

# Some Observations on the Critique of Critical Discourse Analysis

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## Introduction

Since the publication in 1989 of Norman Fairclough's *Language and Power* and Ruth Wodak's *Language, Power and Ideology*, and the launch in 1990 of Teun van Dijk's journal, *Discourse & Society*, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has not only grown into a major field of research in its own right but has also been widely adopted by researchers in a range of disciplines from biblical studies (van Noppen 1996) to urban planning (Hastings 1999). In the general introduction to *Critical Discourse Analysis* (1995), a collection of his papers written during the 1980s, Fairclough described CDA as having 'passed through the first flush of youth' and 'embarked upon the maturation process'. Now, with the second edition of *Language and Power* (2001) recently published and the immanent arrival of a new journal, *Critical Discourse Studies*, we might consider CDA as having reached the fourth of Shakespeare's seven ages, the soldier: 'Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard, / Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth.' CDA has certainly sought (and found) a reputation, but although it has built up a formidable weaponry, and demonstrated considerable skill in using it 'on manoeuvres', it has seldom if ever, in my opinion, advanced beyond a guerilla sniping from the margins to a successful assault on the cannon's mouth. As for the quarrels, they have been numerous but I am not sure that CDA has been particularly quick in responding to them. In this paper I would like to discuss some of the arguments that have been made against CDA and some possible responses to them as a basis for a reevaluation of this influential theory/method of discourse analysis.

Before proceeding to the discussion I would like to make five brief points by way of clarification. Firstly, in my experience, when critics write (in English, at least) about CDA they frequently equate CDA with earlier critical approaches to

language such as Critical Linguistics (CL), either mistakenly or because the latter presents in many ways an easier target. While I personally consider the distinction to be a meaningful one, in what follows I have not always made a hard and fast distinction between them since I believe that some of these criticisms may still be relevant to CDA. For the same reason I have also included some of the early criticisms that were made specifically about CL. Secondly, when critics talk about CDA and really *mean* CDA, what they usually appear to have in mind is the work of Norman Fairclough.<sup>1</sup> I too am not immune to this bias and shall mainly refer to his work on language in the new capitalism, particularly to one example of it summarized below, rather than to the work of other leading CDA scholars such as van Dijk and Wodak on racist discourse, unless otherwise indicated. I realize of course that to do so might well be to place an unreasonable burden on one particular sample from the overall corpus of CDA work (and thus to fall into the very error of unrepresentativeness for which CDA is sometimes criticized) so I shall endeavour to refrain from attaching any unjustifiable generalizations to the observations I shall make. Thirdly, when people talk about Fairclough's work, they have tended to refer to the '3D' model of CDA as set out in *Language and Power* (1989: 25) and modified in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992: 73), rather than the later 'rethinking' and relocating of CDA within the framework of Roy Bhaskar's 'emancipatory critique' outlined in *Discourse in Late Modernity* (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 60) or the simplified 'Genres-Discourses-Styles' approach of *New Labour, New Language?* (2000: 14). Therefore, some of the points made by earlier critics have been addressed in these newer formulations, but once again I have included discussion of them where appropriate. Fourthly, although I use the term 'criticism' to describe the writings of 'critics' of CDA, in several cases more neutral or even positive terms such as 'discussion' or 'appreciation' would be more appropriate. Given that the first principle of CDA, as listed by Wodak (2001: 6), is interdisciplinarity,<sup>2</sup> it is hardly surprising that scholars in allied fields interested in working (or not) with CDA should wish to engage in dialogue with it. Paradoxically though, it is often the more sympathetic critics who make the most penetrating criticisms. Finally, I realize that some of my own comments below may strike some as hardly less critical of CDA than those of the critics whose arguments I have reviewed. Therefore, I would like to emphasize that I count myself as a firm supporter of the Faircloughian 'school' of CDA. As such, however, just as with undertaking any intellectual endeavour, I consider it important to understand what

charges have been laid against it and from what quarters, what exactly people have found questionable in its theory or application, and what pitfalls budding users, such as myself, might need to be aware of.

### **An example**

In order to make this discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of CDA more concrete, I have employed the characteristic CDA move of selecting a sample text, more or less randomly in this case, from a prior work, namely Chouliaraki and Fairclough's *Discourse in Late Modernity*, and subjecting it to a critical re-reading. The text (11) is a full-page advertisement taken from an unspecified issue of *The Big Issue in the North*, the North of England edition of *The Big Issue*, which is a magazine that was set up to support homeless people, who sell it as a means of earning a living. The advertisement is arranged vertically with the following six-part structure, reading from top to bottom:

Heading: *Homeless this Christmas. But not for life.*

Graphic: A close up photograph of the face of a young man, labeled as *Carl, a Big Issue vendor*, who looks directly at the viewer. This occupies most of the top half of the advertisement and is the only graphical image.

Subheading: *We could try to guilt trip you*

Body: Consisting of the following six short paragraphs in two columns.

You know the sort of thing. Photo of a wretched looking rough sleeper slumped in a doorway. Snow. Very cold. Contrast his suffering with the consumption and gaiety of Christmas. Throw in a few shocking statistics about the ill health and premature death of homeless people.

But we've decided not to do that. The Big Issue exists to challenge stereotypes and to help homeless people reclaim their sense of self-worth and dignity by earning a living – all year round.

But we do need your support. The obstacles homeless people like Carl face are huge and the way back from life on the streets is long and difficult. We won't pretend that it is easy. But we are committed to providing homeless people with the resources they need to break out from the damaging culture of long-term homelessness and find homes, jobs and better futures.

Please support our Christmas Appeal and help us help vendors to leave the streets for

good.

A gift of £15 or more entitles you to become a Friend of the Big Issue. We will send you our quarterly newsletter, a certificate and a Big Issue badge, and include your name in our monthly list of Friends.

You can send cheques by filling in the form below, or phone our FREEPHONE number and use your debit or credit card to donate.

Form: A form for making a donation headed ‘Yes, I want to support the Christmas Appeal’.

Telephone Number: The Freephone number in large figures across the page and, below it in small type, the details of its opening times and the Big Issue’s registered charity number.

Chouliaraki and Fairclough provide an analysis of this advertisement at the beginning of their book as a way of introducing ‘some of the significant characteristics of discourse in late modernity which need to be prominent in CDA’s research programme’ (10). They present their ‘analysis’ as a list of 11 points, which I have summarized as follows.

1. The advertisement is advertising a cultural commodity, the charity, but is symbolic of late modernity in being itself a cultural commodity.
2. Cultural commodities are semiotic – they consist of signs – and as such reflect the increased salience of discourse [and, we might add, semiosis more generally] in late modernity.
3. The commodification of language in late modernity entails an increased salience for design and the aesthetic, including design of language.
4. The commodification of language is an instance of the ‘instrumental rationality’ dominant in modern society.
5. Advertisements such as this reflect the extension of the market economy into various spheres of public life.
6. The language of commodities is matched (for example in the second paragraph) by the language of social engagement of the kind frequently used by politicians.
7. The combination of the two types of language in one text reflects the hybridity of texts which is widely regarded as a characteristic of the ‘postmodern’.
8. Hybridity can be used in various ways including as a strategy for resistance,

domination or dialogue.

9. The social fragmentation of late modern society makes it difficult to accept the idea that meaning resides exclusively in texts.
10. By drawing attention to its own status as an advertisement, the text shows reflexivity towards the commodification of language. Such reflexivity is another characteristic of late modern society.
11. The 'anti-advertisement' aspects of this advertisement reflect late modernity's characteristic propensity to appropriate resistance into itself.

What is immediately apparent from this summary of their analysis is that CDA is far removed from many of the more orthodox varieties of applied linguistic or sociolinguistic enquiries into language in social life. Hardly surprising therefore that criticism has been drawn most strongly from those disciplines. In particular, we may regard the above analysis as representative of CDA to the extent that it includes relatively little detailed description of formal textual features; it reflects a commitment to connecting texts to the widest possible social contexts; and it makes use of (critical) social theory as the means for making such connections. But this is to anticipate the following discussion, by begging the question as to what sort of discipline CDA is, a question which has troubled a number of its critics but which its own claims to transdisciplinarity make all the more important.

### **The critics of CDA**

Although there have been, and continue to be, a great number of critics of CDA (so much so indeed that the activity threatens to develop into a whole new academic cottage industry of its own) essentially they are all concerned with asking, from their several perspectives, the same fundamental question: *Does CDA produce valid knowledge?* It is reasonable to suppose that the majority of those involved in the field of CDA would answer this question more or less resoundingly in the affirmative, though whether this would be due more to rational judgement or to a leap of intellectual faith is debatable.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I shall discuss some of my own reservations and those of three of the most prominent critics, treating them according to their location on the map of academia, beginning in the very center with philosophy, then moving to the middle ground of mainstream applied linguistics and finally to a borderland form of critical linguistics which makes even CDA look suburban.

Unlike some critics who tend to quibble over lesser details of CDA methodology, the ethnographer Martyn Hammersley (1997) directs his criticism of CDA at the most fundamental level. In many ways, this is the most damaging criticism of the three reviewed here since it is on these, in his opinion all too shaky, foundations that the whole tottering edifice of CDA is constructed. In addition to criticizing CDA for being unclear of its philosophical foundations, he also takes it to task for lacking an adequately developed sociological theory and for an overblown practical ambition with regard to effecting social change that interferes fatally with its scholarly task.

He begins by locating CDA within the general ‘critical’ perspective in the social sciences, observing sharply that the word ‘critical’ signals ‘an abandonment of any restraint on evaluation of the texts and contexts that are studied’ (243), which is seen to be in marked contrast to the dominant positivist rejection of normative judgments in favour of a concentration on ‘factual’ enquiry. Within linguistics, the move to positivism, itself seen as radical at the time, was initiated by Saussure and taken up most enthusiastically by the generative grammarians whose dominance of mainstream linguistics has defined the field for the past half-century. Setting aside the exaggeration in Hammersley’s deliberately provocative definition, it seems clear that ‘critical’ social enquiry cannot be founded on the same philosophical base as the physical sciences. So where are its philosophical roots? Hammersley identifies three possible alternatives, beginning with Marxism and the later Frankfurt School variant thereof. CDA theorists frequently refer to the Marxist origins of some of their concepts, such as the ‘emancipatory knowledge interest’ and the Gramscian notion of hegemony. The problems Hammersley identifies in this position relate to the logical contradiction in the teleological view of history which Marx inherited from Hegel and the performative contradiction of his claim to have understood the true nature of working class consciousness. In the Frankfurt School’s critique of Marx, Hammersley recognizes the development from seeing capitalism as the cause of alienation to seeing alienation as resulting from the distorting influence of western rationality more generally, in particular its drive to control nature, as an advance on the previous position. Noting in passing that this insightful critique of Marx has resonances with ecological radicalism, a point which connects to ecolinguistic critiques of CDA which I myself am much interested in (see Goatly 1996, 2000; Haig 2001), he nevertheless rejects it as a foundational basis for critical research since it closes the door even more firmly on the possibility of explaining

historical development.

The second foundational candidate he refers to, following Habermas, as Decisionism. By this he means the French postmodern philosophers who followed Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in denying that values are amenable to rational justification. Echoing my above comment about how CDAers validate their approach, he observes that, 'According to this position, one *chooses* one's values and this involves a leap of faith or an act of will: it cannot be based on rational deliberation' (249). As he also reminds us, the problem with this is that 'leaps of faith can go in any direction' (250). Indeed they can, and have done so many times. As Silverman puts it:

To assume that emancipation is the goal of research conflates yet again 'fact' and 'value'. How research is used is a value-laden, political question. To my mind, the first goal of scientific research is valid knowledge. To claim otherwise is to make an alliance with an awful dynasty that includes 'Aryan science' under the Nazis, and 'socialist science' under Stalin. (Silverman 2001: 221)

While Silverman's conception of 'scientific research' is the classic liberal humanist one, his point is well taken. If CDA is based on a simple conviction that the emancipatory ends are right, then how likely is it that practitioners will worry unduly over the validity of the means whereby they are achieved? In this context, it is only fair to point out that Fairclough himself is aware of this danger, noting that a CDA of the Right is a possibility. The irony that some of the politicians, bureaucrats, media and advertising executives, PR persons and publicists whose manipulative discourses CDA seeks to deconstruct may well have been trained in CDA by professors like himself is not lost on Fairclough either: if CDA really is a powerful tool it will inevitably be used by powerful groups and individuals. Of course, the decisionist position can, and notoriously does, lead many people into a third option: not jumping at all, that is, political quietism. For all these reasons, Hammersley is led to search elsewhere for reliable foundations for CDA. His third and, he suggests, least objectionable alternative is Habermas' universal pragmatics. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the writings of CDA scholars, Fairclough and Wodak in particular, who make frequent though generally fleeting reference to Habermas' work. While his ideas regarding the centrality of communicative interaction in social life are obviously valuable from a discourse analysis point of view,

Habermas' position has immense problems due to his concept of the 'ideal speech community', which appears to deny the possibility of linguistic diversity or cultural pluralism.

In concluding his survey of foundational theories by rejecting them all as inadequate, Hammersley suggests that CDA is typical of 'critical' approaches in the social sciences in general in that it simply takes its philosophical foundations for granted, as if they were unproblematic. In his opinion the term 'critical' has become 'little more than a rallying cry demanding that researchers consider 'whose side they are on?'' (251). From personal experience I have found that it also seems to cause the hackles of other discourse analysts to rise because of the implication that they are 'non-critical' or even 'sub-critical' and therefore somehow *in favour* of things like oppression, exploitation and inequality: by commandeering the moral high ground of being critical, CDA thus 'others' mainstream discourse analysis and performs the very kind of domination through language that it seeks to oppose.

Despite the lack of philosophical foundations, the exposure of which is the main aim of his essay, Hammersley states that in fact 'the most damaging feature' of CDA is 'the extraordinary ambition of the task that it sets itself. It aims to achieve a very great deal more than other kinds of discourse analysis. Not only does it claim to offer an understanding of discursive processes, but also of society as a whole, of what is wrong with it, and of how it can and should be changed,' (252). There is no doubt that CDA harbours such ambitions, and that in its younger days was quite strident about them. However, with maturity there has come a measure of realism as to the possibilities, under present social conditions and state of development of CDA itself, of achieving these. But while the aims of CDA have become perhaps more realistic, more local and pragmatic, there is still undoubtedly a tendency for ambition to result in over-interpretation of data. This in turn leads to a tendency to judge results 'according to their political implications as much if not more than their validity,' (253). And so we return to the original question of whether or not CDA can produce valid knowledge. Obviously there needs to be an agreed set of criteria for considering this question, one which does not assume that CDA is on a par with the physical sciences but yet affords some purchase on the question of validity. Unfortunately, I have to agree with Hammersley here that such criteria are seldom if ever discussed by CDA practitioners. 'Have we got a warrant?' does not seem to be a question they ask themselves in their enthusiasm to break down the door of yet another suspected ideological wrongdoer. In the absence of any such

emic criteria developed within CDA itself, I have found the following list of criteria used by the British Sociological Association for evaluating research, as presented by Silverman (2001: 222), to be a helpful guide.

1. Are the methods of research appropriate to the nature of the question being asked?
2. Is the connection to an existing body of knowledge or theory clear?
3. Are there clear accounts of the criteria used for the selection of cases for study, and of the data collection and analysis?
4. Does the sensitivity of the methods match the needs of the research question?
5. Was the data collection and record-keeping systematic?
6. Is reference made to accepted procedures for analysis?
7. How systematic is the analysis?
8. Is there adequate discussion of how themes, concepts and categories are derived from the data?
9. Is there adequate discussion of the evidence for and against the researcher's arguments?
10. Is there a clear distinction made between the data and its interpretation?

With reference to the *Big Issue* advertisement presented above I shall attempt to tentatively suggest how one might begin to assess the validity of CDA research by using just the first two of these questions.

Q1. *Are the methods of research appropriate to the nature of the question being asked?*

Stating things at the most general level, the question that CDA asks is: what is the relationship between texts, their producers and consumers, and the social environment in which text production and consumption occurs? This is supplemented by another question as to what other (i.e. better) ways could such discursal interactions be organized? Beyond these very general questions we find more specifically critical ones to do with the power involved in the relationships between participants, the ideology lurking between the lines on the page and within the social structures in which the interactions take place.

The original three-dimensional method developed by Fairclough to explore these questions is divided into the following parts. Firstly, *description* of the formal properties of texts based, in Fairclough's case, on the systemic functional grammar of Michael Halliday and his associates (Halliday 1994). Secondly, *interpretation* of

the findings from the description stage in terms of their relationship to the interaction of which the text forms a part. Finally, *explanation* of the relationship between the interaction and the social context, in which a dialectical relationship between social structure and discursual practice is assumed. Although this model is now generally subsumed under the Bhaskarian ‘explanatory critique’ model, it survives more or less unchanged and so will be the model I shall refer to.

With respect to the *Big Issue* advertisement, as we have already noted, the detailed technical analysis of the text prescribed by the description stage of the model does not appear to have been undertaken. It may have been conducted ‘off-stage’, of course, but as is generally the case with Fairclough, the results of this are not presented explicitly or systematically. Instead, what we get is an impressionistic, rather literary reading. The most remarkable thing about the reading given is that it is highly, we might even say seductively, persuasive. As is generally agreed, Fairclough is a supremely skillful exponent of the CDAer’s art and his interpretations of texts are brilliantly executed, but it is this very brilliance which, I suggest, sometimes blinds his audience, and dare one say it even himself occasionally, to the hermeneutic lacunae thus created. In response to the age old problem of how to bridge the gap between text and context, the micro and the macro, Fairclough seems to rely more on the arts of rhetoric than the craft of analysis. Given the elaborate methodological tools that he has built for doing such analysis, and which, to answer the question posed, do indeed seem appropriate to the questions asked, we can only wonder as to why they are so rarely used to the full. One common answer which Fairclough and most other writers give is ‘lack of space’, but as Roger Fowler, the founder of the critical linguistics movement and as such a progenitor of CDA, has observed, this excuse is beginning to wear rather thin (Fowler 1996). Eventually, CDAers are going to have to present their warrant in the form of fully worked-through analyses, and I believe that the sooner they address this problem the better.

Q2. *Is the connection to an existing body of knowledge or theory clear?*

It will be immediately apparent that at least two kinds of knowledge are relevant to CDA: linguistic and social-theoretical. Regarding linguistic knowledge, this too may be divided into the mainstream areas such as phonology, morphology and syntax, and the applied areas such as sociolinguistics, language education and literacy. CDA necessarily has recourse to all aspects of these, from phonology to code-switching. However, in practice the strongest connections are with Hallidayan systemic func-

tional grammar (SFG) (see Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: Ch. 8). The connection here is an intimate one, with a shared intellectual heritage traceable all the way back to Marx and, today, the involvement of many key workers such as Gunther Kress and Jim Martin who succeed in straddling the two camps more or less comfortably. SFG is particularly suitable for CDA in that it sees language as fundamentally a matter of meanings, as a 'social semiotic'. However, the relationship is not entirely without its tensions, signaled (in a way beloved of CD analysts) perhaps as much by significant absences as by presences. For example, there has not yet, to the best of my knowledge, been a significant response from the SFG side to Chouliaraki and Fairclough's exploration of the relationship just alluded to, while at the 28<sup>th</sup> International Systemic Functional Congress (ISFC 28) held in Ottawa in August 2001 (the theme of which was 'Interfaces: Systemic Functional Grammar and Critical Discourse Analysis') substantive 'dialogue' between the two fields was, as far as I could see, conspicuous by its absence.<sup>4</sup> It is possible however that the forthcoming Proceedings volume (Young and Harrison 2004) may provide more enlightenment on this point.

One visible site of friction has been over the way in which the relationship between the semiotic and the social are conceived in the two disciplines. This may be seen in Ruqaya Hasan's critique of Bourdieu's views of linguistics and literacy and what she regards as the serious contradictions those views entail for his understanding of society and language (Hasan 1999). Hasan does not refer to CDA directly but, given the importance of Bourdieu for CDA, her understanding of his theory as allowing a role for the social in the 'co-genetic' evolution of the semiotic/linguistic while downplaying the role of the semiotic/linguistic in the constitution of social reality was bound to invite a response from CDA (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 2000; Hasan 2000).

Another example of a figure from SFG critiquing 'critical linguistics' is Jim Martin who has expressed concern about the unachieved practical ambitions of 'linguistics which is articulated as a form of social action' (Martin 1992: 587). In the closing section of this work, *English Text*, Martin writes:

'Where critical linguistics has fallen short of evolving into a form of social action lies in its observer as opposed to an intruder role. Even in educational contexts, critical linguists have tended to stand back and let teachers and consultants do the work of changing educational transmissions ..., being somewhat reluctant to shunt them-

selves between theory and practice. As far as linguistics as social action is concerned this is not adequate. The theory has to be developed to the point where it informs interventions in the political process – where critical linguists take charge for example of public relations for the ANC or intervene directly with education ministers in curriculum debates. This involves developing appropriate theories of semiotic subversion’ (587–8)

Reading through the many and varied CDA-based research reports that have been produced during the intervening decade since this was written, I have the impression that not a great deal has changed. I too have found myself wishing that the frequently persuasive and convincing analyses of manipulative or discriminatory textual practices had been followed up by (or better still embedded in) some form of practical action. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect the *Big Issue* advert analysis to include this (although since it was supposed to exemplify the approach of the book as a whole *some* reference to such practical applications might have been expected) but if we take, for example, Fairclough’s *New Labour, New Language?* (2000), a book-length treatment of an eminently political topic addressed not to an academic but to a lay audience, what do we find? The book begins promisingly enough with, on page 15, the following forthright statement:

‘My interest in the politics and language of New Labour starts from my view that it is profoundly dangerous for my fellow human beings for this new form of capitalism [neoliberalism] to develop unchecked, both because it dramatically increases inequality (and therefore injustice and suffering) and because it threatens to make life on earth ecologically unsustainable.’

However, after 150-odd pages of characteristically compelling analysis and evaluation of the genres, discourses and styles of New Labour, Fairclough concludes the book with just over a page on the question of ‘Is there an alternative?’ His answer takes the form of the following three ‘broad recommendations’ addressed rhetorically to New Labour (and not, be it noted, to the lay-reader).

Dialogue. *Perhaps* the most fundamental contribution New Labour *could* make is in taking measures to *encourage* and *facilitate* real dialogue and debate ...

[...]

Difference. New Labour’s political discourse *could* be made more open to difference...

[...]

Honesty. New Labour *could shift away from* designing its language *quite so much* on the basis of market research and focus groups, away from its preoccupation with ‘spin’ and with how to say things in ways that will win support, away from designing its leadership styles on the basis of calculations of effects.

[...]

The government will not, I imagine, be that eager to take up these recommendations. Nevertheless, we must keep emphasizing this: the way things are does not exhaust the possibilities for the way things could be. (Fairclough 2000: 160 [emphasis added])

Laudable though these goals no doubt are, the first thing that strikes me about this is the almost Third Way-like mildness of the phraseology as reflected in the modality choices selected. To what extent is this just a reflection of scholarly conventions of politeness, to what extent a true reflection of Fairclough’s ambivalent attitude towards his own recommendations and their principal addressee? This book is undoubtedly Fairclough’s most ‘popular’. As such, I applaud his attempt to reach beyond academe to address a wider public. But what are readers, as ‘overhearers’, to make of these recommendations? There is no suggestion here of CDAers taking charge of public relations for the TUC. Beyond this, there are no recommendations for the readers as to what they could do to help open up public space to dialogue, difference and honesty, apart from being implicitly recruited to the task of ‘emphasizing’ (How? To whom?) the significance of the last clause, which itself sounds disturbingly more like a Third Way soundbite than a rallying cry for a revolution.

On a consciously lighter note, Jim Martin has called repeatedly for a ‘Positive Discourse Analysis’ to balance the traditional CDA focus on texts which the analyst finds objectionable. His analysis of excerpts from the autobiography of Nelson Mandela or the music of U2 (Martin 2000) are excellent examples of the kind of work he is referring to here: ‘If discourse analysts are serious about wanting to use their work to enact social change, then they will have to broaden their coverage to include discourse of this kind – discourse that inspires, encourages, heartens; discourse we like, that cheers us along. We need, in other words, more positive discourse analysis (PDA?) alongside our critique; and this means dealing with texts we admire, alongside those we dislike and try to expose’ (Martin 1999 [2002]: 196–7).

Although SFG is remarkable in the way the theory spans both formal and social

aspects of language and thus informs a great deal of work in applied linguistics, in particular literacy education and the teaching of genres, when we turn to consider the relationship between CDA and applied linguistics we find that it is, at best, a mixed one. The main critical voice here, and it is a resonant one, is that of Henry Widdowson. In a series of papers (Widdowson 1995a; 1995b; 1996; 1997; 1998; 2000a; 2000b; 2001a; 2001b) he has kept up a sustained argument against critical approaches to discourse analysis, particularly Faircloughian CDA. To summarize his main arguments, he charges that:

1. CDA is not analysis in support of theory but (merely) interpretation in support of belief.
2. The beliefs of analysts are ideologically biased, leading to analysts reading meaning *into*, rather than *out of* texts.
3. This bias is further compounded by the fact that the analyst selects only those texts which will confirm his or her beliefs.
4. The distinction between the interpretation of the analyst and that of the lay-reader is ignored.

Because of Widdowson's doyenish status and the forcefulness of his attack it is incumbent on CDA supporters to address these points in detail. Regarding the first point, he rather skews the argument in his favour at the outset by defining 'analysis' in extremely narrow terms. However, he is right, I think, to ask of CD analysts that they subject their analyses of texts to at least a mild form of falsification by examining alternative possible readings and seeking evidence to support or refute them. In defense of CDA however, I would say that this is a Popperian rule more honoured in the breach than the observance amongst the great majority of applied linguists and its flouting is not peculiar to CDA. What is more pertinent in Widdowson's critique is his point about the lack of interest in the principle of falsification being due to ideological beliefs. Of course, even non-critical, dyed-in-the-wool orthodox applied linguists such as Widdowson have ideological commitments (such as the commitment to keeping politics and science apart) but they conform to the hegemonic norm rather than the explicitly oppositional stance that CDA espouses and thus tend to attract less attention. My own impression of reading CDA work is that Widdowson may indeed be correct. If we consider the analysis of the *Big Issue* advert once again, we find far less of the hesitant modality associated with Fairclough's recommendations for New Labour. For example, in their discus-

sion of the aestheticization and design of language as a commodity in late modernity, the authors discuss the Heading (*Homeless this Christmas. But not for life.*), saying that it:

seems to us to be structured to catch the reader's attention through two syntactically parallel phrases (the second is an elliptical reduction of *not homeless for life*) conjoined with a contrastive conjunction (*but*) and also contrastive as positive versus negative. The linguistically structured contrast carries a contrast between different discourses: the first phrase is a descriptor of a condition, whereas the second is a declaration or undertaking; the first belongs to the discourse of charitable appeals, the second to a discourse of political mobilization. The commodification of language in late modernity entails a pervasive primacy for the aesthetic. (12)

We have here a good example of the typically microcosmic application of the 3D model found in much of Fairclough's work. Firstly, we get some technical description of the lexicogrammar. Then we get the link to the interactional middle level made by interpreting the illocutionary force of the text via the concept of discourse. Next, the discourse functions thus identified are explained as belonging to categories from the wider social world, and finally a generalized normative statement is implicitly confirmed by the textual evidence thus analysed.

Let us take Widdowson's criticisms in reverse order. Here we encounter what in my opinion is CDA's most unjustifiably abiding weakness, the total exclusion of one whole side of the interactional equation: the audience. All the more remarkable for an approach to language in social life that is supposedly on the side of the underdog, this omission of consideration for how actual readers of this advert may interpret it seems to me inexplicable. An explanation has been offered though, by Fairclough himself in *Language and Power*, where he writes:

'How is the analyst to gain access to the discourse processes of production and interpretation? ... The only access that the analyst has to them is in fact through her capacity to herself engage in the discourse processes she is investigating. In other words, the analyst must draw upon her own MR (interpretative procedures) in order to explain how participants draw upon theirs. The analysis of discourse processes is necessarily an 'insider's' or a 'member's' task – which is why I have called the resources drawn upon by both participant and analyst members 'members' resources' (MR). ... But if analysts are drawing upon their own MR to explicate how those of participants operate in discourse, then it is important that they be sensitive to what resources they are

themselves relying upon to do analysis. 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. For the critical analyst, moreover, the aim is to eliminate even that difference: to develop self-consciousness about the rootedness of discourse in common-sense assumptions of MR.' (167)

The term 'Members' Resources' is used by Fairclough to include what 'people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts – including their knowledge of language, representations of the natural and social world they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions and so on,' (24). Clearly, people vary considerably in this respect, which suggests that it is highly unlikely that any trained linguist of a critical persuasion is likely to have MR which correspond to the average reader of the *Big Issue*. Some CDA workers may read this magazine (and given the poor working conditions of academics in Britain these days some may even be homeless) but surely it would be better to corroborate one's intuitions by attempting to survey readers directly rather than relying on 'self-consciousness'. After all, isn't relying on intuitions for adjudicating the semantical correctness of sentences precisely what the social view of language teaches us to be suspicious of? As many people have pointed out, including it must be said Fairclough himself in more recent publications, the answer to this problem lies in ethnography. But, and here again we find a gap between the talk of CDA and the walk: lip service is paid to the importance of such matters but the sleeves-rolled-up, dirty-handed business of actually producing the work is severely lacking. As long as this gap remains unfilled CDA will remain vulnerable to criticism on this point.

Regarding Widdowson's third point, we have, of course, no way of knowing how this particular advertisement was selected, and this too is typical of CDA's approach to validation. I have found very few studies which display much interest in seeking to establish the representativeness of their samples, either through statistical survey methods, the use of corpora or even just explaining the protocol according to which they were gathered.

As to the point about analysts reading meanings *into* rather than *out of* texts, on one level we must admit that since meaning can no longer be held to reside pristinely in texts, nor in the minds of authors, there is no way to avoid finding in texts at least some pale reflection of our own preoccupations. Widdowson's preoccupations

lie in the area of pragmatics, and not surprisingly that is chiefly what he finds awaiting him in the texts that he studies. But we can have preoccupations about textual features and expectations about regular patterns of occurrence and co-occurrence between them *without* having preconceptions about what they might mean in a given text in a given instance. This is where, as I understand it, Widdowson feels that he differs from CDA. In the case of the analysis of the aesthetics of texts exemplified by the heading of the advert, it is possible to deconstruct Fairclough's own text simply by reading it back to front, beginning with the normative assertion, then moving through categorization of discourses and finally returning to the words on the page. I think that this is something of a chicken-and-egg situation, or, as Fairclough would prefer to call it, a dialectic. And this brings us to the first and last question of Widdowson's, again reading from bottom to top. Isn't it clear that Widdowson is determined to read Fairclough just as doggedly 'against the grain' as Fairclough reads such textual products of late modernity as the *Big Issue* advertisement? Amidst the eternal play of signifiers, can there be any way of grounding interpretation on the sort of Archimedean point from which Widdowson believes he can lever the pure nuggets of meaning out of the drossy ore of text?

If the linguistic theory with which it seeks to find this point is not up to the task, then perhaps what is needed in CDA is a little less linguistics and a little more social theory. With this in mind, I shall now consider the second half of my answer to the question about the relation of CDA's theory and methods. As we have seen, Hammersley, amongst others, has criticized CDA for its underdeveloped understanding of social theory. This is hardly surprising, given its academic 'roots' in linguistics, and given the rudimentary state of theory development in potentially influential neighboring fields such as sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. Undoubtedly we can find no such synergistic relationship between CDA and any one particular type of social theory comparable to that which it enjoys with the linguistic theory of SFG. The theorists which Fairclough most frequently refers to are the grand theorist such as Marx, Habermas, Giddens, Harvey and Laclau and Mouffe, mid-range theorists such as Bernstein and Bourdieu, and micro-level theorists such as Gumpertz and Levinson. Most of these, however 'post' their various antecedents, are still tied into a contradictory position between their emancipatory objectives and the indeterminacy of their hermeneutics. Into this turmoil has come one writer who is ideologically the diametrical opposite of Widdowson, namely Alistair Pennycook – the *flâneur* to Widdowson's doyen perhaps – who leaves his audience in no doubt of

his position vis-à-vis CDA when he entitles a section on it in his book, *Critical Applied Linguistics* (Pennycook 2001), 'Outflanking Marx from the Left'. Accordingly, I shall end my observations on the critical reaction to CDA with a discussion of his critique of what he prefers to call 'emancipatory modernism' or 'mainstream critical work'.

Pennycook begins by questioning the adequacy of the sociological framework which CDA inherits from Marx, particularly the simple division between oppressed and oppressors, dominated and dominant, as well as the primacy given to capitalist accumulation as the basic source of power in society. He then moves on to consider how CDA's stubborn insistence on claims to scientificity keep in play questionable notions of objectivity and truth while failing to be sufficiently objective about its own epistemological status and will to power/knowledge. Against this, Pennycook sets his own preferred vision of critical applied linguistics. This he quite naturally regards as an advance on CDA and all other previous 'critical' approaches to language in that it is one which 'although viewing language as fundamentally bound up with politics, nevertheless articulates a profound skepticism about science, about truth claims, and about an emancipatory position outside ideology. This position, which we might call *critical applied linguistics as problematizing practice*, draws on poststructuralist, postmodernist, and postcolonial perspectives.' (42)

Pennycook's 'problematizing practice' approach is an attempt to establish a new paradigm, a 'postlinguistics' based firmly on a poststructuralist, Foucaultian model of discourse to replace what he calls the 'frequent clumsiness' of CDA's Marxist model of ideology. Postlinguistics accepts that discourses are emergent phenomena which have multiple and complex origins not grounded objectively in some form of social reality. Pennycook nimbly sidesteps the awkward question of how truth can be revealed through the unmasking of the obfuscatory operations of ideology by jettisoning the category of ideology altogether. This move follows from the poststructural rejection of the view that meanings reside in texts. In contradistinction to this, postlinguistics valorizes the chimerical significance of intertextual and situated meanings. It conceives of the subject in a way which highlights how people actively and creatively take up positions in discourses and live in fractalized ways, rather than being determined by discourse or ideology.

Attractive and valuable though this 'putting to work' of Foucauldian theory in the critical linguistic project undoubtedly is, I think it can be criticized in its turn for a number of reasons. Firstly, for its relativism, both epistemic and ethical. If

there is no Archimedean point outside discourse, then how can we see things ‘as they really are’ or as they might be in any conceivable future which we might consider it worthwhile getting up in the morning to struggle towards? Specifically, there seems to be no consistent direction to its politics since no one site of power is to be privileged over another amidst the constant ebb and flow of difference. Finally, as a linguist I can hardly omit to question the total lack of specificity in Pennycook’s work with regard to how a Foucaultian postlinguistics would actually get to grips with texts.

However, on this point at least, there has been some movement in recent years, with SFG tools being adapted for use in poststructuralist (mainly feminist and ecolinguistic) critiques of language (Threadgold and Kamler 1997; Goatly 2000). Regarding the former, in the new applied postlinguistics, as Pennycook puts it, ‘Critical approaches to text become situated practices ... that search for the political/discursive (subtextual), social/historical (pretextual), and local/contingent (contextual) ways in which texts and readers produce (intertextual) meanings in relation across texts,’ (112). And, as regards the latter, the words of Andrew Goatly recall to us the danger that, in an ironic inversion of Dr. Johnson’s ‘I refute it thus’<sup>5</sup>, it could well be that, unless we raise our critical horizons beyond the anthropocentric social to comprise the ecosocial, it will be the rocks that refute us – theories, practices and all:

‘In the context of the ecological crisis, a single-minded preoccupation with sexist and capitalist-imperialist critical discourse analysis is rather like addressing the problem of who is going to fetch the deck-chairs on the Titanic, and who has the right to sit in them.’ (Goatly 2000: 277)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This in turn not infrequently boils down to just one work, *Language and Power*, and with disconcerting regularity to one small section therein, namely the analysis of the ‘Quarry Load-Shedding Problem’ newspaper article (50).
- <sup>2</sup> I note in passing Fairclough’s preference for the term ‘transdisciplinary’.
- <sup>3</sup> As, of course, are the relative merits of these two bases for answering the question.
- <sup>4</sup> Rather in the way that comparative pragmatic studies stereotypically conceive of ‘Western’ conversation as being like playing tennis (speakers hitting the same conversational ball back and forth) and ‘Japanese’ conversation as being more like bowling (speakers

taking turns to roll their individual balls), so I found that SFG- and CDA-affiliated presenters, if not exactly 'bowling alone', tended not to engage with each other (at least in public) on substantive points of disagreement.

<sup>5</sup> When taxed with the metaphysical arguments of George Berkeley, Samuel Johnson is said to have kicked a rock with these words.

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ASSIGNMENT: critical discourse analysis. Posted by Educationist & CO. June 28, 2015. 3 Comments on ASSIGNMENT: critical discourse analysis. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice. Scholars working in the tradition of CDA generally assume that (non-linguistic) social practice and linguistic practice constitute one another and focus on investigating how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use. "Level of analysis" is distinct from the term "unit of observation" in that the former refers to a more or less integrated set of relationships while the latter refers to the distinct unit from which data have been or will be gathered. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. Some of the tenets of CDA can already be found in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School before the Second World War (Agger 1992b; Rasmussen 1996). CDA is not so much a direction, school, or specialization next to the many other "approaches" in discourse studies. More specifically, CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice. Scholars working in the tradition of CDA generally argue that (non-linguistic) social practice and linguistic practice constitute one another and focus on investigating how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use. In this sense, it differs from discourse analysis in that it highlights issues of power asymmetries... Critical discourse analysis In recent decades critical discourse analysis (CDA) has become a well-established field in the social sciences. However, in contrast with some branches of linguistics, CDA is not a discrete academic discipline with a relatively fixed set of research methods. Instead, we might best see CDA as a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement, subsuming a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda. What unites them is a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society. CDA is distinctive in a) its view of the relationship between language and society, and b) its critical approach to methodology.