Theories and Concepts in Critical Discourse Studies:
Facing Challenges, Moving Beyond Foundations

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Abstract

This article emphasises a need to devote more attention to concepts and theories in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). We are particularly eager to emphasise that CDS theory of the second decade of 2000s – often known as the post-crisis era or as the period of 'late neoliberalism'– faces a number of challenges that are both real-world (social) and academic in nature. On the one hand, CDS theory must be reconsidered from the point of view of socio-political challenges and the necessity to tackle new (public and private) discourses as well as their trajectories that no longer undergo the once long-standing socio-political or politico-economic dynamics. On the other hand, we see the need for embracing new ways of theorising and conceptualising discourse in late modernity in the wider landscape of the social theories and their engagement with discourse. The article emphasises the need to address some voices that come from beyond the 'core' CDS community with the aim to enrich CDS theory by ideas that would help us move the latter beyond its foundations and face socio-political and academic challenges ahead.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, Crisis/ Crises, critical theory, Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, Discourse Studies, Social Theory, Post-Foundationalism

1. CDS: Beyond Critical Discourse Analysis

Over thirty years since its original inception as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by a small group of scholars, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) is nowadays practiced across the globe and has established itself as a widely recognised approach in (critical) social research. Since its beginnings in the late 1980s (see Wodak and Meyer 2015), CDS has become widely recognisable as the key area of critical social studies that looks at how language-in-use – most commonly defined via the central concept of discourse – changes as well as controls and shapes contemporary society. As such, CDS has always focused on 'the substantively linguistic and discursive nature of social relations of power in contemporary societies' (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 272) and at how power relations operate (and are contested) in and through discourse Consequently, CDS has been associated with scholars among whose central inspirations are critical theory, interdisciplinarity, linguistics. Among CDS practitioners, one can find scholars working on language-oriented text-based studies of

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different type. They have, in most areas of CDS, conducted their work an in-depth and systematic way while many social theoreticians were still only vaguely calling for a need to place the detailed analysis of discourse at the centre of critical social analysis.

Although in most cases still faithful to its original interests in, in particular, issues of language, power and ideology (see van Dijk 1984; Wodak 1989, 1996; Fairclough 1995; Fairclough and Wodak 1997), CDS has come a long way, theoretically as well as analytically, since its inception. Initially, CDA was mainly associated with explorations of what has been seen as 'lexico-grammatical meaning in written and mass-mediated texts' (Blommaert et. al. 2001: 5). These endeavours have established themselves through the 1990s and onwards within a set of widely recognised research traditions or 'schools'. These have included, most notably, Norman Fairclough's (neo-) Marxist and post-Foucauldian 'pragma-dialectic' approach (for the most recent account, see the new introduction in Fairclough 2014), the Discourse-Historical Approach spearheaded by Ruth Wodak rooted in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and text-linguistics (see Wodak 2001, Krzyżanowski 2010), Teun van Dijk's cross-disciplinary socio-cognitive tradition of CDA bridging linguistics, (cognitive) psychology and communication studies (van Dijk 2008) as well as the Social-Semiotic approach – also known as Multimodal CDS – rooted in systemic-functional linguistics and initiated by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (Kress and van Leeuwen 2013; van Leeuwen 2008; Machin 2013).

However, since the 2000s, CDA researchers have often recognised the limitations of their ideas and analyses and have progressively worked towards developing CDA into a broader field of research now known as the CDS (cf. van Dijk 2007, Wodak and Meyer 2015, cf. also Graham, 2002). The latter, while still drawing on many of CDA's original ideas (above), clearly reaches beyond its traditional 'schools' or 'trends' (for overview and recent developments, cf. Krzyżanowski 2010; Wodak & Meyer 2016). At the same time, while some areas of CDA have remained quite faithful to their original interests (such as e.g. the solely textual analyses still visible in works of Fairclough 2006, 2009) – other schools of CDS – most notably the Discourse-Historical, the Socio-Cognitive and the Multimodal approach – have all postulated the movement towards new types of analyses. They have all consequently called for more contextually oriented and actor-related types of analysis (see van Dijk 2008, Krzyżanowski 2011) as well as emphasised the need to incorporate multiple forms of semiosis and paths of mediation into critical-analytic explorations (Machin 2013).

2. Theories and Concepts in CDS: Towards an Outline of Challenges

Although often (unjustly) perceived as such, CDS is by all means much more than a method or a 'type' of analysis. Among the key distinctive features of CDS have always been its coupling of analytical approaches and apparatuses with well-defined sets of theories and concepts. The former and the latter surely varied across different schools and traditions of CDS that chose to put various emphases on different theoretical and conceptual inspirations (for the most recent outline, see Wodak and Meyer 2015: 18). Yet, they have formed a certain common ground for critical-analytic thinking, drawing on critical theory and other fields. These have included, inter alia, Foucauldian theories of discourse, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, Basil Bernstein's Sociology of Language, insights from Cognitive and

Social Psychology as well as diferent strands of linguistic theory including text linguistics, systemic-functional linguistics, pragmatics and/or argumentation studies.

Indeed, the very strict link between theories and concepts on the one hand, and methods and pathways of analysis on the other, has been among the reasons why CDA, and later CDS, have often been misunderstood, and that both in some areas of social research to which it aspired and in linguistics in which it mainly originated. While generations of social researchers have grown to be accustomed to discourse as an element of grand-theoretical thinking about society – as in, e.g., post-Marxist and post-Foucauldian traditions – they have often neglected to see that the concept of discourse as requiring transposition onto systematic analytical language or the focus on language as an object of the eventual analysis. CDS has therefore often appeared as odd for those who became interested in CDS as 'just' a method while often discarding the fact that CDS analyses come with part and parcel of their theoretical foundations and their rather strictly set perception of discourse as a central conceptual (as well as analytic) category. On the other hand, within linguistics, from which CDA to large extent originated, many scholars have failed to see the need to couple linguistic theory and analysis to wider social-theoretical concepts. Accordingly, the latter were regularly viewed by linguists as obsolete and superfluous and as an unnecessary macro-level ('socio') distortion of the micro-level ('linguistic') analysis.

Standing against those needs and often disciplinarily conditioned expectations, CDS has famously been proposed both as a 'social theory of discourse' (Fairclough 1995) *and* as including methods of analysis. It has consequently showed that theoretical and conceptual claims of CDS are well coupled to its extra-academic aims (incl. its socially-engaged perception of 'critique'; cf. Wodak 2001) and must always be operationalized and eventually transformed into the analytical language and de facto analysis of discourses and texts.

Yet what remains to large extent true about the theory-to-analysis connection in CDS is the fact that, while earlier on we have seen many (often heated) debates about theories and concepts in CDS (for the most recent example, see e.g. Billig 2008; Fairclough 2008), recent years have seen CDS being mainly driven by analytical needs that often preceded theoretical or conceptual concerns. CDS has thereby refined its 'core' analytical approaches (see, inter alia, van Dijk 1998, 2008; Reisigl and Wodak 2015; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2008). It has also progressively called for new, often integrative forms of analysis (see, inter alia, Mautner 2009; Krzyżanowski 2011; Hart 2010; Machin 2013; Sum and Jessop 2013) that linked critical-analytic explorations with other approaches to discourse analysis in linguistics and the social sciences. While this has surely been very profitable for CDS – as it advanced its analytical capacities and the anyway broad catalogue of analytical approaches – it has created a certain gap in CDS theory which has been, it seems, revisited and reconsidered much less often than CDS' analytical approaches.

Therefore, this Special Issue of *Discourse & Communication* on '*Theoretical and Conceptual Challenges in Critical Discourse Studies*' emphasises a need to devote more attention to concepts and theories in CDS. We are particularly eager to emphasise that CDS theory of the second decade of 2000s – often known as the post-crisis era or as the period of 'late neoliberalism'– faces a number of challenges that are both real-world or social and academic

in nature. Willing to tackle such duality of challenges, papers that follow this introductory essay stress that CDS theory must be revisited from an equally dual perspective.

On the one hand, it must be reconsidered, one may say first and foremost, from the point of view of socio-political challenges and the necessity to tackle new types of 'discursive change' and 'discursive shifts' (Fairclough 1992; Krzyżanowski 2013) and *the new/changing nature/character of contemporary public discourses*. These changes and shifts include, among many, the rise of 'post-heroic' societies and the latter's distinct constructions of common pasts; the increasing discontinuity and fragmentation of public and other modes of discourse; the role of technology as ever more persuasive and its connection to and effect on discourses; the collapse of democracy within formally stable democratic regimes; and, of course most recently, the financial and economic crisis and the further development of neoliberalism as the late modernity's central politic-economic ideology have all changed very profoundly the dynamics of discursive practices. All these, we claim, no longer follow the once long-standing socio-political or politico-economic dynamics but call for new ways of theorising and conceptualising discourse in the late modernity.

On the other hand, yet certainly in a close connection to the real-world-induced needs and social dynamics of discourse outlined above, we also see a pressing need to *rethink CDS theoretical foundations in the wider landscape of the recently growing social theory of discourse*. The last decade or so has certainly been the period when CDS has often become challenged by theoretically oriented approaches to discourse (e.g. from within non-CDS post-Marxist or post-Foucauldian approaches) which to some extent promised to offer relevant theoretical and conceptual depth allegedly missing in CDS (see, inter alia, Egan-Sjölander and Gunnarsson-Payne 2011). It is hence essential to address some voices that come from beyond the 'core' CDS community with the aim to irritate, stimulate and/or enrich CDS theory by ideas that would help us move the latter beyond its CDA foundations and face the current socio-political and academic challenges ahead of CDS.

While we recognize that some notable instances of theoretical reflection have recently been indeed undertaken in CDS, it must be noted that they have mainly been proposed within the traditional 'schools' of CDA (cf. e.g. van Dijk 2008; Forchtner 2011; Forchtner and Tominc 2012). Otherwise, it seems, it has now been over a decade since a general debate about theories and concepts of CDA/CDS – and their applicability in interdisciplinary social research across the social sciences – has taken place (cf. Wodak and Weiss 2002). To be sure, we thus see a need to rethink the theoretical and conceptual apparatus of CDS and to make it more relevant to the current, rapid and often abrupt social dynamics. The latter denotes, in particular, the emergence of increasingly fragmented discourses in both public and private settings and the ongoing academic work on how discourse can be theorised and conceived of in late-modern neoliberal conditions.

3. Outline of the Special Issue

This Special Issue opens up with a paper by Felicitas Macgilchrist on '*Fissures in the Discourse-Scape: Critique, Rationality and Validity in Post-Foundational Approaches to CDS*'. In her article, the author argues for a broad understanding of CDS – surely beyond the traditional limit of CDA. Macgilchrist emphasises that such a CDS must move beyond its

theoretical and conceptual (mainly CDA) foundations and incorporate 'post-foundational' thinking in discourse studies. Macgilchrist claims that in the context of mediatisation and other types of late modern discursive dynamics, the analysis of current construction of social orders requires new theoretical concepts and new thinking about issues such as *critique, rationality and validity*. While in search of those, Macgilchrist argues, CDS should not forward its ideas in separation from post-structuralist discourse theory but must move to integrate with post-foundational thinking of, inter alia, the Essex School of Ernesto Laclau and others. It should also move towards what has been called 'positive discourse analysis' i.e. the analysis of resistance or solidarity discourses and moments of hope that would help emphasise the 'positive' social impact of CDS work on contemporary society.

The notion of 'critique' highlighted in the first paper is indeed also central to the second article on '*Discourse Analysis as Immanent Critique: the Possibilities and Limits of normative Critique in Empirical Discourse Studies*' by Benno Herzog. In the paper, the author argues that in CDS there is little debate about the possibility – or even outright necessity – for making transparent the ground(s) of one's *normative critique* and the role of normative positioning in undertaking discourse research. Herzog claims that one of the key solutions to such state of the art would be to revisit the theoretical notion of *immanent critique*, originally found in post-Hegelian theory and in particular in Marxism and Critical Theory, in order to eradicate the theoretical deficiencies of critique found in CDS, or more specifically in CDA's originally prevalent Foucauldian rooting. Herzog proposes to further explore the notion of immanent critique and points to the fact that the former carries both normative- and method-related ideas. He claims that especially the normativity needs closer scrutiny and can prove fruitful to the wider field of empirical discourse research that includes not only CDS but also, inter alia, the so-called sociological discourse analysis.

In the third paper of this Special Issue, Bernhard Forchtner and Christian Schneickert debate '*Collective Learning in Social Fields: Bourdieu, Habermas and Critical Discourse Studies*'. By highlighting relevance of Bourdieu, Forchtner and Schneickert address his reflexive sociology as a key social theory of late 20th and early 21st century that has been largely missing from the theoretical foundations of CDS. The authors claim that the increasing heterogeneity and ever more conflictual character of late-modern discourses make a turn towards Bourdieu's theory – with its key categories of habitus, field and capital – particularly necessary if not indispensable for CDS. Forchtner and Schneickert argue that Bourdieuian categories offer a conceptual apparatus to grasp contemporary conflicts in increasingly differentiated societies consisting of (as Bourdieu argued, increasingly heteronomous) fields, with different positions and 'rules of the game'. In arguing for an incorporation of many of Bourdieu's salient notions, the authors consider possible contradictions with theoretical foundations of Critical Theory and in particular the Habermassian rooting of central areas of CDS such as the Discourse-Historical Approach. Here, the notion of *collective learning processes* is discussed and conceptualised, thereby introducing a concept able to bring together theory and analysis.

In his article on '*Recontextualisations of Neoliberalism & The Increasingly Conceptual Nature of Discourse: Challenges for Critical Discourse Studies*', Michał Krzyżanowski points to concept-oriented discursive change as one of the central features of neoliberal

public discourses. Focussing on the process of the *increasingly conceptual nature of discourse*, his article argues that the concept-driven tendency – evident in policies, but also in media and political genres – necessitates new theoretical (and analytical) tools in CDS. Krzyżanowski argues that, on the one hand, incorporation of theoretical ideas from within conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) into CDS is necessary to highlight the role of strategic use of concepts in legitimising the logic of top-down regulation. On the other hand, it is also argued for an in-depth rethinking of the ways in which CDS approaches the conception of *recontextualisation* and suggests a close re-reading of the original meaning of that concept as proposed by Basil Bernstein. As is argued by Krzyżanowski, both theoretical insights might help CDS tackle the conceptual dynamics in/of discourse by, inter alia, identifying ideological ontologies of contemporary public and regulatory discourses. They may also help conceptualise and scrutinise discourses in which social practice is often regulated and recontextualised and where the image of non-agentic 'invisible' social change allows for legitimisation of the often-negative social and politico-economic dynamics.

The final two papers of the Special Issue tackle the salience of conceptualising the relationship of language and image that has moved to the centre-stage of CDS theory and analysis in the context of contemporary multiplicity and diversity of channels and modes of mediation and mediatisation. At first, in his paper '*On the Need for Social and Affordance Driven Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis*', David Machin argues for a necessity for CDS to depart from the strictly linguistic traditions of understanding the relationship between text and image. He argues that the field of multimodality – the name most commonly used as a description for multimodal, social-semiotic analysis – is emerging as a field in its own right yet remains fragmented both internally, with a range of divergent core interests, and externally from academic fields which have long dealt with the topics to which it is turning its interest. Machin looks at some of the key ideas from the wider visual studies and reflects on what kind of multimodal approach best aligns with the needs of CDS. He eventually argues for an affordance based approach and one driven by the social – and not by need to model on the basis of language.

On the other hand, and to some extent contrary to proposals made above, in the final paper of this Special Issue Chris Hart argues for a more thorough linguistic positioning of the multimodal approaches in CDS, especially with the aim moving beyond their prevalently systemic-functional roots., In the article '*The Visual Basis of Linguistic Meaning and its Implications for Critical Discourse Studies: Integrating Cognitive Linguistic and Multimodal Approaches*', Hart presents an argument from Cognitive Linguistics which suggests that understanding language involves the construction of multimodal mental representations, the properties of which can be approached within frameworks of multimodal social semiotics and the wider multimodal CDS. Specifically, his paper shows how spatial organisation and orientation feature in linguistic understanding of certain grammatical constructions and, consequently, what evaluative functions those constructions covertly confer. Hart claims that, traditionally, the direction of influence between linguistic and multimodal forms of discourse analysis has been unidirectional with the former informing the latter but not the other way around and calls for a reversal of this orthodoxy.

In sum, and returning to the very beginning of this article, we view these papers as a very promising, fruitful input into a much-needed debate within and beyond CDS; a debate concerning the need for empirical analysis which is not only language-in-use oriented but also theoretically well-informed and conceptually rich. Keeping in mind the aforementioned societal changes, evermore rapid and volatile as they are, we hope that readers will benefit from the following pages and will themselves feel encouraged to engage in debates on CDS and its theory and concepts. The field of CDS, in order to remain relevant in the light of ongoing social change, will certainly require them.

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