A Weberian Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Discourse analysis, since its emergence, has gone through various changes and modifications, especially in the trend coming to prominence as critical discourse analysis. This trend has always manifested the impact of brilliant ideas by great intellectuals from different disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, and social theory. Max Weber is one of the towering figures in the history of sociology whose method of conducting sociological analysis, especially the concept of ideal types, has not been adequately utilized in discourse studies. Throughout years, critical discourse analysis has been criticized on account of its founding assumptions, vagueness, preferences for a particular social theory, lack of rigor, unsystematic nature, lack of methodological consistency, nontransparent research procedures, etc. Simply stated, using its theories in conducting actual analysis has always been a problem for researchers. This study is an attempt to propose a framework using Weber's ideas and methodology which enables researchers to utilize discourse theories in practice. The Weberian framework does not reject other theories within the field as it is in line with an orientation termed hyper-differentiation of theories in which theories coexist rather than compete with each other.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Critical discourse analysis, Max Weber, Ideal types, Weberian framework

1. Introduction

Making sense of our complicated world relies on a wide range of value-laden resources such as social interactions, acquired knowledge and experience, culture of origin, mass media, techno-media, etc. Language is the primary mode of these resources and that is the main reason behind the emergence of Discourse Analysis (DA) within linguistics. According to Paltridge (2012), the focus of DA is on knowledge of language beyond sentence level, patterns of language across texts, relationships between language and social and cultural context, using language to present different worldviews and construction of identities. Some authors use the more encompassing term 'Discourse Studies' (DS) to include both DA and discourse theories (e.g. Angermuller et al., 2014; Rheindorf, 2019). For them, DA is the pragmatic part of DS which focuses on language in use, while discourse theories encompass the parts which focus on power, knowledge, and subjectivity. Therefore, DS "could be considered as not only a trans-disciplinary or even post-disciplinary project but rather one which runs counter to the division of knowledge into specialized disciplines and subdisciplines" (Catalano & Vaugh, 2020, p. xxii).

Language has become prominent in social sciences especially since the 'linguistic turn' in 20th century when its conception as a medium for expressing already existing meaning changed toward a system with its own meaningfulness (Ihde, 2021). As a result, the impact of different sociological and social theories began to grow in DS in general and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in particular. Sociological theories refer to the classical works of great intellectuals in sociology (most notably Marx, Durkheim, and Weber), while social theories refer to ideas about the ways societies develop and methods of explaining social behavior through power, structure, gender, etc. (Murphy, 2021). In other words, sociological theories have been developed in the field of sociology but social theories are multidisciplinary "analytical frameworks or paradigms used to examine social phenomena" (Murphy, 2013, p. 4). A close look at ideas in CDA reveals the influence of great thinkers such as Marx, Gramsci, Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, etc. One key figure in sociology whose ideas have not been adequately utilized is the German sociologist and a towering figure in the field, Max Weber.

Throughout its history, CDA has been subjected to a multitude of criticisms attacking its founding assumptions (Hammersley, 1997), vagueness in its preferences for a particular social theory (Slembrouck, 2001), lack of rigor and enhanced understanding (Verschueren, 2001), its unsystematic nature (Widdowson, 2004), lack of methodological consistency (Stubbs, 1997), not providing transparent research procedures (Rogers et al., 2005), etc. In other words, using theories of CDA in conducting actual DA has always been a problem for researchers. This study is an attempt to propose a framework using Weber's ideas and methodology which enables researcher to utilize discourse theories in conducting DA. Therefore, it is in no way an attempt to disqualify other theories and findings within CDA. This characteristic is in line with the hyper-differentiation of theories that has proven to be a suitable path in social sciences, in which theories coexist rather than compete with each other (Turner, 2012).

2. Background

2.1 Text and Discourse

The term 'discourse' has always been a controversial concept in social sciences both in terms of definition and its differentiation from 'text'. As the pioneers, Halliday and Hasan (1989) introduced text as an instance of both the product and process of social meaning that unfolds in a particular context of situation. But discourse, in its definition, has two broad categories of use: as an abstract noun referring to language in use, and as a countable noun referring to practices which constitute and construct the world in meaning (Pennycook, 2021). Simply put, discourse has a more sociological orientation focusing on content, function, and social significance of language, while text has a more linguistic orientation focusing on the form and structure of language (Hart, 2019). In order to differentiate these two broad categories of use, Gee (2015) used discourse with small 'd' to refer to the way language is used in social contexts to enact activities and different identities. Furthermore, he introduced the term with capital 'D' to address non-linguistic features which are influenced by values, beliefs, ideologies, etc. The second perspective, influenced by works of intellectuals such as Foucault and Derrida, conceptualizes discourses as naturalizing and normalizing ways of language use which are socially constructed and open to deconstruction and reconstruction.

2.2 Critical Linguistics

As a branch of linguistic analysis and critique of traditional sociolinguistics, CL emerged in Britain in 1970s to uncover power relationships in texts (e.g. Fowler, 1996; Kress, 1989). The main focus was on the connection between linguistic and social structure by accounting for socio-political context of texts (Fowler, et al., 2018). Advocating a critical and emancipatory agenda, CL turned the focus of analysis to issues like language use in social institutions and relations between language, power and ideology. In other words, the purpose was to uncover, by conducting systematic analysis of texts and linguistic choice, hidden ideologies through which the powerful controls ordinary people. CL is heavily influenced by Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics which emerged as an attempt to incorporate social semiotic functions into a theory of grammar (Halliday, 2014). Emphasizing only ideational function, focusing only on the role of syntax, lacking an intertextual perspective, and downplaying the role of interpretation, have been the most prominent criticisms of CL (Fairclough, 1992).

2.2 CDA

The term 'critical' in CDA highlights engagement with power and the word 'analysis' implies examining texts in terms of what they include as well as what they do not (Rogers, 2011). Engagement with power, heavily influenced by Marx and later Frankfurt school of critical theory, led to argument against neutrality of language and opposition of social inequalities. Conceptualized as both a theory and method, CDA treats language as a form of social practice in which the relationship between reality and linguistic forms is not arbitrary (Fairclough, 2013). The other important concept in CDA is 'context' which is defined as the mentally represented structure of those properties of the social situation that are relevant for the production or comprehension of discourse such as the overall definition of the situation,

setting, ongoing actions, and participants' mental representations (Scollon, 2001). To sum up, CDA brings together social theory and textual analysis by focusing on inter-relationships between language and power and its main areas of inquiry are political discourse, media, advertisement, ideology, racism, etc.

According to Blommaert (2005), two directions of social theory can be distinguished in CDA: interest in theories of power and ideology, and an attempt to overcome structuralist determinism. The first direction resembles the influence of five theorists. The first theorist is Michel Foucault (e.g. 1981, 1982) who, taking a different ontological outlook compared to that of analytic philosophy prevalent in social sciences, proposed that concepts are historical constructions rather than natural reality to be found in the real world. Foucault explored the cyclical relationship of power and knowledge, and orders of discourse which he believed has disciplinary effect in normalizing and regularizing individuals' behaviors. For him, discourses, which are spread by special institutions, are authoritative ways to describe social phenomena and set constraints and limits on what is acceptable. Second, Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony through which political systems maintain power over people using consensual and ideological means rather than coercive regulatory forces. The third influence comes from Louis Althusser's (2006) notions of 'ideological status apparatuses' and 'interpellation' and his definition of ideology as a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. And finally, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) who drawing on post-structuralist thought, post-analytical philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and psychoanalysis of Lacan, elaborated on the concept of discourse. They conceptualized ideological elements as contingent and not necessarily a class belonging.

In the second direction, the works of three key figures are noticeable. First, Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (1984) which claimed that there is a dynamic relation between social structures and agency. He believed that social life is more than random individual acts merely determined by social forces. In other words, social life is not an aggregate of micro-level activities, and its study requires looking for macro-level explanations. For him, structure is produced by the repetition of the acts of individual agents, and these can be changed when people start to ignore them, replace them, or reproduce them differently. The second figure is Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991) who proposed a sociology of power focusing on symbolic dimension of domination which contributes to preservation of social inequality by masking underlying reality. Third, Jurgen Habermas (e.g. 1990, 2015) who explored the complex relationship between different types of knowledge and the priori interests of individuals. His critical theory makes use of both empirical-analytical and hermeneutic knowledge to remove social restrictions through civilized communicative action.

Influenced by these ideas, Fairclough et al. (2011) introduce CDA as a "problem oriented interdisciplinary research movement" which includes different approaches with their specific models and methods (p. 357). All these methods claim that there is a dialectical relationship between discursive events and situations, as well as institutions and social structures (Johnstone, 2018). Generally, three principal approaches stand out in CDA: Fairclough's Marxist Perspective, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, and Wodak's discourse historical

approach. Fairclough's perspective (e.g. 2007, 2010, 2013), as an attempt to bring about social change, identifies (re)production of relations of domination and inequalities in discourse through a dialectical theory and a transdisciplinary approach. The purpose is to uncover 'naturalization' i.e. the use of language to construct a negative hegemony which presents the ideas of dominant groups as common sense. Van Dijk's CDA (e.g. 2009, 2014, 2017) uses a socio-cognitive framework to stress the role of cognition in interpreting context. For him, by theorizing about the relationship between social systems and cognitions, CDA should aim at bringing about social change or at least support struggles against social inequality. Historical CDA takes an inter-textual orientation i.e. tracing the history of linguistic features and arguments by integrating necessary background information in the process of interpretation and analysis (e.g. Martin & Wodak, 2003; Wodak, 2016). In other words, it starts with an ethnographic perspective on the original document and then proceeds to extreme contemporary data collection and analysis.

Conducting CDA has been a controversial issue in which some scholars encourage methodological diversity while others look for more systematic and focused frameworks (Gordon, 2021). Although some authors emphasize the importance of using visual images and multimodal conceptions (e.g. Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), CDA stays biased on linguistically defined text concepts. Fairclough (1992, 2013) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) proposed the most elaborate social theory of discourse along with a methodological framework for practice. Taking a three-dimensional stance, the proposed framework attends to discourse as text, as discursive practice, and as social practice. The first dimension focuses on linguistic features, the second dimension sees discourse as produced, circulated, distributed, and consumed in society, and finally the third dimension addresses the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse operates. Using this threefold distinction in research methodology, CDA practitioners should progress stepwise from description to interpretation and finally explanation.

3. A New Sociological Approach

Turner (2006, p. 2), declared the era of hyper-differentiation of theories in which theories coexist rather than compete head on with each other. To this end, he identified three positions which deemed sociology as,

- a natural science that would discover the laws of human organization

- a critique and call for action

- an explanation revolving around interpreting empirical events in terms of analytical schemes consisting of categories used to describe classes of empirical phenomena

Although these positions have emerged from what is known as classical theories in sociology, they remain completely relevant today. The first position is associated with works of Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim, the second one with Marx, and finally the third position with Weber. The first position is resembled in what is called functional discourse analysis and the second position is one of the main thresholds for the development of CDA. As the third position has not been adequately utilized in discourse studies, this new framework aims at introducing

Weber's methodology of social sciences into the field as a framework for conducting DA. The logic behind this endeavor is that Weber's practical methodology helps discourse analysts to utilize theories of discourse in actual practice.

3.1 Max Weber

Weber is believed to be one of the most influential figures in sociology whose work has influenced diverse perspectives such as structural functionalism, conflict theory, critical theory, symbolic interactionism, and rational choice theory (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). Weber (1978) had a completely different take on sociology and conceptualized it as "a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequence" (p. 4). In his undertaking of social issues, Weber turned his focus on the cultural and non-economic motivations that underlie social actions through theories' embeddedness in empirical research rather than abstract theorizing (Dillon, 2020). Furthermore, using the term 'verstehen', the German word for understanding, he tried to make sense of motivations behind social actions by answering 'why' questions. Such characteristics is why he is believed to be the bridge between early macro-level sociological theories and subsequent micro-level ones (Ferris & Stein, 2018).

3.2 Ideal Types

Weber believed that since human life is bound to be consisted of empirical events, reaching general laws for it is an unrealistic goal. In other words, he believed, generalization is impossible at empirical level because although concepts can be utilized as heuristic tools to better understand reality, they can never completely capture the empirical world (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). These heuristic tools, which Weber (1949) called ideal types, can thus be used to explain and understand social phenomena. According to Aspalter (2022), the ideal typical concept is of great help in developing imputation research skills as it offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses. Put differently, it is not a description of reality but an attempt to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description.

An ideal type is formed through a one-sided accentuation of various viewpoints regarding a concrete individual phenomenon, which is unified into an analytical construct. Generally speaking, this mental construct is idealistic and cannot be found anywhere in reality. Historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality. Simply put, ideal types are inductively constructed from reality (but are not exact replicas of real world) and are used as yardsticks in measuring and comparing social phenomena (Kalberg, 2017). According to Hope (2022), an ideal type, through the extraction of essential characteristics and with the purpose of providing a structure against which real examples may be compared, lays out a typification of phenomena.

3.3 A Weberian Framework

Using Weber's conceptualization of ideal types as heuristic devices, due to its practicality, could be of great help to practitioners. Following Weber, ideal types used in DA are also one-sided accentuations of what is found in reality and not exact mirror images of them. The

ideal types used in DA provide something with which we compare what has happened in reality. The ideal types themselves can also be subsequently analyzed to discover the system of thought and culture which has influenced their creation. It means that the analysis of ideal types can help to discover the researchers' biases.

As was mentioned in the criticisms regarding CDA, many theories within discourse studies, remain at the theoretical level and mainly suggest what should this field be about, the type of questions it should address, and what is important to attend to in conducting DA. However, when comes to practice, most of them do not provide or even intend to provide practitioners with a useful framework to conduct their studies. It is evident in most books and articles on the subject which are mainly theoretical. The inevitable outcome is that most students studying DA know a great deal about this field while face difficulties in conducting an actual analysis of a specified text.

The present orientation aims at providing a perspective which makes use of the strengths of the mentioned approaches while providing an actual framework to conduct discourse studies. It provides the Weberian technique to start the process and then attend to questions which are of significance. In this section, a very simple example will be used to clarify what the practitioners should go through to actually succeed in analyzing a piece of text. The following is the beginning lines of the interview of Iran foreign minister Javad Zarif (JZ) with Christiane Amanpour (CA) on CNN on May 15th, 2015.

> CA: *Dr. Zarif, welcome back to the program*
>
> JZ: *Happy to be with you*
>
> CA: *So, let me ask you, is a deal imminent?*
>
> JZ: *Well it can be, if there is the political will on all sides to make the decisions that need to be made. We have made some progress. There are issues left to be decided. So, we will have to work very, very hard for the next few weeks.*

Through the analysis of this simple interaction, it will be shown that how different perspectives and their associated questions will be used. The first step is to build an ideal type of the beginning of an interview on national television; moreover, these ideal types could in turn be analyzed to address any likely biases of the practitioner who builds them. The ideal type for the first turn of the interviewer would be to say something like:

> Actual 1: *Dr. Zarif, welcome back to the program*
>
> Ideal Type 1: *Welcome to our program Foreign Minister Zarif*

Compared to what actually happened in the interview, there are some differences: she used his name without his title, and her emphasis on the word 'back'. Using tenets of other theories in the field, it can be said that using name without the title cuts through the existing distance between them. The use of back can be analyzed historically as Dr. Zarif has lived most of his life in America. The interviewer also emphasizes his previous appearance on American TV, and/or her more positive orientation toward him compared to the pervious

Iranian negotiators on the nuclear program. The ideal type of each turn would be based on its prior actual speech, not its prior ideal type.

Actual 2:   *Happy to be with you*

Ideal Type 2:   *Happy to be back to the program*

He deliberately starts with the word happy to show his appreciation while also implying Iran's position as friendly in negotiation but ignores the word back to put the distance back in place because he is now the foreign minister of Iran.

Actual 3:   *So, let me ask you, is a deal imminent?*

Ideal Type 3:   *Do you think there is going to be a deal, and if yes, when?*

She deliberately uses the pronoun "you" to imply that the deal mostly depends on Iran's side to cooperate with other nations' representative in the negotiations; this way she also implies the power relationship that supposedly exists between Iran and other countries at the other end of the deal. Another important thing is that she implies that there is going to be a deal and only asks if it is going to be soon or not.

Actual 4:   *Well it can be, if there is the political will on all sides to make the decisions that need to be made. We have made some progress. There are issues left to be decided. So, we will have to work very, very hard for the next few weeks.*

Ideal Type 4:   *since you are asking me I could say that there could be a deal if all parties cooperate and put their mind into reaching an agreement.*

Dr. Zarif uses can and an 'if structure' to correct her implication that the deal is a hundred percent sure. He also uses various strategies to deal with her implicature that reaching an agreement mostly depends on Iran. He uses modality (can), subjunctive mood, inclusion (we), passive voice, there structure, and emphatic *the* (the political will) to point that making the deal is not all on Iran and it is up to all nations.

4. Concluding Remarks

Issuing theories in humanities and social sciences is a great endeavor, but innovative ways should also be provided to put them into practice (e.g. Fathabadi et al., 2021). Many theories of discourse, although built on sound and brilliant thought, fall short of providing convenient and accessible frameworks to put them in practice. Using Weber's brilliant sociological method is one way of providing a suitable framework to conduct DA. Using his concept of ideal types helps practitioners by providing a criterion to which they can compare the actual speech and meanwhile show the manifestation of theoretical points in real life. Since ideal types are not what exactly found in reality and the practitioners' influence in them would be inevitable, they could also be analyzed in terms of likely intellectual and cultural biases that may have impacted their construction.

Acknowledgements

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