard the findings of CDA simply because they have not been obtained in this way. Close, qualitative analysis of a small sample of text might be the only way of analysing certain types of discourse, for example, the discourse of a particular politician or party.

A slightly different angle is adopted by Verschueren (2001: 60), who points to the lack of detailed analysis of language and interaction in some CDA analysis (for example, Verschueren provides a critique of textual analysis from Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). Verschueren homes in specifically on the tendency to leave out important aspects of the text that do not fit with the interpretive framework. A review of various instances of this selective tendency leads Verschueren to conclude that many of the supposed findings are “the product of conviction rather than the result of a careful step-by-step analysis that reflexively questions its own observations and conclusions” (2001: 65).

Verschueren accepts the validity of Fairclough’s three-stage approach to analysis (description, interpretation and explanation, see above), but takes issue with the way in which the analyst moves from the first level (description) to the second (interpretation, that is, situating the text as discourse). To make this transition, Fairclough relies on what he terms “members’ resources” (1989: 167):

At this stage of the procedure, it is only really self-consciousness that distinguishes

the analyst from the participants she is analysing. The analyst is doing the same as the participant interpreter, but unlike the participant interpreter the analyst is concerned to explicate *what* she is doing.

Verschueren suggests that by introducing the notion of “members’ resources”, Fairclough is essentially giving up on the issue of empirical evidence. The analyst’s interpretation is only as valid as any other interpretation (that of the participants themselves, for example, or an onlooker), since it is grounded in the same kind of working knowledge of how language is used and what society is like. Moreover, as Slembrouck has pointed out, members’ resources are also conceptually affected and distorted by social power relations, and so there is no guarantee that they are free from reproduction or ideological manipulation (2001: 39).

According to Fairclough, from the point of interpretation, the analyst can quickly go on to the final stage of explanation. But since interpretation relies on members’ resources, then even at the level of explanation, the only difference between a participant, say, and the analyst is that the analyst can draw on social theory to interpret what he or she has observed. It is at this point that Verschueren believes that CDA’s claims to interpretive insights fall down. In his words “the only real requirement for explanation is a good social theory. Nothing is said about the empirical dimension that is required to link data and theory” (Verschueren 2001: 69). In the view of some critics (Slembrouck 2001), the heart of the matter is that it is not legitimate to maintain a difference between researcher and researched solely on the grounds of access to social theory.

Verschueren provides a detailed analysis of how, in his estimation, Fairclough (1989) fails to cope satisfactorily with the empirical dimension – that is, fails to provide sufficiently rigorous systematic analysis of the text. The essence of his critique is that Fairclough isolates single texts for analysis, without placing them in the kind of social and intertextual context within which they would usually be read. For example, Fairclough takes a linguistic feature such as nominalisation in news reports, and interprets it as as being used to obfuscate issues of agency and avoid attribution of responsibility. However, in the context of the particular story or situation, and the ongoing reporting about a particular topic across many issues of the same newspaper, it may well be very clear to readers where responsibility lies. Verschueren’s main point is that Fairclough fails to anchor the text in a communicative situation, taking it out of context and ignoring aspects of the text that do not conform to expectations, which leads to distorted results.

Verschueren (2001: 60-79) also analyses a similar phenomenon that occurs when Fairclough attempts to analyse conversational interaction. Taking the case study by Fairclough (1992: 50-52) contrasting two doctor-patient interactions, one “traditional” and the other “alternative”, Verschueren applies systematic techniques of conversation analysis and pragmatic interpretation to show that Fairclough’s conclusions are ungrounded (Verschueren 2001: 70-71). He argues that Fairclough imposes a contrastive framework from the outset, which leads to a distortion of the data and disregard for features that do not fit the predetermined scheme. In the methodology, Verschueren identifies two major flaws: First, general aspects of context are simply ignored (such as whether the patient has a specific problem or not, whether or not the doctor and patient know each other); and second, form-function relations are treated as stable, which is not acceptable in pragmatic terms (for example, Fairclough assumes

that the first doctor exerts control over the interaction by asking questions, but does not address the possibility that the second doctor may be exercising control more subtly by giving minimal responses and waiting for the patient to continue – or that the second doctor might simply be uninterested in the patient, or wish to seem non-committal).

Verschueren argues cogently for a more systematic, objective, disciplined approach to qualitative analysis of ideology in texts, based on a set of specific principles concerning the nature of the samples used, the need for horizontal and vertical exploration of the text, sensitivity to pragmatic issues in the relationship between form and function, and concern that the meanings should emerge coherently from the data rather than be imposed by the researcher (see Verschueren 2011). In fact, the past history of CDA reveals that practitioners have sometimes made few concessions to methodological exigencies, and do not always present their own research procedures with transparency (Rogers et al. 2005). The major failing of approaches such as that used by Fairclough (1989) is that it accords a pivotal role to the researcher and his/her interpretive and explanatory skills, and, as Verschueren (2001: 60-77) indicates, provides no account of exactly how or why particular aspects of the text are deemed to have one meaning or another – the researcher's judgement is enough, a questionable assumption that is sometimes justified, rather weakly, by using the rather nebulous concept of "members' resources" (Fairclough 1989: 167; Verschueren 2001: 68). In particular, Fairclough's assumption (1989: 167) that "it is only really self-consciousness that distinguished the analyst from the participants she is analysing" is singled out for criticism, because many readings are possible, and the purpose of analysis is to provide something more solid than a subjective impression, by applying a rigorous method that is theoretically grounded. As Verschueren points out (2001: 68-69), the problem of method and interpretation is a serious one which is not satisfactorily resolved in Fairclough's later studies. For example, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 67) state that CDA does not "advocate a particular understanding of a text, though it may advocate a particular explanation". In Verschueren's view, by saying this they shrug off any claims that the analyst has a privileged understanding, and thereby eliminate the need for methodological rigour at the stage of reading and "understanding" the text (Verschueren 2001: 69). Their lack of interest in the epistemological and hermeneutic dimensions of textual analysis is matched by a corresponding over-emphasis on the theoretical dimension of explanation. After quoting Fairclough's distinction (1989: 167) between the analyst as reader (with the same "member's resources" as any other reader) and the analyst as explainer (the analyst is superior to other readers because he/she can draw on social theory), Verschueren concludes that:

In other words, the only real requirement for explanation is a good social theory. Nothing is said about the empirical dimension that is required to link data and theory. The theory being preconceived, it is not surprising, therefore, that 'findings' tend to be predictable and that a gap emerges between textual analysis and conclusions – even for many of those who, like myself, share large portions of the theory – as soon as the question of evidence is asked. Texts are simply made into carriers, as it were, of what one already assumes to be the case. Rather than proceeding from description via explanation to positioning, with interpretation at the core of all stages of the investigation, positioning comes first and interpretation is marginalized. (Verschueren 2001: 69).

This issue inevitably leads into the question of interpretation, which is again linked intimately to the issue of reader response. For the question as to how discourse analysts

can or should interpret text overlaps with the question as to how readers understand text. Although these questions also arise when quantitative language data are being interpreted, the problem tends to be more acute when the analysis is exclusively qualitative. These issues will be tackled together in the next section.

### ***3.3. The reader and the text: Reception and response***

It is perhaps on the level of textual interpretation that the CDA enterprise has come in for the greatest amount of criticism. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, critical discourse analysts have been accused of what might be called a kind of naive linguistic determinism. Widdowson (1998: 136) draws attention to an explanation offered by Kress (1996: 25):

“this set of semiotic features, of representational resources, suggests and implies, and I would wish to say, over the longer period produces a particular disposition, a particular habitus, and in so doing, plays its part in the production of a certain kind of subjectivity”

Widdowson likens the analysts’ approach to “the interpretive ingenuity one associates with literary criticism” (1998: 136). In his view, discourse analysts have unwittingly fallen back into “a transmission view of meaning, whereby significance is always and only the reflex of linguistic signification” (1998: 142).

On this basis, several critics have targeted CDA’s understanding of the relationship between texts and readers. Some authors have identified what they call “the familiar Whorfian notion of linguistic determinism” (Widdowson 1998: 139), not in its original form whereby the possibilities of a particular language code determine the habitual thought processes of the language users, but in an extended form in which discourses similarly produce, condition and restrict the thought processes of the recipient/user. It is uncontroversial to assume the existence of a significant relationship between discourse and people’s view of reality. However, it is equally obvious that in a globalised world people are exposed to many different discourses, and that they learn to navigate them, ignoring many, accepting some, rejecting others. Despite the evident truth of this, much CDA research proceeds on the basis that there is a simple, one-to-one relationship between the text and its reader, or the discourse and its recipient. It would be at once more subtle and more realistic to acknowledge from the outset that some discourses are more powerful or influential than others, and to focus attention on those that are particularly likely to have an impact on a large audience, or to attempt to determine what factors make such an impact probable.

One of the major problems with this approach is the circularity of the argumentation. It is possible to maintain that language use determines cognition, but this claim is weakened if the only evidence we have of cognition is language use. It would be truer to say that language both represents and influences cognitive processes, and so we must be very careful when trying to draw conclusions about thought from language and vice versa. In Stubbs’s view (1997), if researchers want to make claims about what people think on the basis of what they read or hear, they really ought to obtain non-linguistic evidence about their beliefs, or examine their behaviour. As he says (1997: 6), “if we have no independent evidence, but infer beliefs from language use, then the theory is circular”. Stubbs’s proposal presents many difficulties, because it



is not clear how exactly one would infer people's thoughts and beliefs without using language, and it is by no means straightforward to relate discourses to non-linguistic evidence such as observable behaviour. None the less, his criticism stands, because it is unreasonable to assume a one-way influence from discourse to thought, and methodologically unsound to operate as though the existence of such an influence were unproblematic.

Taking a rather different line of attack, some CDA researchers have devoted considerable space to discussing the means by which they think texts influence people, in order to validate their own hermeneutic practices. Kress (1992: 91-117) develops a theory of representation and transformation which he proposes as the means by which discourses function to modify or change people's views of reality. His theory is initially based on Halliday's notion of representation, the process by which reality is ideationally encoded. The notion of transformation is not borrowed from Halliday, and appears to be distantly conceptually related to the Chomskian notion of transformation. The main point is an insistence on the way in which representations are changed, possibly as a result of ideological manipulation.

As Widdowson points out (1998: 138), there is a certain circularity in this, too, because representations are by definition an encoded version of reality, and so it is hard to know exactly how we are to know which representations are purely representations, and which are transformations. It appears that this is a theory of language change, or discourse change, but it is not entirely clear how it is possible to ascertain what has changed from what. There is a curious parallel here with the problem of classifying poetic language as a deviation ("Abweichung") from normal language, discussed by Coseriu (1980: 51). Deviation is a relational concept, one must deviate from something, but who is to say what is deviating from what? Moreover, it may be possible to "deviate" in a wealth of different ways. Similarly, the concept of transformation is set up as a dichotomy, but there is no real way of knowing which side is which or whether, indeed, there is a dichotomy at all, or a range of different possibilities. In a further explanation of transformation offered in Hodge and Kress (1993), the authors propose that some types of grammatical construction are neutral or "non-transformed", and that these, though representational, lack any particular representational significance – they are innocent reflections of reality. Others, however, are transformed, and transformed sentences "always involve suppression and/or distortion" (Hodge and Kress 1993: 35). In practice, especially in much research carried out in the 1990s, transformation appears to be involved when grammatically "less simple" structures, such as the passive, are used to convey information. However, the question as to whether use of the passive is always ideological, or indeed, whether the passive is actually "less simple" than the equivalent active form, is not fully addressed by these researchers.

Widdowson takes issue with Kress's notion of transformation in various ways. First, he reminds us that in a Chomskian model, all strings of words are transformed and potentially transformable, so there are no neutral, innocent, non-transformed sentences. This model offers no method for telling transformed and non-transformed sentences apart. Secondly, Widdowson relates Kress's notion that transformed sentences are more complex to the derivational theory of complexity, a theory prominent in the 1960s, based on the idea that structural complexity was mirrored by psychological complexity and the consequent difficulty in processing. Thus passive sentences, it was proposed, required more effort to process, because a passive sentence is intrinsically more complex than an active sentence. This theory, again, presupposes that some structures

are actually more complex than others, and that this has a knock-on effect on the reader/receptor. However, this assumption goes against the evidence that is available from the area of language processing. When experiments were actually carried out to determine the processing speed or ease of different linguistic structures, it proved impossible for the subjects to separate their understanding of the language itself from contextual factors. For example, Olson and Filby (1972) compared comprehension time in processing active and passive propositions, and found that when events or questions were coded in terms of the actor, active statements were more swiftly processed, whereas when they were coded in terms of the receiver of the action, passives were processed more quickly. In their view, “the comprehension of a passive sentence does not necessarily involve the recovery of the base structure equivalent of the passive to the active sentence, or the base S-V-O structure usually assumed to underlie (...) sentence meaning” (1972: 379). In other experiments (Wales and Grieve 1969: 327-332), subjects found it surprisingly easy to understand complex structures within a particular context, in other words, they tended to come up with pragmatic interpretations, rather than engage in linguistic analysis.

In more recent CDA publications, the notion of transformation is less prominent. None the less, the underlying concept is often used (Schroder 2002; Kuo and Nakamura 2005; Stenvall 2007; and see also Billig (2008: 35-46) for a detailed discussion of possible ways in which passives and nominalisation have been thought to be “mystificatory”) so that passives are often suspect of depriving certain groups of agency, or of concealing agency, for example, without full discussion as to the pragmatic functions of the passive in language in general, or the impact, or lack of it, on the reader. Finally, as Widdowson (pp. 138-141) astutely points out, the whole notion of representation versus transformation, innocent language versus ideologised manipulation, appears to contradict another of the tenets of CDA, which is that all language is ideological, and nothing can be neutral. This further undermines the dichotomy between representation and transformation, and leaves little firm ground for the analyst to stand on.

How, then, can the analyst interpret texts, and how can the analyst establish what effect the text has on the reader? Critical discourse analysts are not unaware of the problems that arise here, and are quick to assert that ideological meanings cannot be read off from textual features, and that textual analysis should be combined with analysis of production and consumption practices (Fairclough 1995). Yet they provide little evidence of such practices, and tend to fall back on a transmission model of hermeneutics whereby linguistic forms “convey” or “construct” meaning, which is presumably imbibed by the reader in undiluted form.

This model itself contains an underlying contradiction, because even CDA specialists admit that the ideological meanings are often opaque and have to be prised out with difficulty by the discourse analyst, and yet they appear to be communicated with ease to the reader and be capable of subtly exerting an ideological influence on him or her. Thus meaning is contained in text in a deeply embedded form, subtly imbricated in the syntactic structures and lexical choices, but that same meaning, opaque to the analyst, is conveyed to readers, exerting an ideological influence on them. Moreover, the problem of understanding reader response is further compounded by issues of access to context, discussed elsewhere in this paper, because poor consideration of context tends to render opaque the way that the actual participants in any situation understand and interpret it themselves. Thus if, as we have seen, the researcher privileges his own

position because his/her “members’ resources” include access to social theory, then he or she “runs the risk of losing sight of whatever spontaneously productive ‘hermeneutics’ there already are in the lifeworlds” (Slembrouck 2001: 42), that is, what the participants actually think is happening.

The issue of reader response, analytical stance and hermeneutic possibilities has been addressed in considerable length in literary studies. When critics such as Widdowson accuse CDA of subordinating analysis to interpretation, of finding in the text what they set out to find (Widdowson 1998: 149), they frequently refer back to literary criticism for a parallel problem: CDA is “a kind of political poetics, and over and over again the same issues arise about the textual warrant for interpretation”. It is therefore useful to make a brief examination of the way this issue has been tackled in literary studies, in order to draw fruitful comparisons with CDA.

Both Stubbs and Widdowson recognise that the problem of hermeneutics in CDA somehow mirrors the problem of literary criticism and reader response that was the object of heated debate in the 1960s and 1970s. However, their claim that the problem is similar enough to be solved in the same way is open to criticism. To summarise briefly, the arguments in the field of literature about reader response arose in implicit contradiction to previous theories of literature that had foregrounded the writer or the content and form of the literary work, and in explicit opposition to the New Criticism and to formalist theories, which consigned the reader to oblivion. The proponents of reader-response approaches centred on the idea of the reader as an active agent who completes the meaning of a literary work through interpretation – a notion which some detractors felt would lead to relativism or even chaos. Stubbs cites Fish (1980: 341, 347) who endeavours to solve the problem of the heterogeneous nature of readers’ responses by taking the line that a text does not have meaning outside a set of cultural assumptions about what it means and how it should be interpreted. These assumptions are embodied in the “interpretive community”, which establishes the criteria for reading a particular text in a particular way, and sets norms as to what is possible and what is not.

Although the main question addressed by reader response theory is similar to the issue of interpretation in CDA, it is important to highlight some major differences. First, the responses to a literary work are essentially different, more complex or more multi-layered than responses to everyday texts of an informative or instrumental nature. Rather than reader response theory, which is more usually applied to works of art, the approaches to audience reception that form the staple of media studies would provide a useful tool for gauging what people understand from a particular text, or detecting the deviant readings that are generated within particular social settings. Second, if we are to accept CDA’s claims that obscure patterns and hidden meanings in discourse ultimately exert an ideological influence, then the notion that an “interpretive community” would provide useful in determining the meaning of discourse is obviously suspect: the community itself might be positioned in support of the hegemony, or various different interpretive communities might exist, offering a variety of interpretations. Moreover, when we are dealing with the type of text often studied by CDA, we are not simply thinking of the way a text is “interpreted”, which is the case in literary studies, but of the way in which it is accepted, used, acted upon, changed, parodied or perhaps ignored. In this, the notion more familiar to applied linguists of the “discourse community”, or the educationalists’ notion of the “community of practice”, offer more useful tools for gaining an understanding of how discourse works in specific social settings (Kent 1991:

425-445; Lave and Wenger 1991: 22-23). As Bhatia has remarked (2002: 6), thick descriptions of the communicative practices within a particular group “may unravel many of the mysteries of the way members of various discourse communities function to achieve their institutional and disciplinary goals and to justify their discursive practices”. Recent studies (Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Candlin and Hyland 1999; Arminen 2005) have brought out the complexity of the workings of power and language in academic and professional settings. There is also a substantial body of research in media studies that suggests that the influence of texts and broadcast material on subjects is much less one-way and much more complex than might be supposed (Abercrombie 1996; Nightingale 1996; Reese et al. 2003), because people bring a wide range of previous knowledge and interpretive techniques that enable them to generate a broad spectrum of divergent readings. Ideally, studies of this kind should be borne in mind or carried out in combination with discourse analytical research, in order to establish how media, institutional and other texts “work” in their natural settings.

Despite the foregoing, the problem of obtaining evidence about the effects of the text on the reader or listener is one that is rarely even raised in CDA research. The bodies of research that exist in media studies or ethnography of communication are rarely even alluded to by CDA practitioners, and in general it can be stated that CDA lacks a cogent theory of audience effects and audience response that would provide support for its assertions about the influence of discourses on human subjects.

### **3.4. CDA and context: *Too much or too little?***

One of the fundamental tenets of CDA is that discourse is socially embedded: It is at once socially constructed, and also plays a role in constructing and perpetuating (“reproducing”) social structures and relations. CDA also declares itself to be socially committed (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), with an explicit purpose of raising its readers’ consciousness “of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step to emancipation” (Fairclough 1989: 1). Language viewed in a social framework is a highly complex phenomenon, since it both constitutes and challenges social relations, and different linguistic media are intermeshed with each other and with non-language media, generating an intricate web of intertextuality and multimodality. It is therefore striking that one criticism levelled at CDA is that the most specifically social aspects of discourse, namely the social contexts in which discourse is embedded, have often been ignored.

The critiques that question CDA’s claims to offering an interpretation of the social world have originated in the areas of conversation analysis, on the one hand, and the ethnography of communication and pragmatics, on the other. In essence, these approaches tend to differ from CDA in their emphasis on the need to follow a bottom-up approach (Peace 2003: 164). Both conversation analysis and ethnography require meticulous data-gathering techniques involving the use of recordings and detailed transcripts, and both disciplines are committed to the notion that interpretations should emerge from the data. Pragmatics is concerned with the functions fulfilled by language in real contexts, and with the complex relationships between form and social function, and also focuses on the detailed study of specific instances of language use. Although CDA practitioners frequently call for “triangulation” in the sense of obtaining multiple perspectives on the phenomenon under observation (Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 33ff;

Rogers et al. 2005: 382; van Dijk 2006: 359ff; Wodak 2007: 203), or at least for “constant movement back and forth between theory and data” (Meyer 2001: 27), there is an observable trend for work carried out in CDA to operate in a top-down manner, in that it presupposes a particular theory of social relations, and looks at language data from that perspective, or singles out interesting aspects of language that tie in with a particular theoretical view, rather than embarking on an all-round, in-depth study covering the multiple dimensions of a text to determine how language works in a particular setting.

Conversation analysis and CDA share an interest in naturally-occurring talk, interaction and text, and agree that discourse has a two-way relationship with context and social structures. However, the discipline of conversation analysis emerged from a different intellectual background, partly as a reaction to mainstream sociological trends. Although generalisations entail some risk of over-simplification, in broad terms it is usually accepted that conversation analysts mainly focus their analysis on close study of the interaction itself, and are unwilling to include what might have come before or after the interaction within their field of focus. It has sometimes been called the study of “micro interactions” (Rogers 2005: 378). By contrast, CDA’s field of focus tends to widen out to encompass the macro context, the role that interaction plays in social relations, institutional power structures, and so on.

From the area of pragmatics, some critics have argued that CDA does not always look closely at the linguistic features of interactions, but that there is a tendency to jump too quickly to the macro context, making assertions as to how macro relations might be mapped onto micro interactions (Widdowson 1998). The immediate context, which determines the type of interaction in social settings, is often ignored completely (cf. Verschueren 2011). In the words of Verschueren (2001: 60), the lack of methodological rigour and, particularly, the way that context may be left out of the equation, means that CDA, particularly in its early days, was responsible for “subjecting the media, as well as other institutions, to a circus trial, playing fast and loose with the observable facts in order to support preconceived claims.”

Contact with CDA researchers who were using some of the techniques of conversation analysis sparked a heated debate in the late 1990s. To summarise the main arguments, in Schegloff’s view, context should only be taken into account insofar as it features in the interaction as a concern for the participants. Since there may be an almost infinite number of contextual factors that might possibly influence a given interaction, how is it possible to select just one that is analytically relevant? For example, an interaction between a man and a woman might be influenced by gender issues, but then again, this might not be the case, and it is conceivable that gender issues are unimportant for the participants on this particular occasion. In such a case, would it be legitimate for a researcher interested in gender to impose an analytical framework on this interaction?

In Schegloff’s opinion, conversation analysis should be driven by a desire to understand how everyday interaction works, how identities are negotiated, how people do things through language in different settings. To this end, the appropriate analytical approach is to discover the orientations provided by the participants themselves, and the role these play in the interaction. Moreover, even when it has been established that certain aspects of the context are important, the analyst has to take care to discern exactly what these might mean in the particular situation at hand, rather than jumping to conclusions in terms of meta-categories such as “gender” or “power”. In Potter’s words

(1998: 31), “context is treated as something that is constructed, dealt with, and oriented to by participants. Features of participants such as their ethnicity, features of the setting, and other ‘ethnographic’ particulars are not treated as separable factors”. As Potter points out, this tends to dissolve the classic distinction between micro- and macroanalysis, because researchers in this tradition do not view social structures as something in which interaction happens, but rather look at social interactions as evidence of the way social phenomena are shaped or constituted.

Although it is obvious that in the real world, the researcher cannot approach the data without preconceived notions, Schegloff’s recommendation is that scholars should try to ground their analysis in the interaction itself, focusing on what is relevant to the participants. In his words (1997: 165), “this is a useful constraint on analysis in disciplining work to the indigenous preoccupations of the everyday world being grasped, and serving as a buffer against the potential for academic and theoretical imperialism which imposes intellectuals’ preoccupations on a world without respect to their indigenous resonance.”

Although Schegloff’s concerns are important, the extent to which they are wholly applicable to CDA is questionable. Schegloff’s defence of a particular approach, generally epitomised in conversation analysis and ethnographic studies, whereby external categories are not imposed on the research agenda, does not necessarily mean that other approaches using externally imposed categories are invalid. CDA researchers draw on many methods, including those associated with conversation analysis, and there is intrinsically no reason why they should have to accept a series of assumptions or principles simply because they use aspects of a particular method. Van Dijk (1999: 460) identifies the bone of contention as being the issue of contextualisation, and argues that it is legitimate for CDA to examine text and context separately and explore how features of the context affect or are affected by the text. It is therefore up to individual researchers to determine how far particular external categories are important in the interaction, and CDA researchers need not be constrained by rigid disciplinary norms.

From a rather different point of view, it is also possible to criticise CDA for failing to take context into account, since it often concentrates on decontextualised samples of language, so that texts or parts of texts are analysed without regard to their production, distribution or consumption. Other scholars, particularly ethnographers of communication, have raised the question of the need to take context seriously, since texts are embedded in social contexts and cannot be understood without insights into the mesh of social relations within which they came into being. In areas such as education, this shortcoming has probably been tackled to some extent, since many more recent studies blend CDA approaches with some types of ethnographic methodology, obtaining qualitative data from a variety of sources including fieldnotes and other forms of observation, documents, interviews and focus groups (Rogers et al. 2005). However, in the field of media studies, which is close to CDA in many respects, there is less attention to context, partly because it is genuinely rather harder to define what context means, to identify and track readers or viewers, to gain thick descriptions of the way media texts are generated, and so on. None the less, as on the issue of hermeneutics and reception, CDA practitioners often work with more naive constructions of the way media texts work than do other media specialists, for whom the analysis of audience responses or production processes are essential to the research operation.

One may speculate that the failings outlined above are a consequence of CDA’s ideological approach: The overriding concern with power in society may make CDA’s

exponents eager to identify certain aspects of the text that seem to reflect their underlying thesis and to move swiftly on to the stages of interpretation and explanation, rather than devote time to laborious examination of the language itself, or to exploring the immediate contextual surroundings. In the view of some authors (Verschueren 2001), this may even lead to circularity of argumentation and produce results that are essentially no more than a confirmation of the obvious. CDA research in the 1980s on the mass media tended to yield the finding that the media reproduce the ideological status quo, for example, but in the theory of society to which most CDA researchers subscribe, this is hardly surprising. The overwhelming interest in ideological categories, over and above contextual variants, may lead researchers to ignore what is special or distinctive about particular instances of language use in favour of macro-patterns that confirm the researchers' initial hypothesis. The point is proven, but the result is ultimately banal. In Verschueren's view, "the presentation of predictable patterns as 'findings' distracts from what ought to be the more interesting questions related to the way in which they contribute to the generation of meaning" (2001: 63), so by jumping from what might be termed the "symptoms" (recognisable features of a specific phenomenon) to the macro-context, we learn little about how people appropriate or resist hegemonic discourses or indeed about how such discourses are enacted on the micro-scale.

One particular feature of the reliance on macro-structures in some CDA research is a tendency to generalise and stereotype. Blommaert (2001: 15) notes how critical discourse analysts tend to work from a priori notions concerning the main players in a particular context, such as "politicians are manipulators" or "the media are ideology-reproducing machines", as well as stereotyped socio-theoretical constructs such as "business", "institutions" or "traditional medicine". He advocates a more disciplined approach to taking in contextual features, which would include three aspects that he believes are ignored by mainstream CDA, namely resources, text trajectories, and data histories.

Briefly, his notion of resources means the complex of sociolinguistic means and communicative skills that participants bring to a particular situation. This is vital because "the importance of resources lies in the deep relation between language and a general economy of symbols and status in societies" (Blommaert 2001: 23). Language itself leads to the heart of social structure, because linguistic resources are intrinsically bound up with the distribution of power. Resources of this kind tend to be invisible in CDA research, because they are not features of individual texts, but can only be understood with knowledge of social structures and the way language functions in society. "Text trajectories" refer to the way discourse shifts across contexts, so that an interview becomes a set of notes, then a case study, and perhaps ultimately part of a review article. Again, many CDA scholars tend to prefer to concentrate on single instances or genres, rather than tracing the "natural history" of discourses across a range of settings and text types, which may lead to a slanted view or, at best, an incomplete picture. Although there are some honourable exceptions, particularly within the Viennese school of CDA, where a broader perspective has been adopted in order to cover a representative range of text types over a considerable period of time (see, for example, Wodak 2001; Reisigl 2007: 34ff), this is a highly complex enterprise, and not all discourse analysts are able to work on such an ambitious scale, with the result that they may run the risk of overstating their case on the basis of insufficiently corroborated evidence. Finally, "data history" refers to the actual gathering of data, which in

ethnographic methodology needs to be recorded meticulously, with consideration of observer effects or possible observer bias. Logically enough, this ought to include an account of the stance of the researcher regarding the immediate political concerns at stake, not just a general positioning as “left-wing” or “radical”, which are notoriously fuzzy categories and open to multiple interpretations.

Blommaert concludes with the observation that many of the problems with CDA arise out of the centrality accorded to text in the CDA tradition: Even though CDA researchers claim to interpret society through text, they usually end up simply interpreting text. If the tables are turned, and discourse is regarded as a situated social phenomenon within a context that includes language, social relations, power structures, and so on, then it might be possible to come closer to the ambition of “explaining society through the privileged window of discourse” (2001: 28).

Be this as it may, it seems fair to say in summary that the position most frequently adopted by CDA foregrounds interpretation and explanation in terms of predetermined categories that are of interest to the researcher. For CDA, context tends to mean the macro-context: Power systems that operate in society as a whole. This may often mean that features of the immediate micro-context can be omitted or ignored. This ideologically-motivated approach offers a stark contrast to the principles of some related analytical fields of language study.

### **3.5. CDA as essentially negative**

CDA practitioners repeatedly emphasise that their enterprise is essentially aimed at creating a better world, effecting transformation and empowering the oppressed: “CDA is essentially political in intent with its practitioners acting upon the world in order to transform it and thereby help create a world where people are not discriminated against because of sex, colour, creed, age or social class” (Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 1996: ix). However, they also admit that this objective is rarely met:

Critical language projects have remained just that: critiques of texts and of the social practices implied by or realised in those texts, uncovering, revealing, inequitable, dehumanising and deleterious states of affairs [...] if critical language projects were to develop apt, plausible theories of this domain, they would be able to move from critical reading, from analysis, from deconstructive activity, to productive activity [...] CL or CDA have not offered (productive) accounts of alternative forms of social organisation, nor of social subjects, other than by implication. (Kress 1996: 15-16)

Given the assumptions made in CDA about the nature of society, and the overwhelming interest in exposing ideological manipulation that shapes and perpetuates power imbalances through discourse, it is hardly surprising that language scholars of this school find it easier to deconstruct than to construct. In an article calling for more positive work in discourse analysis, Martin draws particular attention to the negative facets of CDA, locating CDA among “a pathological disjunction in 20th century social sciences and humanities research which systematically elides the study of social processes which make the world a better place in favour of critique of processes which disempower and oppress” (2004: 186) and calls for a serious attempt to be made to re-configure CDA in a more positive sense. He identifies this type of negative deconstruction as the dominant face of CDA, which he terms “CDA realis”, which is



largely concerned with “exposing language and attendant semiosis in the service of power” (2004: 179). However, he also notes that CDA has a secondary aspect oriented to constructive social action, which he names “CDA irrealis”, which has rarely been put into practice. In Martin’s view, “we need a complementary focus on community, taking into account how people get together and make room for themselves in the world – in ways that redistribute power without necessarily struggling against it” (2004: 186). This “Positive Discourse Analysis” would focus on how change happens for the better, looking at how indigenous peoples overcome their colonial heritage, for example, or how sexism is eroded and new gender relationships are established. By studying such phenomena, we will learn more about how positive developments take place, and we will thus be in a better position to support change in the future.

By way of example, Martin documents the Australian government enquiry on the forced adoption of indigenous children, which is truly innovative within the genre of the bureaucratic report in that it foregrounds the voice of the victims. He similarly charts the roles of narrative and of biographical literature in raising people’s awareness of injustice and changing public opinion. Martin’s own frustration with the orthodoxies of CDA is plain when he states that he supposes “it would be going too far to propose a 10 year moratorium on deconstructive CDA, in order to get some constructive PDA off the ground” (2004: 199).

In a similar vein, Luke (2002: 98) argues that if CDA is to develop its full potential, it needs to move beyond ideological critique, and to explore what he calls “the productive use of power” and, in Freirean terms, “emancipatory discourse”. Like Martin, he asserts that “if CDA is a normative form of social science and political action, it must be able to demonstrate what ‘should be’ as well as what is problematic” (2002: 105). If not, he argues, CDA will remain entrenched in a deterministic negative paradigm in which all media are forms of central ideological control, and CDA practitioners have the “enlightening” role of the Gramscian intellectual, to raise awareness and mobilise the people against the hegemony. Since this would be reductive (and, we might add, assumes certain premises about the nature of the audience and the workings of the media that are highly questionable), Luke proposes that a new, positively-oriented CDA should focus on minority discourses and diasporic voices, emergent counter-discourses, reinterpretations of mainstream discourses by different groups of subjects, and strategies of resistance. In the face of globalisation, for CDA to remain locked in dialectical analyses of economic disparity and political oppression would be to miss an opportunity, and ultimately to fail to come to terms with new cultural configurations, new ways of negotiating identity, new counter-discourses and voices of resistance. To meet this challenge, from a theoretical point of view, it will be necessary to stop thinking in terms of outdated dichotomies, while in methodological terms, it will be important to seek out evidence and develop appropriate methods for investigating the new discourses and new media that characterise life in the 21st century.

### **3.6. CDA as an intellectual orthodoxy**

Critical Discourse Analysis began as a revolutionary form of language study. Although, as we have seen, the term “critical” is polysemous, if not vague, there is no doubt that what unites the people who apply the name CDA to their activities is the belief that they

can stand back from their data and apply techniques of critical analysis – to the texts or interactions themselves, and to the society in which these occur. As we have seen, their critique is generally political, concerned with issues of power and inequality. At the outset, CDA certainly seemed radical and new, an approach to language study in which old orthodoxies could be challenged in the name of social commitment.

However, as is inevitable in the case of successful new movements of any kind, in the twenty years or so in which CDA has gathered momentum there has been a gradual move towards establishment and respectability. Some authors even claim that CDA scholars are actively engaged in an attempt to establish CDA as an approach or school in itself (Verschuere 2001: 67). Billig (2002) documents this change and sketches out what this may mean for a “revolutionary” discipline, calling for greater self-awareness and self-criticism on the part of CDA practitioners.

In his account, Billig (2002) draws attention to the use of the acronym “CDA”, which he feels has gained the status of an academic “brand”. In his view, one rhetorical strategy available to academics is to package their products as part of a range which is accredited or in some way guaranteed by a particular theoretical perspective. The “branding” of this theory is often accomplished by the use of abbreviations (Billig cites the example of SIT, Social Identity Theory, in sociology, but one might equally think of SFL, in linguistics). In Billig’s view, this type of labelling makes it possible for academics to “market” their ideas “as branded and identifiable intellectual products in today’s academic world” (2002: 42), and this phenomenon is becoming common in a fiercely competitive academic world that is increasingly dominated by the rules of the market place. Now that CDA has a firm foothold in universities, with its own journals and large numbers of academics who assent to its main tenets, it is part of the academic power structure, and aspiring scholars can choose to join its ranks by accepting its principles and methodological assumptions. In terms of academic power (to publish books or articles, to make appointments, to achieve promotion), CDA is now at least equal to other fields of language study. It is even possible to maintain that, in intellectual terms, a critical paradigm has been established – a critical orthodoxy which may, in its way, be as inflexible, dogmatic and exclusive as other orthodoxies of the past.

Moreover, Billig draws special attention to the role played by the term “critical” in the self-understanding and self-marketing of CDA. He points to the history of the way the word “critical” has been used from Kant through to Piaget and Popper, not to mention the Frankfurt school (see above), and suggests that the main force of the term has usually been to insist on the objectivity or intellectual credibility of one’s own enterprise and undermine the “uncritical”, “non-critical” or “acritical” approaches adopted by other scholars. In particular, CDA’s insistence that academic work should be addressed to the critique of power in society, added to the difference it establishes between itself and disciplines or paradigms whose theoretical and methodological assumptions exclude direct political analysis, tends to set up a dichotomy in which CDA is constructed as positive, while non-critical approaches are positioned as potentially defective or worse. Non-critical approaches are not simply another option: By not taking a critical stance, they are taking side with the existing hegemonies, guilty of precluding the necessary social critique, and thereby of collusion or of furthering the reproduction of an unjust social order. If we appraise CDA critically, we should therefore be aware that the use of the term “critical” is itself significant as what has been termed “a rhetoric of self-praise” (Billig 2002: 37). This aspect of CDA could indeed be

seen as a form of ideological manipulation, a way of disqualifying the competition. As Potter (1996) indicates, CDA treats criticism as if it were intrinsic to the enterprise. Although this does not necessarily follow, the implication often seems to be that discourse analysis which is not critical is in some sense lacking. As Potter says (1996), there is scope for types of discourse analysis which might or might not lead to social criticism, depending on what emerges from the data. There is no particular need for discourse analysis to be critical in order to be valid, useful or interesting. Moreover, other discourse analysts have argued forcefully that discourse analysis ought set its own particular rules as a discipline of language study, particularly relating to rigorous and impartial standards of analysis and interpretation, and that external concerns such as ideological issues are not necessarily germane to the enterprise (Antaki et al. 2003). However, to those working within CDA, critique is not something that may or may not emerge from the analysis of text: Critique is the *raison d'être* for analysis in the first place.

In Billig's evaluation of this situation, several points stand out as being relevant to our present discussion. First, there is the issue of the critical canon. As we have seen, the intellectual basis for CDA is a subject of discussion even within the area itself. Beginning from a fairly straightforward neo-Marxist critique of society in the 1980s, CDA has expanded its intellectual horizons to take in a range of sociological thinking of a very diverse nature. What is special about this, if CDA is considered as a "school" or "approach" within language study, is the heavy emphasis on sociology, and on figures with a particular "critical" position towards late modernity, blended with the use of notions more generally associated with post-modern paradigms. Whatever the merits of this eclectic background, the result is that CDA seems to have established its own "critical canon" consisting of "radical works of social analysis that were never considered by conventional linguists to be part of linguistics" (Billig 2002: 44), which have now been fixed as set texts for the upcoming generation. There is some danger that this "canon" will be accepted uncritically, which is a matter for concern, particularly if it contains an imbalance between social theory and works concerned with language and linguistic methodology.

A second, related theme is the lack of reflexivity and internal dialogue, which tends to consolidate CDA from the outside, as an intellectual paradigm with its own hierarchy and systems of control, but which may detract from the seriousness of its intellectual enterprise. Billig (2002) feels that what self-critique there is tends to omit key factors, and is concerned that the growth in respectability will entail a loss of intellectual creativity. He recommends that academics should draw back from treating CDA as if it were a reified product, or a brand name for labelling one's work so that it will be published. He asks scholars to "unpick the rhetoric that has led from 'critical approaches' to the abbreviated and capitalised 'CDA'" (Billig 2002: 44), and calls for a return to the critical analysis of discourse (without capital letters) in such a way that new approaches can arise. In his words:

"Above all, there is a need to encourage young academics, especially those without established positions, to criticise the language and rhetoric of the established critical writers – even to expose the self-interest and political economy of the sign 'critical'. The results would not be comfortable for the critical experts; nor should they be if the activity of social critique is to continue into the future" (Billig 2002: 45).

#### 4. Conclusions

Critical Discourse Analysis offers a promising paradigm for identifying and interpreting the way ideology functions in and through discourse. Its particular strength is that it bridges the gap between real language phenomena and the workings of power in society. It would be unfortunate if this important mission were to be undermined by methodological flaws and theoretical shortcomings. The following tentative conclusions are intended to summarise the main criticisms that have been levelled at CDA over the years, and to evaluate their relevance for linguists who read work by CDA practitioners, or who wish to carry out research within the CDA paradigm.

1. Critical discourse analysis is fundamentally defined by its political aims. Researchers are usually explicit about their political commitments, at least in a general sense. These commitments should always be borne in mind when we interpret their work.
2. Critical discourse analysis draws on a wide range of theories about language and society. These theories are not always clearly defined, and there is a tendency to draw on an eclectic mix of concepts from different intellectual traditions, not all of which are compatible. Researchers should endeavour to clarify the theoretical background to their work, while readers should feel free to adopt a critical stance towards the theoretical apparatus encountered in CDA studies, or even to challenge its bases.
3. CDA practitioners have frequently been accused of using “impressionistic” methodology for analysing text. Care should be taken to apply the same standards of rigour when handling language data as in any other area of linguistics. One solution might be to apply the techniques of corpus linguistics, in order to obtain a more representative overview across a larger sample of language. Another might be simply to be less selective and more disciplined and systematic in analysing the text. Particularly when spoken language is analysed, the pragmatic dimension should always be taken into account.
4. Critical discourse analysts have sometimes been said to move too quickly from the language data to the stage of interpretation and explanation of those data in terms of social theory. If this is the case, then readers should take care to test interpretations against the available data objectively. In general, researchers need to do justice to the text itself, so that their interpretations are well-grounded.
5. CDA has an inadequate theory of the way texts work in social contexts. Reader response or audience reception is often naively assumed on the basis of the researcher’s interpretation of the text. Readers should contrast conclusions of this kind with work carried out in media studies which provides deeper insights into the relationship between texts and subjects. CDA researchers need to pay more attention to this dimension, and find ways of exploring real responses.
6. Though critical discourse analysts have always widened their field of vision to the macrocontext, they have sometimes paid insufficient attention to features of the immediate context, which has led to interpretations which are pragmatically inappropriate or remote from the concerns of the participants. The specific

features of the immediate context should be treated seriously by readers and researchers alike.

7. In the last twenty years, CDA has mainly researched the way ideology works through discourse to maintain unequal power structures. Perhaps because of CDA's self-image as a "critical" force, the focus of this work has been overwhelmingly negative, and seems to propagate a deterministic vision of society. Discourse analysis that explores emancipatory discourses or positive changes in social language use would be useful, because it would provide information about the way that positive transformations can be brought about.

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