

Beyond the Obvious. Suggestions to Empower Critical Discourse Analysis

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The essay discusses some of the theoretical and methodological criticism against Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing especially on the charge of belaboring the obvious, of providing empirical findings that were already implicit in the research premises and/or that were attainable by the average lay reader of the texts without the application of peculiar analytical techniques. Instead of following the sharpest critics in their overall rejection of CDA, the author looks for possible methodological solutions to improve its explanatory and critical purposes. In particular, she suggests to identify clearly the unit of analysis and to keep it fixed during the analytical process; in addition, she proposes to look more systematically for hidden meaning structures, revisiting the classical works by Propp and Toulmin.

Key words: argumentation, critical discourse analysis, Toulmin, Propp, narrative analysis.

Introduction

Since 1980s, Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA) has undergone a gradual institutionalization process and has acquired an autonomous status within the broad range of qualitative approaches to discourse analysis, despite the internal heterogeneity of theories and methods it came to group under the same label. The more CDA acquired the status of a discipline in its own right, with its own strongholds and dedicated scientific magazines, the more opponents/outsideers were aggressive and stingy in their theoretical and methodological criticism. This paper surveys such criticism, focusing especially on a charge that could eventually lead to an overall rejection of CDA: namely, the charge of belaboring the obvious, of providing empirical findings that were already implicit in the research premises and/or that were attainable by the average lay reader of the texts without the application of peculiar analytical techniques.

Instead of discarding on the outset CDA with its warts and all from the available qualitative methods to analyze discourses, I propose to take some of those critiques seriously and to discuss them analytically, in search for possible solutions to improve the explanatory and critical purposes of CDA. Underpinning assumption of this work is in fact the belief that CDA is a highly valuable instrument, worthy to be kept inside the social sciences toolbox, especially on behalf of its original, critical commitment to a discourse analysis directed at unveiling dominance relationships and social inequalities. A discourse analysis, in other words, com-

mitted to the challenge of changing the world and, possibly, to improve society.

I first introduce the readers to the main tenets of CDA as a theoretical approach and research orientation (§ 1), providing a brief overview of its different intellectual sources (1.1) and main strands (1.2). Then I sum up the criticism recently leveled at CDA (§ 2), both from the theoretical (2.1) and methodological viewpoints (2.2.). Finally, I discuss some suggestions to attenuate or even overcome such critiques, offering solutions that could eventually lead to a further empowerment of the critical commitment of CDA (§ 3).

1. Fundamental tenets of CDA

Notwithstanding the wide internal heterogeneity of theories and methods encompassed by the label Critical Discourse Analysis (displayed in the coming paragraphs), it is possible to identify some key assumptions that are shared by most critical discourse analysts. First, there is a good share of consensus in defining the term «discourse»¹. Some quotations will show that it is basically defined as «language use», in both meanings of text and talk. So, for instance, in a handbook of Discourse Analysis especially popular in the field of critical linguistics, Brown and Yule (1983) write: «the analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs» (p. 1). Fairclough, among the most representatives of CDA, states: «Discourse is for me more than *just* language use: it is language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice» (Fairclough 1992a, 28). On rather the same tone is also Candlin's definition: «Discourse refers to language in use, as a process which is socially situated [...]. Discourse is a means of talking and writing about and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices [...]» (Candlin 1997, ix). Finally, Jaworski and Coupland, editors of a ponderous anthology of extracts in discourse analysis, synthesize various definitions proposing the following: «Discourse is language use relative to social, political and cultural formations – it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals' interaction with society» (Jaworski and Coupland 2014, 3).

In addition, many discourse analysts share the view that CDA is not a systematic corpus of well-ordered theoretical and methodological assumptions. Rather,

1. Michel Foucault, one of the most influential antecedents of CDA, claims: «Instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse', I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements» (Foucault 1972, 80).

they think about it more in terms of a research direction, a perspective, a peculiar approach, sometimes even as a movement. In any case, many among the most representative authors within the field have already tried to identify analogies and standpoints considerable as largely agreed upon. So, for instance, Fairclough and Wodak, summarize them in eight tenets (1997, 271-80), most of which pertain to the role of discourse in society. Within CDA, discourse is generally conceived as a form of social action and as constitutive of society and culture; its historical embeddedness is openly acknowledged. Moreover, the relationship between text and society is perceived as mediated and discourse is deemed able of doing ideological work. The scope of Critical Discourse Analysis is described as «interpretative» and «explanatory» and its target are social problems and political issues. Dominance, social inequalities, race or gender discrimination and other forms of power abuse are challenged starting from the assumption that power relations are discursive², and that through critical analysis they can be unveiled, exposed and resisted (for more details on CDA mission see also Fairclough 1985).

These common orientations confirm a shared critical interest towards the relationship between language (text and talk) and power-order (political struggle, social conflict). This relationship is often presented as bridging the micro and macro levels of analysis (see for instance Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981). In Luke's words (2002, 100): «CDA involves a principles and transparent shunting backwards and forth between the microanalysis of texts using varied tools of linguistic, semiotic and literary analysis, and the macro analysis of social formations, institutions and power relations that these texts index and construct». According to Van Dijk, moreover, «in everyday interaction and experience the macro and micro level (and intermediary 'mesolevels') form one unified whole. For instance, a racist speech in parliament is a discourse at the microlevel of social interaction in the specific situation of a debate, but at the same time may enact or be a constituent part of legislation or the reproduction of racism at the macrolevel» (2003, 354). More generally, it is shared the view that the language/power-order relationship is reciprocal, self-confirming and self-enforcing: discourses do not merely «reflect» the social *status quo* with its unfair power distribution; instead, they contribute to its construction, legitimization, justification and reproduction (in so doing, language performs its ideological function). This view is basically rooted in a left-wing political conception of society, tracing back its origins to the CDA intellectual antecedents.

2. Critical discourse researchers can unmask sources of dominance in discourses, because «the social is built into the grammatical tissue of language» (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, 140).

1.1 Intellectual antecedents

The expression «Critical Discourse Analysis» was coined by Norman Fairclough in 1985 and it was popularized by his influential book *Language and Power* (1989). Apart from the label birth date, also the intellectual background of CDA is wide and heterogeneous. Some CDA analysts (i.e. van Dijk 2003, and Breeze 2011) trace back the origin of the approaches nowadays grouped under the label of CDA to the late 1970s, when some seminal studies (i.e. Fowler, Hodge Kress and Trew 1979) tried to apply Hallyday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) within a wider social perspective able to deal with power and control issues³.

Largely consensual, however, is the view that CDA enroots within the neo-Marxist tradition, more specifically into the critical and normative legacy of the Frankfurt School (Rasmussen 1996). However, I believe that such statement is somehow reductive⁴, especially with regard to the many strands CDA encompasses, and that it fits well only to one of such strand (the so-called historian perspective, whose stronghold is today Wien).

Instead, it would be better to recognize from the outset that CDA entails at least three different traditions, which are geographically and intellectually separable. First, in the American and English context, CDA has his intellectual antecedents into the so-called «linguistic turn», in pragmatics and especially in the speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism have also largely contributed to lay the foundations for conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics, whose analytical tools and methods are sometimes still used within CDA. In the German intellectual environment, the major role of the School of Frankfurt is certainly undeniable, the more so because of the original interest of Adorno and Horkheimer for the impact of the media and their messages on mass societies. More recently, some critical discourse analysts have addressed renewed attention to the seminal contribution of Habermas' theory of communicative rationality, and to the ideal conditions of its validity. France too has greatly influenced CDA, first and foremost through the works of Pecheux (1982) and Foucault⁵ (1972; 1981).

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3. In any case, I agree with Ruth Breeze (2011), who recognizes that «unlike SFL, CDA rejected descriptive linguistics and the structuralist thinking which underpins much SLF research» (496). As I will argue later on, despite its declared purposes, CDA has lost some of its potential explanatory power due to a loss of interest in the latent structures of analyzed texts.
 4. It should also be added that from Gramsci, CDA has drawn the insight that social and political oppression is attained through internalized «hegemony», which exerts itself by means of coercion, but also through consent (and through language).
 5. Some authors (for instance, Breeze 2011) have noted that another important, although somehow contradictory, influence on CDA is the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault, who highlighted the crucial role of discourse in framing social relations, and at the same time the unstable nature of social constructs (against structuralist theories of society like Marx's).

Curiously enough, within this already diversified heritage, no reference has been made so far to the impact on CDA of the sociology of knowledge (for an excellent introduction see Stark 1958). However, in my opinion, one could convincingly argue that CDA has an antecedent in the pioneering work of Karl Mannheim ([1936] 1955), who by the first considered the situated, socially conditioned character of ideology (and of utopia). Among Mannheim's merits, furthermore, is the brilliant insight about the distinctive features of the conservative ideology, its typical synthetic style, so neatly distinguishable from the analytical one, typical of the progressive ideology ([1925] 1986)⁶.

The CDA group as a network of scholars, however, emerged only in the early 1990s, after a symposium in Amsterdam held in January 1991. The meeting offered a chance to the main critical discourse analysts (van Dijk, Fairclough, Kress, van Leeuwen and Wodak, among others) to discuss theories and methods of discourse analysis, especially of CDA. The start of the CDA network was marked by the launch of van Dijk's journal *Discourse and Society*⁷.

1.2 Main strands within CDA

During the Amsterdam meeting, sameness and differences were openly laid out within the paradigm of CDA. Following the detailed account of Wodak and Meyer (2009), six distinct strands were identified within CDA: Dispositive Analysis (DA); the Sociocognitive approach (SCA), the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), the Corpus Linguistics Approach (CLA), the Social Actors Approach (SAA) and the Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA).

Since it is well beyond the purposes of the present work to display exhaustively the many strands of CDA, I chose to focus on the main features and strong points of three of them – SCA, DHA and DRA – limiting myself to notice that dispositive analysis is an application of Foucault's methodology; and corpus Linguistics represents a quantitative extension of CDA.

The Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA) has its origins and strongholds in the Netherlands and it has been funded by the seminal works of Teun van Dijk. The approach draws, from a theoretical viewpoint, on socio-cognitive theory, and more specifically on social representation theory, in its elaboration by Moscovici. According to such theory, social actors rely in their experiences and choices on collective frames of perceptions, namely, *social representations* (a notion coined by

6. For a recent, empirical verification of Mannheim's insight about the differences between left and right wing political public speech, see Corradi (2013, 2016).

7. After *Discourse and Society*, many other dedicated journals were established. Among them, it is worth remembering at least *Critical Discourse Studies*, *The Journal of Language and Politics*, *Discourse and Communication*, *Visual Semiotics*.

Moscovici, but already well present in Durkheim). These collective constructs (shared concepts, opinions, attitudes, evaluations, images, symbols) are produced, reproduced and changed in dynamic processes through social communication: they form the link between the social system and the individual cognitive system (as such, they also contribute to shape the actor's identity). Social representations are typically bound to specific social groups and as such they can account for situated ideologies. Main merit of this kind of approach is, in my view, to emphasize the role of context in communicative situations and to focus on the relationship between text and context. In empirical analyses, such as the analysis of the denial of racism (van Dijk 1992), key notion is the one of «context model», defined as the «mental 'definition of the situation' that controls the adequate adaptation of discourse production and comprehension» to the actor's social environment (van Dijk 2009, 66). The theoretical function of context models is mediating between discourse structures and social structures at all level of analysis, or, simply put, between text and context; their practical function, instead, is to «define the genre as well as the style of text and talk» (ivi, 73). Context models consist of some fundamental categories: the spatiotemporal setting (the where and when of communication), the participants (the who), goals (the what), knowledge, ideologies and practices (the how). Van Dijk argues that a complete discourse analysis of a large corpus of discourses is practically impossible. The research focus should instead be on those text properties that can vary as a function of social power. Hence, SCA generally checks for the following linguistic indicators: stress and intonation, word order, topic and lexical choices, coherence, rhetorical figures, and speech acts. In addition, SCA analyses «local meanings», namely, various forms of implicit or indirect meanings, like presuppositions, allusions, vagueness, omissions and polarization and for specific linguistic realizations like hyperboles and litotes (for an example of empirical study see for instance van Dijk's analysis of the «Petition Against the persecution of Microsoft», in Wodak and Meyer 2009, 67-79).

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) has set as its «theoretical mission the linking of genres, discourses, texts and fields of action» (in the formulation proposed by Girth 1996, cited in Wodak and Meyer 2009, 26). It has mostly taken place in the German speaking context, and has its stronghold in Wien. This approach strongly opposes the use of «grand theories» for critical discourse analysis, judging their operationalization as an attempt doomed to fail. Instead, DHA calls for a methodological implementation of *argumentation theory* (on this point see paragraph 3.2 in the present work). The strategy of analysis entails four steps: 1) the assessment of the contingent topics of a discourse; 2) the investigation of the discursive strategies (including argumentation strategies); 3) the exam of specific linguistic means (as types) and 4) of context-dependent linguistic realizations of discriminato-

ry stereotypes (as tokens). Among the discursive strategies taken into consideration, we could remember: referential strategies («where the salient linguistic devices are membership categorization [...], metaphors, metonymies and synecdoche», *ivi*, 29); strategies of predication (the attachment of positive or negative properties); strategies of intensification and mitigation (used to strengthen or weaken the illocutionary force of utterances). The historical context is always taken into account in the interpretation of discourses even though, as Wodak and Meyer honestly admit, «there is no clear procedure for this task» (*ivi*, 30). For an example of empirical analysis applying DHA see the Reisigl and Wodak (2009, especially 102-116, with the findings regarding Klaus' speech at the House of Representatives of the USA Congress). Finally, the Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA) had its origins in the UK, especially at Lancaster University, where Fairclough, its founding farther, is Professor Emeritus of Language in Social Life. He takes a grand theory-oriented position in addressing social conflict (in the Marxian tradition) and tries to unmask its linguistic expressions in texts and talks. Embracing this mission, DRA pursues emancipatory objectives on behalf of the «losers» or the «oppressed» in society. According to DRA, the semiotic element is inherent in any social practice and it shapes genres and styles. Unveiling the semiotic aspect of social order – named, within DRA, the «order of discourse» (a clear reference to Foucault's intellectual heritage) – means to analyze the dialectical relationships between «semiosis» (including language) and social/political action. The linguistic analysis should be performed according to the Systemic Functional Linguists principles, that assume that even grammar, in language, is shaped by the social functions it serves. From a methodological viewpoint, DRA entails a two stages procedure, the first of whose is preparatory to the following analytical efforts (but is also helpful in the selection of material for analysis). First, the discourse analyst should identify a «social wrong» with a semiotic aspect and its dominant styles and genres and their eventual variety. Afterwards, he/she can proceed with a «structural analysis» of the context and with an «interactional analysis» centered around the categories of agents time, modality and syntax. The methodology, which has «not to be interpreted in a mechanical way» (Fairclough 2009, 167) should also lead the researcher to identify «obstacles» to addressing the social wrong and possible ways to past the obstacles, also through linguistic devices.

Fairclough himself illustrates the application of his own method step by step, supplying two case studies (for more details see Fairclough 2009, 174-186). Some comments on these empirical analyses could be useful to appreciate and evaluate critically the criticisms presented below. The social wrong in case is «de-politicization», namely, the suppression and marginalization of political differences over important issues of strategy and policy: «a social wrong in which it under-

mines democracy but also poses the danger that dissent, which cannot be politically articulated, may emerge in nationalist or xenophobic forms» (Fairclough 2009, 174). The choice of the social problem object of research guides the selection of sample texts. Thus, Fairclough chooses and counter poses two different discourses: one as representative of the strategy of de-politicization (the *Forward* written by the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to the Department of Trade and Industry' White Paper on Competitiveness, 1998); the other, as exemplary of the opposite strategy of politicization, an extract from a book written by form members of the Labour Party, criticizing Blair's New Labour's Government (From Brown and Coates 1996, pp. 172-4). In each cases, Fairclough first *sums up* the fundamental argument contained in the text, identifying *summaries* of the premise(s) and of the conclusions, having care of making explicit implicit assumptions. So, for example, in the case of the *Forward* by the former Prime Minister Tony Blair, the argument is reconstructed as follows (Fairclough 2009, 177):

Premises: the modern world is changing
 There are opportunities to succeed and prosper in the modern world.
 If we want to succeed and prosper, we must compete effectively.

Implicit premise: (we do want to succeed and prosper)

Conclusion: Therefore we must compete (more) effectively

Fairclough claims that the argument is formally valid, but that the validity of the conclusion depends on the truth of its premises. According to him, the argument is not sound because a) it «predicates the possible success of a problematic identity category as subject ('we')»⁸ and also because b) «it falsely claims that the change attributed to the modern world is simply an inevitable fact of life which 'we' must accept». Consequently, he concludes: «Both of these flaws in the premises can be associated with the macro strategy of de-politicization». In addition, he notes that «processes of change are construed without responsible social agents» (177), while, «by contrast, when it comes to national responses to these implacable impersonal processes of world change, social agents are fully present – business, the government [...] and especially 'we'» (178). Symmetrically, «the domain of 'is' is world change; the domain of 'ought' is national responses: a divide is textually constructed between economics and politics [...], fact and value, which excludes the former from the latter. This differs from the social democratic tradition from which New Labor has come» (178). This divide is strengthened by the use of paratactic syntax:

8. Fairclough more precisely remarks that «the identity category 'we' is problematic in that it is based upon a false equation between 'we' = Britain and 'we' all the citizens of Britain: if Britain achieves 'success' or 'prosperity', it does not follow that all of its citizens do» (ivi, 178).

«change is authoritatively construed as lists of known appearances and truisms [...]. These features together construe the new economy as a simple fact to which there is no alternative» (which is seen as an obstacle to face and overcome the social wrong in question). The second text, by contrast, «enters into adversarial dialogue with contemporaries, specifically Blairities. The macro-strategy of politicization is semi-otically realized in the text's dialogicality. Specifically, there are claims which are denials of claims made 'elsewhere', by New Labour politicians among others [...]. The strategy is to politicize by construing the nature of world change and government responses as controversial matters, subject to political difference and division» (ivi, 181). I will comment on these specific examples in paragraph 3.

2. Criticism against CDA

Criticism against CDA has been piling up rapidly in the last fifteen years, and has gained special vigor after the appearance of a new journal – *Critical Discourse Studies* (published by Routledge) – in 2004. According to Jones, one of its sharpest critics, CDA «is still in its ascendancy, having so far managed to brush aside, or at least to ignore, its occasional (Hammersely 1997; Stubbs 1997) or persistent (Widdowson 1995; Widdowson 1996; Widdowson 1998) critics» (Jones 2007, 337-338). Some good surveys of such criticism have already been published (see for instance Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; and especially, the excellent essay by Breeze 2011), as well as systematic reviews of literature in specific CDA fields of study (for instance, the very detailed essay on CDA in Education, by Rogers and others, eds. 2005).

My main concern in this work, consequently, is not providing an exhaustive account of the many sources and reasons of criticism directed against CDA. Instead, I focus on the ones I find more challenging and/or useful to enhance the explanatory and critical commitments of CDA. Following a classical exposition framework (similar to the one already adopted by Breeze), I made the effort to separate the theoretical critiques from the methodological ones, even though such distinction is most of the time not a clear-cut one. Where necessary, in exposing other authors' critical remarks I made my best to make their argumentation explicit, highlighting, on occasion, the ontological or epistemological assumptions seemingly underpinning them.

2.1 Theoretical critiques

To my knowledge, the most radical critique to CDA at the theoretical level is the one by Peter E. Jones. In an article published in 2007 on *Language and Communication*, significantly titled «Why there is no such thing as 'critical dis-

course analysis'», he moves a prosecution case against CDA challenging «its *raison d'être*» (339). His argument questions the CDA (implicit) claim of having some privileged access to the critique of communication. This charge is specifically leveled at Fairclough and the entry point for critics is one of his claim, namely, that «his version of CDA does not assume the existence of some autonomous linguistic system, but is, rather 'based upon a view of semiosis as an irreducible part of material social processes with language as an 'integral element' of such process» (Fairclough 2001, 122). In a statement that could appear a little cryptic, Jones holds that such «claim is belied by CDA's uncritical commitment to and application of the unambiguously segregational framework of analysis of lexical and grammatical properties of sentences and texts based on 'systemic functional linguistics'» (2007, 339).

If I understand Jones's overall reasoning correctly, his critique can be split in three main, distinct propositions. First, he claims that CDA (and Fairclough in particular) illegitimately advocates for some privileged critical perspective about communicative practices when «everyday communication already involves the critique of communication» (338). From his own perspective, the «engagement» in communication by social actors is in itself a critical activity: «we have all been busily criticizing [publicly or privately] everybody's else words and deeds», (340), and, as such, it is theoretically inherent to the practice of communication and not analytically separable from it. Secondly, words (language) are not intrinsically «discriminative» or power-vectors («people can be racist, words cannot», 342). As a consequence – and this is the third methodological statement – the application of systemic functional linguistics to analyze discourse cannot lead to sound, scientifically valid conclusions because it implies the treatment of semiosis (meaning production) as a distinct process from the actual engagement in communication. As one can see, from an ontological standpoint rather different from the one of CDA, Jones derives epistemological and methodological implications that discredit the scientific value of CDA overall.

Together with such a radical critique, Jones adds, like in passing, a subtle warning, that I deem worthy of special attention. He writes: «the contribution of particular communicative practices to the exercise of power and authority must not be oversimplified, something which can happen when we proceed on the assumption that there is a direct correlation between particular linguistic constructions and relations of power» (344). The more interesting case of such oversimplifications⁹ is to me when the social dimension of power, its intrinsic relational/recip-

9. Jones mentions another case of oversimplification, that can occur «where power itself is seen so abstractly, so hazily, that questions are taken to have intrinsic, power-oriented semantic content» (344), as he thinks to be the

rocal character is forgotten. As Jones states: «since the efficient exercise of power assumes and involves a manifest reciprocal act of obeisance [...], this means that to comply with an order is just as complex and ethically problematic a social act as to issue one and that acts of compliance, even those which are commonplace, regular and routine, do not speak for themselves but require interpretations» (344). This addition of complexity and call for awareness about the social nature of power could pave the way for new, interesting research paths. For instance, it suggests to test divergences in the speaker/hearer interpretations of requests, questions and commands, eventually crossing and double-checking them with the interpretations provided by critical discourse analysts.

Hammersely too questions the critical foundations of CDA. In a frequently quoted article (1996), he charges critical discourse analysts to take their intellectual critical heritage in a very unproblematic way, either in the case they rely on the Marxist tradition, on the Frankfurt School or on the universal pragmatics of Habermas. As a consequence, in his opinion, «the term ‘critical’ has become little more than a rallying cry demanding that researchers consider ‘whose side they are on’, an «umbrella for any approach that wishes to portray itself as politically radical without being exclusive in its commitments» (244). Hammersely notes that «what it could legitimately shelter under this umbrella is very diverse» (ivi) and that such uniformity «does not even match the perspectives to be found in Leftist politics». Equally important, for him, is that «the terms ‘oppression’, ‘equality’ and ‘emancipation’ are used as if what they referred to could be identified easily and uncontentiously, yet there are fundamental problems with each of them» (ivi). The lack of attention towards the fundamental theoretical assumptions and concepts is all the more unforgivable in CDA, Hammersely argues, because «its advocates argue for the superiority of their position because it is reflexive» (ivi).

However, Hammersely’s criticism, in my view, is more straightforwardly addressed to the excessive *normative* ambitions of CDA. In fact, he describes the «most damaging feature of CDA» as «the extraordinary ambition of the task 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. As a result, it faces all the difficult methodological problems with which more conventional kinds of research have to deal, plus many others as well. (Hammersely 1996, 244)

case in Hodge and Kress’s interpretation of an everyday question (cited in note n. 7 in Jones 2006, 344): «Take as an example an interrogative used as a command: Can you get the meal ready? The surface form classifies the speaker as (- knowledge). In some situations (- knowledge) implies (- power), so that the asker of a question may be classifying himself as (- power). But a question requires an answer, so the questioner is also controlling the behavior of the hearer. In this respect the questioner’s classification is (+ power)» (Hodge and Kress 1983, 95-96).

In response to this second criticism by Hammersely, I would be more cautious – and more analytical – in describing the normative impetus of CDA. To put it simply, imagining how things could be different and how they could eventually be changed is something very different from claiming how they should be otherwise or how they should be changed¹⁰. On this regard, it would suffice to recall that Weber (1917) has openly warned us sociologists (and social scientists in general) from unconsciously overlapping these different meanings and relative tasks of our discipline; while at the same time advocating for an explicit declaration of values-self-positioning by the researcher (*Wertbeziehung*: relationship towards values). Finally, Stubbs (1997) addresses a direct critique of circularity to CDA. Revisiting Whorf's unresolved question about the influence of diverse languages on habitual thought, he observes that such circularity lingers in Fairclough statement's that language use is «socially shaped and socially constitutive». More specifically, he remarks:

The basic claim of CDA (and of Whordian views) is that languages or uses of language implicitly classify experience and that these categories influence a person's view of reality. There is therefore an essential criterion for any research. There must be non-linguistic evidence of a pattern of beliefs and behavior. If language and thought are to be related, then one needs data and theory pertinent to both. If we have no independent evidence, but infer beliefs from language use, then the theory is circular. This may be the most difficult kind of evidence to provide, but there is no way around this demand, especially in light of the constant claim in CDA that certain meanings are hidden from speakers and hearers, and can be revealed only by certain types of analysis. (6)

Personally, I do not agree with Stubbs' claim that «there is no way round this demand», neither consider I CDA circularity from his same perspective. In any case, I value Stubb's methodological recommendation to improve CDA; consequently, the reader will meet again with Stubb's criticism in the next paragraph.

2.2 Methodological critiques

Standardization of method is certainly not one of the strongpoints of CDA. Despite Fairclough's efforts (1989) in laying the foundations of CDA methodology in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)¹¹, hardly a unified and standard

10. For an extensive discussion of this point and on normativity in social sciences I recommend Turner (2007). Moreover, the question about «how to derive ought from is» is discussed analytically by Searle (1964). Streumer (2003), instead, faces the question whether «ought» conversationally implicates «can».

11. From SFL, Fairclough borrows a three-level framework, in which language is seen as working at the ideational, relational and textual layers. Within this framework, the analysis should encompass three stages: description, interpretation and explanation. Through the analysis of specific aspects of language – for instance the usage of passive forms – Fairclough himself (1992), in a review of 20 articles published in *Discourse and Society*, notes that the essays' findings would have been more convincing, had the linguistic framework of analysis been applied more systematically and with more rigor. For more details on this point I recommend Breeze's essay (2011).

method can be identified to analyze texts from a critical discourse perspective. Variety of methods would not be a drawback were each method described in details, systematically and impartially applied. But this does not seem to be the case, according to many critics.

Widdowson has certainly been, so far, the sharpest critic of CDA methodological flaws. In a review of three CDA studies published in the 1990s, he stresses the unsystematic nature of CDA research, going so far to define it as an «*ad hoc bricolage* which takes from theory whatever concept comes usefully at hand» (1998, 136). He does not deny that certain linguistic properties could bear «an ideological valency», such as the usage of passives, but, at the same time, he underscores that in looking for such elements critical discourse analysts tend to disregard other features of the texts that may contain contradictories stances. Consequently, a certain degree of «*randomness* could be perceived in studies like the one by Fowler (1996), Fairclough (1996) and van Dijk (1996) ».

The problem of randomness and potential analytical bias is also perceived by others critics, like Stubbs (1997), Toolan (1997), and Verschueren (2001). They share the view that CDA outcomes «are not tenable, because the method is often simply impressionistic or because the sample of texts is small and obtained unsystematically» (Breeze 2011, 504). Verschueren, for instance, stresses the tendency to leave out important features of the text that do not fit with the interpretative framework or could even result as contradictory. As Breeze recalls (2011, 505): Verschueren concludes 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). To take Verschueren's argument a step further, one could charge CDA methodology of apriorism: the supposed empirical findings would be somehow «only» a confirmation of the research premises, they would show through linguistic features the existence of already presupposed power/dominance relationships, of presumed ideological stances. In this way, CDA logic of interpretation/explanation would result as dangerously self-confirming, not to say, circular.

Stubbs (1997), in the constructive part of the already mention work, asks himself how the circularity he sees in CDA can be avoided. Among his methodological considerations, he points in particular to the lack of quantitative support and diachronic evidence for the supposed empirical findings. To face such methodological flaws, Stubbs interestingly suggests:

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 generalizations are made about typical language use. And a much wider ran-

ge 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. (10¹²)

This proposal by Stubbs is of interest for a number of reasons¹³. First, he suggests that CDA should look for «typical language use», namely, search for *regularities that could be elaborated as typical*. In this way, he defines in a clearer way the possible goal of a unified CDA methodology. Second, he claims that CDA should be concerned with «*clusters of co-occurring features*», instead of only with individual linguistic aspects of discourse: in this way, he opens up the quest for *connections, meaning structures and hidden linkages* – in other words, he calls for the *discovery* of something that is not immediately obvious to the lay reader of a text. What Stubbs has in mind when talking about clusters of co-occurring features is the kind of frequencies and co-variants that can be discovered through corpus content-analysis, within an applied linguistic perspective. However, as I will argue in the next paragraph, his insight can also be developed along a different research direction. Finally, he advocates for a *comparative research design*: which could be declined in a variety of ways, well beyond the diachronic dimensions (for instance, comparing discourses on the same topic from different interest groups, political parties or standpoint, social classes, ethnic or religious groups and so on). These suggestions are worthy of further conceptual elaboration, even though they are certainly not the only possible remedies to improve CDA methodology.

3. Suggestions to improve CDA

3.1 *The unit of analysis*

To my knowledge, no criticism against CDA has yet point it out explicitly that the unit of analysis is generally not clearly identified and/or shifting throughout the process of analysis. In Fairclough's empirical studies, for instance, it sometimes seems to be the single word (lexical level), other times the utterance, other times yet the text in its wholeness. In the example cited above about the strategies of de-politicization and politicization, for instance, the unit of analysis is not clearly pinpointed. His starting point seems to be a reconstruction of the fundamental argumentative framework underpinning the text. Reconstructing the argumentative

12. Quotation from the on-line available version: <https://www.uni-trier.de/fileadmin/fb2/ANG/Linguistik/Stubbs/stubbs-1997-whorfs-children.pdf>.

13. This is actually not the only suggestion he has to improve CDA. Others deal with analyses of text production and text reception, like the «ethnographic study of actual text-production» and the «study of text dissemination and audience reception», along the lines already set forth by Bell, Zipes and van Noppen (see Stubbs 1997).

line summing up the premises and the conclusion, however, is not the best way to start the analysis of a text, be it only for the reason that summaries are somehow arbitrary and often questionable. Different researchers could make very different summaries: some would be more analytic, others more synthetic; in addition, rarely a text contains just one fundamental claim.

If CDA cares for maintaining argumentative analysis within its toolbox, as I would suggest, some firmer unit of analysis has to be identified, to make the process of analysis a replicable one. A solution could be to implement the Toulmin's layout for arguments¹⁴ (1958), which is apt for splitting analytical syllogisms as well as everyday arguments. Notoriously, such layout is made up of three basic elements, the *claim* (answering the question: what do you want to say?), the *data* (the antecedent information) and the *warrant*, the rule bridging and making legitimate the passage from data to claim (the answer to the question: how do you get there?)¹⁵. Three more elements complete the layout: the *qualifier* (qualitative or quantitative), mostly an adverb like, possibly, probably, necessarily, strengthening or weakening the validity of the claim; the *backing*, covering the warrant's back with additional ground for the rule; and the *rebuttal* (or recusation), bearing possible objections to the claim or considering in advance possible exceptions to the claim or to the warrant (for a more detailed description of the model see Corradi 2012).

From a procedural viewpoint, the application of the Toulmin's model turns into a standardized step by step analysis. To start, the researcher has to identify all the distinct claims contained in a text, listing them in columns (for instance, in an excel file) as separate cases. Then, for each claim, he/she can proceed in splitting the arguments alleged to each claim, distinguishing every element of the model and listing them in rows. So, for instance, a claim can come with one or more data, no warrants, one backing, and one qualifier. This allows, at the end of the analysis, for a variety of *tallying* operations regarding the whole text (considering results in columns). On the basis of such quantitative outcomes, a text can therefore result rich or poor in data, warrants, and other elements of the Toulmin's layout, providing the research with an array of clues to evaluate the quality of an argumentative performance. Obviously, it is hard to set once and for all a quantitative threshold to distinguish between poorly or richly argued claims: instead, it is up to the

14. The idea of a methodology drawing on the Toulmin's model first came from Franco Rositi, who dealt with argumentative analysis both at the theoretical and empirical levels since the early 1980's (see Rositi 1982). During the last decade we have been working together to revisit and apply the Toulmin's layout to different kinds of texts, within a research project of national interest devoted to assess the richness and quality of factual and normative public argumentation (See Rositi 1986, 2008, 2013; and Corradi 2012, 2013, 2016).

15. Since the warrant is the «heart» of an argument, it is not surprising that many Toulmin' scholars (see Klumpp 2006; Kock 2006; Verheij 2006) and other CD analysts (for instance see Govier 2010) have focused on this element of the layout, often with classification purposes. I also engaged in a specific study of normative warrants, trying to distinguish both between value-using and value-establishing arguments (see Corradi 2016).

researcher's experience to establish when a claim is in need of arguments (as it is the case for most normative, prescriptive claims) and when argumentative grounds are not necessarily required (as it is the case when a claim just names a well known state of facts). In any case, when a text in its wholeness shows very low quantities of warrants and data, the likelihood that the speaker prefers an assertive style is very high. Moreover, this procedure of analysis permits a systematic inquiry into the eventual presence of argumentative fallacies, testing the appropriateness and logical validity of each explicit or implicit warrant (where the fallacies typically nest, more or less hidden¹⁶). Empirical examples of analyses of this kind are displayed in Corradi (2012, 2016), where the argumentative richness and quality of arguments are tested with regard to public speeches about Islamic Terrorism by several political leaders and to speeches meant to restore trust after the 2008 financial and economic crisis by politicians and economists. Moreover, the reader will find a detailed presentation of the methodological procedure – with one complete step by step analysis of Obama's acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize – in Rositi ed. (Corradi 2013, 49-100).

To sum up, the application of the Toulmin's layout within the CDA approach would provide some methodological advantages. First, it allows for a clear identification of the unit of analysis (especially if the analyst resists the temptation of making summaries, but follows with patience and discipline the letter of the text in search for distinct claims). Second, it encompasses the possibility that the speaker/writer considers in advance possible objections to his/her claim (would not this be useful to evaluate the degree of politicization in the examples presented above?). Third, matching a qualitative and quantitative analytical approach, it permits to evaluate both the argumentative richness and quality of texts. Finally, these methodological opportunities are available independently from any kind of evaluation of the truth (or validity) of the premises (which is, by contrast, crucial in Fairclough's analysis).

Such methodological advantages are in part due to the fact that the unit of analysis (the claim) in the Toulmin's layout is placed within a *structure* of other interconnected elements, whose *position* can vary in contingent arguments, but whose *functions* remain the same. This aspect of the model fits particularly well with CDA declared aims, in particular, with the ambition of discovering latent or semi-latent structures. In the Toulmin's model such aim is achieved through the identification of explicit and implicit warrants (the «rules» legitimating the passage from data to claim) and by means of a systematic check for fallacies in the warrants.

16. For a very clear catalogue of argumentative fallacies, and a reasoned classification, I suggest the book by D'Agostini (2010), who is equally concerned with the quality of public arguments.

This is certainly not the only possible meaning of «hidden structures», neither the only method fostering their eventual discovery. The next paragraph displays a different method to unveil hidden structures, drawing on Propp's narrative analysis.

3.2 *The search for latent structures*

V. Propp's brilliant inquiry into the origins of Russian folktale and fairy tales (1927-8) confirms that dealing systematically with a fixed unit of analysis can be heuristic and can lead to the discovery of latent or semi-hidden structures (structures that are not immediately «visible» to a text reader/listener, but can nonetheless be unveiled as stable meaning-connections). In the clear exposition of his research aims, corpus material and methodology, Propp makes explicit that in order to study the morphology of tales one has first to extract and then to classify their «basic components». In Propp's perspective, such basic elements are, in the case of tales, the «functions of the dramatis personae», where «function is understood as an *act* of a character, defined *from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action*» (1968, 8; *italics is mine*). This methodological choice is of great interest for CDA methodology as well; consequently, it deserves further comments. On the one hand, the «functions» are independent from the contingent and specific modalities of the action itself and also from the specific characters that embody them. In fact, as Propp stresses: «Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale». On the other hand, however, similar acts can have different meanings and thus «an action cannot be defined apart from its place in the course of narration» (1968, 8). Hence, Propp's choice of the unit of analysis has two virtues, in my view: it is *semantically related* to the narrative structure of the text, and at the same time, it is *independent* from its contingent enactments/realizations. In other words, it is *abstract enough* to allow operations of classification, but *not too abstract* to allow for excessive interpretative freedom by the analyst (every skilled analyst would more or less agree on the identification of the single functions).

Keeping stable the unit of an analysis, and making systematic comparisons within the selected corpus¹⁷, Propp manages to discover that: 1) «the number of functions known to the fairy tale is *limited*»; 2) «the *sequence* of functions is always *identical*»; 3) «all fairly tales are of *one type in regard to their structure*» (*ivi, italics are mine*). From a cognitive viewpoint, these findings correspond to *the discov-*

17. Propp's comparative design shares some analogies with the kind of «intertextuality» Fairclough called for more than two decades ago (on this point, see especially Fairclough 1992b).

Figure 1 Propp's main discoveries with regard to the morphology of fairy tales

		Fight with the antagonist and his defeat	
		Yes	No
The difficult task and its accomplishment	Yes	I type	IV type
	No	III type	II type

Initial functions (damage) Flight victory Final functions
 —————
 Task accomplishment

ery of a hidden paradigmatic structure¹⁸, a recursive framework that is not immediately detachable reading only one or a few fairy tales, nor comparing them without a systematic attention to their basic components (the functions of dramatis personae) and their specific sequence of occurrence.

The discovery that the fairy tales are «monotypical», however, did not refrain Propp to a further inquiry into their possible variations. In fact, he noted that there are two couples of functions that are mostly mutually exclusive: the fight-victory and the task-accomplishment sequences of events (both located in between the initial and final functions sets¹⁹). Thus, as the figure below shows, he was able to identify four different types of possible plots (where types III and IV are decisively the most common in his sample).

In this way, Propp was also able to establish where and to what degrees the storytellers enjoyed narrative freedom and where not: their fantasy can work in the choice of the functions to be used (but only to a limited extent), in the way a certain function can be performed (provided that the function is recognizable as such) and finally, with higher degrees of liberty in describing the characters identities.

Of course, Propp's final goal was purely cognitive, not a critical one²⁰. His «hidden

18. One should remember that according to Levi-Strauss, the task of the structural analyst is to discover latent structures past or through the superficialities of texts, in search for the underlying pattern of organization. For comments on analogies and differences between Propp's and Levi-Strauss structural analysis see the «Introduction» to the second edition of the *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, 1968, 1-6.

19. From a situation in which some damage occurs to the protagonist, to the conclusion when the damage is solved or overcome, the middle set of functions allows for two possible, different developments: one in which the hero engages in a fight-victory story against the antagonist, or one in which he faces a task and struggles to accomplish it.

20. Notably, the very popular critique of Propp's work by Bremond – his disregard for the moral lesson transmitted by

structures» are, so to say, innocuous (from a CDA perspective). This should be no hinder, however, to a reasoned acquisition of his valuable methodological lesson within CDA. He hints at a clearer and more systematic identification of the unit of analysis; he employs a comparative design and shows an exemplary discipline in the description of the method (such that it could be eventually replicated by every researcher interested to). At the same time, Propp's study invites CDA analysts to look more systematically for "latent power relationships", identifying recursive frameworks of dominance within linguistic functions and possibly reaching a classification. Van Dijk (2009) has already moved some steps along this line, in his latest socio-cognitive analyses of racist discourses (in Wodak and Mayer 2009, 63-86), identifying typical language polarizations between «us» and «them».

3.3 Conclusive remarks: unmasking the ambiguous meaning of «obvious»

This leads me finally to a critical discussion of the concept of «obvious». In my opinion, CDA analysts should seriously face the objection that their supposed findings are just a few steps beyond the obvious: a charge that is not so far from claiming that CDA is substantially redundant (see Toolan 1997 and Jones 2007). As I have already anticipated in the introduction, the charge of belaboring the obvious can be declined along two different semantic directions. One has to do with CDA tendency to find in texts empirical/linguistic proofs of what was already implied in the theoretical premises (the existence of power relationships in society that are reflected and reinforced through language use). Bad-tempered critics could go so far to compare CDA circular tendency to hide the treasure under the bush and to go and find it, after having pretended to look for it extensively. I am in favor of a much milder version of this objection, believing that problem-oriented empirical research cannot do without some theoretical assumptions. It is certainly not a matter of changing from the outset CDA epistemological approach from a top-down to a bottom-up one, not to say to dismiss its valuable «problem-oriented» approach (naturally, a problem-oriented approach is not necessarily a deductive one!). I would instead work on an improvement of the methodology and on the standardization of the analytical procedure, along the lines suggested in the paragraph dedicated to the Toulmin's model. Such standardization should make the process of analysis replicable and inter-subjectively controllable.

In addition, I would warmly recommend to analysts within CDA to focus on normative and prescriptive claims, whose argumentation is especially important in political proposals and economic policies. I have moved some steps in this direc-

fairy tales – dramatically fails to recognize Propp's methodological accuracy in keeping fixed and stable the unit of analysis.

tion in an empirical analysis of the Obama's acceptance speech for the Nobel Price for Peace, working on a classification of the warrants and distinguishing between value-using and value-establishing arguments (Corradi 2016). It is furthermore of great importance, if one works with an initial substantive hypothesis, not to discard or omit eventual textual counterproofs to the supposed confirmative outcomes. Using the Toulmin's model, when the test regards the poorness of an argumentation, this means to make any effort to find out valid implicit elements, especially warrants and backings; when at stake is the argumentative quality, to evaluate the gravity of each fallacy within the context of speech delivery (audience included). The other possible declination of the charge of belaboring the obvious is a bit more slippery, especially if it is phrased through the question «obvious for whom?». One (too) simplistic way out would be to differentiate among different audiences/recipients/targets of CDA findings, drawing somewhere and somehow a (discriminatory) watershed between those who are deemed able to unmask the power strategies hidden through the lines, and those who are supposed not to. Van Dijk (2003) seems to hint at this way when he states that «discourse analysts conduct research in solidarity and cooperation with dominated groups» (353).

The problem is instead, in my view, to settle what kind of «obvious» is redundant to unveil (for instance because it is innocuous) and what kind instead is socially useful to unmask through CDA. I have no fast or definitive solution to this dilemma, but I certainly think that not any power-relation is dangerous, neither that its linguistic embodiment is necessarily effective. *When* this is the case (under which conditions), is probably a more interesting question, one that could hopefully ignite new discussion within CDA.

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