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Ethics in Critical Discourse Analysis
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Abstract

This paper analyses influential approaches to CDA using an ethical lens that employs a synthesis of Kenneth Burke’s theoretical perspectives on language as action. It argues that CDA is an unavoidably moralistic pursuit with explicit aims of beneficially transforming social and political systems to make them more equal and democratic. The paper briefly addresses well aired criticisms of CDA based on its moralistic core and conclude that they miss the point by having made a Scientistic assessment of a Dramatistic pursuit. Theorists analysed are van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), Fairclough (1989/2001), Wodak (2001), van Dijk (1999), Lemke (2005), and Fairclough and Fairclough (2013).
Introduction

My aim here is to provide an explicit inventory of the various ethics underpinning influential approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and then to follow through the implications of those ethics for analysis. I have argued elsewhere that CDA is necessarily a ‘moralistic’ approach to analysis (Graham, 2016). That aspect is explicit in the word “critical”, which means judgmental. That being the case, as critical analysts we had best make the basis of our judgements explicit. I note the well-aired arguments, such as that, for example, between Henry Widdowson (1995) and Norman Fairclough (1996) that turn in part on the notion of CDA’s moral orientation. Such criticisms of CDA are exemplified by Hugh Tyrwhitt-Drake (1999) who says

that critical discourse analysis is in danger of undermining its claim to disciplinary status by taking a cavalier approach to the data, by adopting some of the practices it identifies as being manipulative, and by attempting to establish its own hegemony. Above all, its major moralizing element betrays an interest not so much in finding the truth as in proclaiming it (p. 1081, my emphasis).

Tyrwhitt-Drake exemplifies the kinds of critique that I think entirely miss the point of CDA, if only by criticising the field for moralising by moralising (in so far as he seems to judge moralising as a bad thing). Of course CDA is moralistic. It says so in the title. Similar confusions are often evident in the various analyses that go under the label of Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) (e.g. Martin, 2004; cf. Bartlett, 2012; Rogers & Wetzel, 2013) based on the idea that by being ‘positive’ PDA is somehow the opposite of critical CDA. But one can be both critical and “positive”, which is simply to say that a judgement (kritikos) can be “in favour of” (positive), “against” (negative), or a bit of both in some cases (e.g. Rogers & Wetzel, 2013). To make a judgement about something is to evaluate it according to some standard or other. Sometimes the evaluation can be a simple binary, say, true or false, or sometimes a mixture of both, when a judgement is made according to truth standards. But when we discuss the way people address each other; how they deploy linguistic and other meaning making resources to achieve personal, social, and political ends; and about what motivates such actions in respect of their descriptive, evaluative, and persuasive ends, we are into a far more complex terrain than that of “mere” truth and facts. Which is not to say truth is unimportant. It is entirely necessary. However, truth is only one kind of judgement
we can make about an utterance, and then only about formally propositional utterances. I would go so far as to say that for CDA, truth is a category of evaluation that only becomes meaningful in relation to some other category, such as obligation, desirability, appropriateness, or importance (Graham, 2006; Lemke, 1998).

Let me offer some sentences from Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) to exemplify:

> Immigration is severely restricted in almost all countries of the European Union and elsewhere in western Europe, and the ‘European Fortress’ is no longer a phrase but a reality. Besides official political measures to ‘curb’ the immigration of unwanted Others, European societies have begun to show signs of deteriorating human rights. Attacks on immigrants have become common and widespread, and are no longer routinely covered in the media. More-or-less subtle discrimination and everyday racism in housing, employment, health care, legislation and policing have become general practice. (1999, p. 84)

The sentences are all formally a series of propositions summarising evidence presented later in the piece. But from a critical perspective the truth of the propositions is not their most significant aspect for analysis. It is, rather, that they describe political phenomena that the authors clearly evaluate as being important, socially unjust, and as adding impetus to further injustices. Their point is that the trend they describe is unethical. It hurts vulnerable people directly and reinforces attitudes that cause further harm. So the procedure in this specific case of analysis is to choose a selection of texts involved in an important or exemplary social problem, foreground their ethical implications, evaluate them according to those critical standards, and then present those evaluations in propositional form as findings. A secondary aspect of critical analysis in this example is its technical dimension: it shows precisely how injustice is enacted in the language of Austrian immigration bureaucracy. Both those critical aspects are at a far remove from the grammatical or linguistic “facts of the matter” that scholars such as Tyrwhitt-Drake want to demand of CDA (although the “how” is closer than the “what” in this case). CDA cannot be concerned primarily with truth except insofar as the truths it concerns itself with have implications for the ways in which people act, including the misuses of truth that affect how people act towards each other and the world.
I frame what follows with that basic distinction in mind. It is a distinction that Kenneth Burke (1961) defines as being between ‘Scientistic’ and ‘Dramatistic’ modes of analysis (1961, pp. 38-39). Burke defines Scientism as having to do with ‘some essentially epistemological question’, with the ‘is’ and ‘is-nots’ of language. Dramatism is concerned with the analysis of action and the ‘do’ and ‘do-nots’ of language (pp. 38-39). That is, Dramatism begins ‘with problems of act’ while Scientism begins ‘with problems of knowledge or perception’ (p. 39). Burke notes that the two perspectives overlap, with either approach ‘encroaching upon the territories claimed by the other’, but points out that ‘the way in is different’ (p. 39). He is also clear that this is ‘not necessarily to imply a distrust of science as such’, but more that ‘language in particular and human relations in general can be most directly approached in terms of action rather than in terms of knowledge’ (p. 38).

Burke’s Dramatism underpins his perspective on language as ‘symbolic action’ (1966). He explicitly distinguishes between action and motion: ‘Behaviouristic terminologies of motives would reduce “action” to “motion”, whereas Dramatism holds that “action” is a more inclusive realm, not capable of adequate description in terms of “motion” only. Action is to motion as mind is to brain’ (1961, p. 39). The distinguishing difference between the two term comes back to Burke’s definition of ‘Act’: ‘any verb, no matter how specific or how general, that has connotations of consciousness or purpose falls under this category’ (1945/1962, p. 14). Such a definition leads analysis directly into the realm of the ethical because

*Action involves character, which involves choice; and the form of choice attains its perfection in the distinction between Yes and No (between *thou shalt* and *thou shalt not*). Though the concept of sheer “motion” is non-ethical, “action” implies the ethical (the human personality). Hence the obvious close relation between the ethical and the negatives of the Decalogue.*

(1961, p. 41)

I have discussed elsewhere the implications of Burke’s perspective for CDA and what it means to analyse discourse primarily as action (Author, 2016). When we see language as a subset of action more generally, we are able to begin analysing language as something that people do to and with each other, and to the world more generally. A Dramatistic perspective also necessarily emphasises the hortatory aspects of language and how they are implicated in other forms of action:
Morals, shaped by the forms and needs of action, become man's [sic] most natural implement when exhorting to action. As implicit in censorial words, they are the linguistic projection of our bodily tools and weapons. Morals are fists. An issue, raised to a plane of moral indignation, is wholly combative in its choice of means. From this point of view, the moral elements in our vocabulary are symbolic warfare. To the handling of complex cultural issues we bring the equipment of the jungle. (1935/1984, p. 192)

In what follows, I use Burke’s dramatism to show the various ethical approaches and assumptions that are evident in different approaches to CDA. I employ Burke’s Pentad (1945/1962) which helps to situate each ethical approach in relation to an overall site of action and its motivating elements. The categories of the Pentad are: Scene (in what setting did the act happen?), Act (what was done?), Agent (who did it?), Agency (what means were used to do it?), and Purpose (with what aim was the act done?). I am aware of the appearance of Attitude as an explanatory category in some of what follows. Burke sees attitude at times as ‘incipient act’, at others as ‘delayed action’, at others as ‘a characteristic of agent’ (1945/1962), at others yet again as a sixth aspect of Action, as part of a Hexad rather than a Pentad. I use the term here as an equivalent of the term “orientation”: that is, as a culturally inculcated framework of interpretation for framing action from within one particular cultural perspective rather than another and which, as a result, makes action along one path more likely than another.

Burke defines ‘orientation’ as any ‘general view of reality’ or ‘sense of relationships’ based in sustained experience (pp. 5-7). Any orientation is a ‘medium of communication’, a two-sided view of the world with ‘its goods and bads’, and therefore contains ‘the defects of its qualities and the qualities of its defects’ (p. 49). Hence any orientation ‘can go wrong’:

Consider, for instance, what conquest over the environment we have obtained throughout powers of abstraction, of generalisation; and then consider the stupid national or racial wars which have been fought precisely because these abstractions were mistaken for realities. No slight critical ability is required for one to hate as his deepest enemy people thousands of miles away. When criticism can do so much for us it may have got us just to the point where we greatly require still better criticism. Though all organisms are critics in the sense that they interpret the signs about them, the experimental, speculative technique made available by
speech would seem to single out the human species as the only one possessing an equipment for going beyond the criticism of experience to a criticism of criticism. (1935/1984, p. 6)

That is the central paradox of any critical scholarship: critical engagement with any topic implies the need for still further criticism: counter-criticisms, transcendent criticisms, and dialectical criticisms, all of which CDA invariably seeks to achieve, regardless of which way “in” a specific approach to analysis might take. To the degree that critical scholarship achieves anything at all in the realm of practice, it generates a need for its achievements (or lack thereof) to be subject to just as stringent a regime of critique as produced the achievements (or failures) in the first place.

**Ethics, morals, and meaning**

I define ethics here as more or less codified patterns of moral evaluations. I use the term “morals” quite literally to mean established customs (morés) specific to various social and cultural groups. I also use the term evaluation as an active term that defines different cultures as such: that is, I see evaluations as being expressed in patterns of choice made by people in specific cultural contexts (Graham, 2004). Theoretically I situate my approach to ethical analysis in American Pragmatism to maintain a consistent focus on action and its effects in the world (Lemke, 1995; Peirce, 1903/1998; Lafollette, 2000; cf James, 1907/1995; Burke, 1945/1962; Blakesley, 1999). Pragmatist ethics rejects distinctions between action and consequence (deontology and consequentialism), and between action and motive (deontology and virtue ethics), primarily because of an assumption of continuity across the aspects of motive, act, and consequence (Lafollette, 2000, p. 412). As a non ‘criterial’ approach, Pragmatism rejects deontological (principle, rule-based, or rationalist) reasoning (p. 401), instead relying on a theorisation of ‘habits’ which, like Bourdieu’s (1990) theory of *habitus*, draws on Aristotle’s concept of *hexis* (Aristotle, 1953/1976). So there is no such thing as moral principles for Pragmatist philosophy; rather, there are only people acting in ways that can be judged as better or worse based on the habits they have developed through experience and the effects of those habits on the social fabric.

Habits are socially inculcated and so a Pragmatic ethics is socially focused and grounded in education:
The moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical with each other. The measure of the worth of the administration, curriculum, and methods of instruction of the school is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit. And the great danger which threatens school work is the absence of conditions which make possible a social spirit. (Dewey, 1916/2008, p. 307)

Habits are ‘shaped by prior experience’ and begin ‘in the instruction (either formal or by example) we received growing up’ (Lafollette, 2000, p. 403). For pragmatism ‘moral habits are like other habits’ and can therefore be taught, emphasised, de-emphasised, or discarded (p. 406). Since any act ‘can affect others interests’, all action has a moral dimension and the ‘aim of moral education is to make us habitually sensitive to the needs of others, and to shape the ways we think about, consider, and promote their interests’ (p. 407).

From a Pragmatic perspective, then, morals are socialised patterns of judgement and are therefore often sacred in magnitude for those who are socialised into them. Burke frames this as a form of secular piety:

Santayana has somewhere defined piety as loyalty to the sources of our being. Such notions should suggest that piety is not confined to the strictly religious sphere. ... The connection between our pieties and our childhood should seem clear, since in childhood we developed our first patterns of judgement, while the experiences of maturity are revisions and applications of these childhood patterns. (Burke, 1935/1984, p. 71)

‘Piety is the sense of what properly goes with what’ in a given social or cultural context (1935/1984, p. 74). Burke compares the pieties of the altar with those of the street gang, noting that one can be pious in terms of either or both. Piety is ‘a schema of orientation, since it involves the putting together of experiences. The orientation may be right or wrong; it can guide or misguide’ (p. 76). Given this, we can see CDA’s efforts to persuade along moral lines as labours of ‘secular conversion’ (1935/1984, Ch. 5) aimed at transforming one class of habitual judgements into another. But seeing piety as a secular concept also implies the need for a certain amount of respect for, or at least a “pietistic” understanding of, moral structures with which we disagree (which is to say, with which our own moral habits conflict). That is even more the case if we wish to change some other person or group in respect of the moral structures into which they have been socialised. Which is also to say we must understand them to change them. In what follows, I use the framework above to
identify the orientational basis evident in different and influential approaches to CDA and the sites of action they identify and at which they aim their efforts.

Summarising the analytical framework

1. Language is action;
2. Action involves choice;
3. Choice is ethical. It is driven by orientations that are socialised through pietistic practices and made manifest in habits, including habits of meaning making;
4. Different ethical motives arise from different aspects of Action

The following analysis proceeds through these features as they pertain to different approaches to CDA.

I should at this point offer an apology for the necessary coarseness with which I treat the material in the following analyses. They are analyses of Fairclough (1989/2001), Wodak (1999), van Dijk (1993), Lemke (2005), and Fairclough and Fairclough (2013). Even the selection of material is problematic. I have selected theorists from the field of CDA who have been most influential in my own work and are therefore approaches with which I am most familiar. There is some further support for my selection from the citation statistics, especially for Norman Fairclough and Teun van Dijk, whose citations are well past the 50,000 mark according to Google Scholar, well higher than others in the field. But even using that measure I might well have included the work of Ron Scollon, Malcolm Coulthard, Theo van Leeuwen, Robert Hodge, and Gunther Kress, all of whom are foundational scholars in the field with citations in the same range as Ruth Wodak and Jay Lemke whose work I analyse here. My hope is that because I am more familiar with these authors’ work than others I do not analyse here, any errors of analysis that might arise from such a necessarily “summary” selection of text as required by an article of this length might be lessened. That said, I am aware that my familiarity both with the scholars and their work might just as well obscure important aspects of ethical analysis, just as such a summary analysis must exclude significant amounts of their work along with the subtleties thereof.

Beginning at the beginning: Language and Power
While acknowledging the influence of earlier works, especially Hodge & Kress’s (1988) *Critical Linguistics*, Norman Fairclough’s *Language and Power* (1989/2001) (L&P) is widely taken to be a foundational work in CDA. I quote here from the 2001 edition. Fairclough names ‘two main purposes’ for the book, the first being ‘theoretical: to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power’ and the second being ‘practical: to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation’ (2001, p. 1). The primary concern of this early work is to show ‘the connections between language use and unequal relations of power’ (p. 1). Fairclough situates these connections primarily in the concept of ideology and the role of language in the social operation of ideologies:

Ideologies are closely linked to power, because the nature of the ideological assumptions embedded in particular conventions, and so the nature of those conventions themselves, depends on the power relations which underlie the conventions; and because they are a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted. Ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour, and the form of social behaviour where we rely most on ‘commonsense’ assumptions. But despite its importance for language, the concept of ‘ideology’ has very rarely figured in discussions of language and power within linguistics, which is itself symptomatic of their limitations. (1989/2001, p. 2)

There is a strong emphasis on Scene, construed here primarily as structure, as a motivating factor for critique (‘power’, ‘social relations’, ‘power relations’, ‘conventions’, and ‘differences of power’ are all Scenic elements). The ethical program of Fairclough’s early CDA is directed at transforming social injustice – which is perpetuated through social structure, power relations, and social relations – through a critique of ideology. In that sense the earliest ethical aims of CDA can be summarised as being about transformation of the Scene by achieving revelation for Agents, with the most important revelations being about ‘ideological assumptions embedded in ... conventions’ (another word for customs), which in turn rely for their reproduction on ‘power relations’.
It is worth noting that ideologies are placed here in relation to power at a fairly distant remove in causal terms. The conventions in which ideological assumptions are embedded depend on power to operate. The reverse must necessarily also be the case (that power depends on a beneficially functioning set of ideological assumptions). And while ‘ideologies are closely linked to language’ here, the reverse must also be the case, especially when it comes to articulating ‘assumptions’ of any kind. The role of ideologies in ‘legitimizing existing social relations’ must also be of major importance in terms of identifying a point at which critical linguistic pressure might be brought to bear upon the overall problem. All of this taken together indicates a set of logically interrelated terms, none of which have clear causal or temporal priority, each of which mutually implicates the others. Language, ideology, power relations, social relations, and ‘ordinary, familiar ways of behaving’ are all implicated as objects of critique, as a collective cause of injustice, and as an overall Scene.

Burke’s notion of Scene is useful here because, as he points out, those fields of study that emphasise their “... and society” aspect necessarily situate motivating issues in social context, thereby implicating social structure as motive force in the ongoing injustices at which analysis aims. The aim of transforming consciousness, with consciousness being ‘the first step towards emancipation’ (a Purpose of analysis), and given that ideological assumptions, power relations and the conventions that support those are interconnected parts of any social system, therefore implies an ethical aim of transforming social context in general. In linking ‘consciousness’ with ‘emancipation’ there is an assumption that truth and freedom are linked, a secular version of St John’s desideratum (John, 8:32).

To summarise the earliest ethical orientation of CDA we can therefore say it began as a critique of social structure and social conventions (Scene) focused on transforming consciousness (an attribute of Agents) with the aim (Purpose) of emancipating people from the unequal power relations endemic to the Scene through which they are oppressed. The means (Agency) of emancipation is the discourse analyst’s (Agent) critique of oppressive language practices, especially ideology. However from a transformational perspective we get a different view of CDA’s Dramatism. Because critique is aimed at linguistic conventions, those conventions are functionally means (Agency) of change because emancipation relies on the Scene itself being changed by Agents possessed of a transformed consciousness about how language figures in the reproduction of the Scene itself. In terms of secular piety,
it brings into contact revolutionary democratic morés and orientation with those of the Status Quo and can therefore be viewed as an ethics grounded in applied impiety, at least from the perspective of those who benefit from a generalised status that naturally privileges its most powerful classes (political, commercial, and bureaucratic in this case).

There is of course (and as always) another interpretation to be had here. By asserting a link between consciousness and emancipation, or to be more abstract, truth and freedom, with the stated aim of increasing social equality against established conventions and the power structures that support them, the ethics of L&P can be seen as exemplifying many key premises of enlightenment era Social Liberalism (Mill, 1859). Mill saw the maintenance of convention and conventional opinion (ideologies), along with the suppression of new ideas, as nothing more than a ‘convenient plan for having peace in the intellectual world, and keeping all things going on therein very much as they do already’ (social structures, social conventions) and with such a system in place ‘we can expect no fresh start, until we again assert our mental freedom’ (Mill, 1859, p. 32). CDA’s ethics (like Marx’s political economy) therefore share roots with what would later be called “neoliberalism” (which is of course anything but liberal). And though Mill is an occasional touchstone for neoliberal theory, that is simply to point out that critical Purpose can find itself in strange company, sometimes being transformed into means of oppression as with Mill’s (and Adam Smith’s) critical liberalism once transformed into “neoliberalism” and set to work in a global context. The need for the continual development of critique immediately presents itself as per Burke’s argument.

van Dijk’s socio-cognitive CDA

van Dijk (1993) is most recognised for his work on the links between language, society, psychology, discourse, and racism. He argues that ‘the most damaging forms of contemporary racism’ are ‘those of the ... [p]olitical, bureaucratic, corporate, media, educational, and scholarly elites’ who ‘control the most crucial dimensions and decisions of the everyday lives of immigrants and minorities: entry, residence, work, housing, education, welfare, health care, knowledge, information, and culture’ (2011, p. 145). According to van Dijk, the ‘system of racism’ has ‘two main subsystems’, a social systemic aspect comprised of ‘the symbolic elites, that is, those elites who literally have everything “to say” in society,
as well as their institutions and organizations’ (p. 146). The ‘second subsystem of racism is
cognitive’ and has ‘a mental basis consisting of biased models of ethnic events and
interactions, which in turn are rooted in racist prejudices and ideologies’ (p. 146). Racist
practices are not necessarily intentional, but only ‘presuppose socially shared and negatively
oriented mental representations of Us about Them’ (p. 146).

The point of the analysis of discourse structures ... is not only to examine the detailed features
of one type of discriminatory social practice, but especially also to gain deeper insight in the
way discourses express and manage our minds. It is especially this discourse–cognition
interface that explains how ethnic prejudices and ideologies are expressed, conveyed, shared,
and reproduced in society. (1993, p. 148)

van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model of racist discourse emphasises what Burke calls as a ‘Scene-
Agent ratio’ in which the location of motives for action, and therefore of the ethical centre
of analysis, is framed as a relationship between context (Scene) and psychology (as an
attribute of Agents). The nature of Scene in van Dijk’s model is twofold: on the one hand it is
a structural or ‘geometric’ means of placement (contextualising), with the structure being
dominated by elites and the organisations and institutions in which they work and over
which they exercise control. On the other hand, it is also an ‘ancestral’ category of context
in Burke’s terms (1945/1962, p. 23) because it identifies those institutions as being
historically generative of attitudes towards immigrants over extended periods of time. That
twofold description of context is an example of what Burke defines as the ‘strategic
ambiguity’ of definition wherein the contextual categories of the Pentad can change place
depending on perspective:

... under Agent one could place any personal properties that are assigned a motivational value,
such as “ideas,” “the will,” “fear,” “malice,” “intuition,” “the creative imagination”. ... Machines
are obviously instruments (that is, Agencies); yet in their vast accumulation they constitute the
industrial Scene, with its own peculiar set of motivational properties. War maybe treated as an
Agency, in so far as it is a means to an end; as a collective Act, subdivisible into many individual
Acts; as a Purpose, in schemes proclaiming a cult of war. For the man inducted into the army,
war is a Scene, the situation that motivates the nature of his training; and in mythologies, war is
an Agent, or perhaps better a super-agent, in the figure of the war God. We may think of voting
as an Act, and of the voter as an Agent; yet votes and voters are hardly other than a politician’s
medium or agency; or from another point of view, they are part of his Scene. (1945/1962, p. xx)
van Dijk’s transformation of motives occurs through a shift from a theoretical interplay of Scene and Agent as the basis of the problem to an analytical focus on Agency (or means):

Much earlier work [on racism] is content-analytical, that is, quantitative research into observable features of text or talk, such as how often members of a specific ethnic group are portrayed in the news or advertising and in what roles. These studies offer some general insight, but do not tell us in detail how exactly the media portray minorities or ethnic relations. Sophisticated discourse analysis is able to provide such a study, and also is able actually to explain why media discourses have the structures they have, and how these affect the minds of the recipients. It is only in such a way that we get insight into the fundamental role of the media in the reproduction of racism. (1993, p. 152)

Any talk of how we do things shifts analytical focus into the realm of Agency (means or technologies). That shifts the ethical emphasis and somewhat blurs motivational questions. It is clear that van Dijk sees racism as a form of injustice with negative consequences for immigrants as racism operates to ‘emphasize Our Good things and Their Bad things’ (p. 147). But by situating the ethical motives of racism in a system characterised by a Scene-Agent ratio and then aiming analysis at Agency ethical questions are necessarily shifted into the realm of the deliberative, which is in effect to ask, in the case of racism, “what is the best way to analyse representations of the Other?” rather than addressing the problems of Othering more generally. Yet the broader aim is implicit throughout van Dijk’s work simply by taking on the problems of racism as a large part of his life’s work. But the rhetoric endemic to a means-focused analysis is necessarily deliberative rather than Purposive, and therefore assumes a pre-established end:

We deliberate not about end but about means. A doctor does not deliberate about whether to cure his (sic) patient, nor a speaker whether to persuade his audience, nor a statesman whether to produce law and order; nor does anyone deliberate about the ends at which he is aiming. (Aristotle, 1953/1976, p. 119).

There is no explicit or implicit means in van Dijk’s analytical approach for changing racist discourse. Its efficiencies are instead directed towards better ways of identifying and categorising the means through which racism is propagated and reproduced. That leaves the problem of racism out of reach since its source resides elsewhere in various combinations of Scene and Agent. To change those combinations would mean having to
change social systemic discourse, including elite media and other institutional discourse (Scene), and the cognitive systems of Agents who are framed as discourse ‘recipients’. Neither of those changes can be achieved through revised ‘means selection’ (Burke, 1935/1984, p. 9). A critique of Agency (means) is the only stage in van Dijk’s analytical approach that the exercise of choice (ethics) can make a difference, leaving the primary sites of the ethical motive analytically distant in terms of transformative action.

**Wodak’s discourse-historical approach: History as Scene**

Wodak’s approach is grounded in the emancipatory ideals of German critical theory of the 1930s. Horkheimer (1937/2001) is key here in defining critique. He defines the difference between ‘traditional and critical theory’ along similar lines to those of Burke’s difference between Scientism and Dramatism, with the ‘traditional idea of theory’ being ‘based on scientific activity’ and ‘critical theory’, being based upon a ‘critical attitude’ (1937/1972, p. 309). Critical theory is concerned with human action and has an explicit focus on Purpose, namely developing viewpoints that derive ‘from historical analysis ... the goals of human activity, especially the idea of a reasonable organization of society that will meet the needs of the whole community’ (p. 311).

Wodak defines a non-Scientistic role for CDA:

... in contrast to some views on CDA, CDA is not concerned with evaluating what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. CDA - in my view - should try to make choices at each point in the research itself, and should make these choices transparent. It should also justify theoretically why certain interpretations of discursive events seem more valid than others. (p. 65)

While the terms ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are ambiguous here and can be read either as ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’, ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’, or even as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, Wodak is clear that it is the orientational at which her analysis aims. It is an approach most explicitly concerned to help analysts ‘minimize the risk of being biased’ by using ‘triangulation’ (p. 65) and therefore seems to be engaged in a form of ‘verisimilitude’ in terms of propositional development, which is to say that she sees good analysis as that which is free from analytical ‘bias’ and ‘most accurate’ in its interpretation of texts. Her stated aim ‘is to explain the contradictions and tensions which occur between nation states and
supranational entities on many levels’, including ‘economies, science, technologies, communication, and so on’ (p. 64). Wodak is concerned to ‘justify theoretically why certain interpretations of discursive events seem more valid than others’ (p. 65):

One methodical way for critical discourse analysts to minimize the risk of being biased is to follow the principle of triangulation. Thus, one of the most salient distinguishing features of the discourse-historical approach is its endeavour to work with different approaches, multimethodically and on the basis of a variety of empirical data as well as background information. [...] In investigating historical, organizational and political topics and texts, the discourse-historical approach attempts to integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive ‘events’ are embedded. Further, it analyses the historical dimension of discursive actions by exploring the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change ..... Lastly, and most importantly, this is not only viewed as ‘information’: at this point we integrate social theories to be able to explain the so-called context. (p. 65)

Wodak identifies three main levels of analysis, the first of which is intrinsic to the text and ‘aims at discovering inconsistencies, (self-)contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in the text-internal or discourse-internal structures’ (p. 65). The second aims at ‘the demystifying exposure of the – manifest or latent – possibly persuasive or “manipulative” character of discursive practices’ through the application of ‘social theories to interpret ... discursive events’ (p. 65). The third level of analysis is ‘prognostic critique’ which ‘contributes to the transformation and improvement of communication’ including ‘elaborating proposals and guidelines for reducing language barriers in hospitals, schools, courtrooms, public offices, and media reporting institutions ... as well as guidelines for avoiding sexist language use’ (p. 65).

The third level of analysis is the most overtly ethical in its orientation because it is the level at which normative prescriptions ('proposals and guidelines') for action are developed from analysis and directed towards the Purpose of increasing social equality by the strategic deployment of findings to ‘experts’. DHA has its Purpose in transforming Acts: ‘Practice is the target. The results [of analysis] should be made available to experts in different fields and, as a second step, be applied with the goal of changing certain discursive and social
practices’ (p. 70). The discursive and social practices targeted for change include language that is ‘discriminatory’, prejudicial, ‘disfiguring of facts and realities’, ‘racist’, ‘sexist’, ‘Anti-Semitic’, and ‘nationalist or ethnicist’.

The historical orientation of Wodak’s approach also suggests a ‘temporizing of essence’, the process by which matters of ‘logical priority’ are explained in terms of ‘temporal priority’ (Burke, 1966, p. 51), thus providing a diachronic explanation of what might otherwise seem to be categorical issues of social order that have plagued human societies throughout history. To put that statement differently: human beings seem naturally to put “Us” as a logically prior category to any “Them” in as much as “We”, along with “Our” values and “Our” needs, come first in any considerations, regardless of whether that “We” is familial, cultural, nationalist, or some otherwise intermediate corporate grouping of people. The discourse historical approach is designed to foreground the ways in which (Agency) specific cultural attitudes are developed and maintained over time within specific contexts (Scene), and for situating issues of discourse within their socio-historical trajectories (temporised Scene). The approach can also point out recurrent discursive strategies used by power elites in similar circumstances that also recur over time (Graham, Keenan, & Dowd, 2004).

The aim of using analysis to transform practice by informing experts of findings is reliant on a situation in which one class of Agents has the ability to transform an historically constructed Scene by influencing the Acts of other classes of Agents (including through policy and education). The application of findings drawn from analysis again emphasises Means, but in a different way to that of van Dijk because, here, Means and Purpose are connected to the Acts of Agents based on their degree of expert influence, both analytically and hierarchically. The distance between analysis and action deriving from that analysis depends on a social structure through which expert classes of Agents can Act upon other classes of Agents to bring about qualitative changes to the Scene of discrimination.

**Multimodal discourse analysis and CDA**

Any discussion of influential aspects of CDA must include the burgeoning work on multimodal analysis (van Leeuwen, 1999; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, Machin, 2007; Caldas-Coulthard & van Leeuwen, 2003; The New London Group, 1996; Lemke, 2006), which
in some senses ought to give us the most clear view of critical orientation and focus in CDA if only because of the need to position such analyses within a field defined as being primarily linguistic. The following from Lemke (2006) is unambiguous on the critical core of multimodal analysis:

The time is past when serious scholars can pretend to have no politics. We make value choices at every stage of our work as researchers, speakers, writers, and teachers. If we take no special thought about these choices, then we naively reinforce the value choices of others, and with them the interests of institutions and social sectors that share responsibility for the inequities and injustices in our own society. If we feel the need for critical literacy, for a critical multimedia literacy curriculum, it is because we do not trust the messages carried in our pervasive modern media. It is not just that we may be skeptical of their facts, we are also wary of the values and assumptions they purvey. No one of us, or our students, can make free and democratic choices about the kind of world we want to live in, if we lack the tools of critical multimedia literacy.

For this reason research in related fields such as critical discourse analysis ... and critical media studies ... has recognized that we cannot simply study media as artifacts and multimodal texts, not even with the addition of studies of how people read and use them. We must also inquire into their conditions of production, their institutional origins and functions, their circulation in the modern economy, and to whom their benefits accrue, directly and indirectly, economically and politically. Who creates mass media, youth media, and educational media? And who does not? What institutions and what sectors of society benefit most and in what ways from the production, sale, circulation, and consumption of multimedia? We are not asking these questions out of pure academic curiosity, and our students would not be much interested in this agenda if that were the only reason for it. We undertake this inquiry because we believe that we will uncover at least one component of the covert workings of injustice and the perpetuation of privilege and anti-democratic power in our society. (Lemke, 2006)

This is probably the most comprehensive statement of critical scope possible for any approach to CDA. It includes an emphasis on relationships among Scene, Act, Agent, Agency, and Purpose as simultaneous focii of critical analysis: in other words, Action considered in its totality. As Agency (means), analysis is directed towards uncovering ‘the covert workings of injustice’ (Means of oppression) and ‘the perpetuation of privilege and anti-democratic power’ (Purpose of oppression) that create ‘inequities and injustices in our society’ (Scene
of oppression). Again, Scene is that which requires changing as the result of critical analytic action (‘society’, ‘institutions’, ‘pervasive modern media’, ‘media’, ‘youth media’). But it comes in combination with seeing analysts as Agents imbued with values and biases who are therefore also engaged in purposive Acts when they analyse texts (or anything else); seeing ‘our students’ as Agents who may or may not choose (Act) to take an interest in our agenda (Purpose); seeing ‘media artefacts’ (Agencies) as being produced by specific Agents, with other Agents being involved in creating and distributing those artefacts; and seeing as Agents the beneficiaries of the sum of all the Acts that interweave to produce the Scene we call ‘youth media’, ‘mass media’, ‘educational media’ (all three are Scenic construals of what are from another view, or in isolation, Agencies). We are admonished not to confine analysis to ‘media as artifacts and multimodal texts’, or to ‘studies of how people read and use’ those texts. We must also analyse more specific aspects of Scene: ‘their conditions of production’, ‘their institutional origins and functions’, and how their circulation leads to the accrual of power and wealth by specific people (Purpose). Such a view provides multiple entry points into analysis and puts pressure on analysis to be self-conscious in the relationships between point of entry, situation of the most important or susceptible ethical motives, and the implications of applying analysis at any given “moment” of the act.

**Fairclough and Fairclough: Ethical questioning**

Fairclough and Fairclough’s (2011) more recent work synthesising CDA and argumentation theory includes an explicit statement of ethics in critical analysis that aims to ‘show how both argument evaluation and social critique relate to ethical questioning’. There is a combination of Scientistic and Dramatistic approaches put forward through a focus on ‘two ethical issues: (a) manipulation in discourse and (b) the question of values and their relation to action’. The case of manipulation they detail is the known falsehoods (lies) Blair and Bush used as excuses to convince the public that invading Iraq in 2001 was a ‘reasonable’ action. The element of manipulation is explicitly ‘epistemological’ in character, centres on the notion of ‘deceit’, and is the basis of a very specific definition of ‘rationalisation’ as ‘deceptive argument’ (2011).

They position politics as deliberative ‘arguments about what to do’. That moves the concept of a substantive, ‘means-ends relation’ (Agency:Purpose) to future action and functions to
separate argumentation from action proper (or substantive action), explicitly construing Acts as Means for the achievement of principle-based ends. Political arguments are ‘practical arguments’, ‘arguments about what should be done, as opposed to arguments about what the case is’. In that sense they are Dramatistic. Practical arguments ideally result in ‘a normative or prescriptive statement ... that an agent ought to perform an action, or that the action in question is recommended’. In this view the outcome of deliberation is an Act by an Agent or Agents, whereas the argument leading to the Act is treated as a different order of interconnected Acts that are principle- rather than action-based: ‘an argumentative dialogue is a “connected sequence of moves” (speech acts) in which participants ask and answer critical questions in order to test the (tentative, provisional) acceptability of a claim and thus resolve a difference of opinion’.

The question of values is treated in a primarily Scientistic way in this framework, with the critical focus being on whether values drawn upon in arguments are ‘rationally acceptable’ and ‘support the goal and action’ at which the argument aims. Values therefore function as logical and propositional entities. They are a form of ‘premise’ and their validity helps to determine whether the overall arguments to which they contribute are ‘valid’ or disingenuous ‘rationalisation’. Communicants have an ethical imperative to present alternative outcomes of an argument with ‘an impartial weighting’. Fairclough and Fairclough note that appeals to values like ‘fairness, sincerity, and responsibility’ can increase the rhetorical force of an argument. But as practical orientations they also ‘underlie a dialectically optimal process of practical reasoning and decision-making’ in which ‘there has been no attempt to deceive the public’ and are therefore desirable conditions (Scene) for democratic argumentation.

Overall the ethical imperative here turns on conceptions of truthfulness and sincerity (attributes of Agents), including where values are concerned. The problems of political action and its effects are somewhat forestalled by their placement “at the end of the line” in relation to argumentation. That is, as long as political action, as the outcome of argumentation, is taken on the basis of unbiased (morally unweighted) value premises and arguments that are assumed to be true and valid by arguers on whichever side of an argument, and that the premises put forward by arguers are a genuine part of the arguer’s
agenda, then the argument meets the standards of being ‘reasonable’ and ‘rationally acceptable’ and the ethical question is answered in the positive.

This is the basis of what Fairclough and Fairclough describe as ‘normative’ and ‘explanatory’ critique, both of which proceed in different directions from Scene:

Normative critique evaluates social realities against a standard of publicly recognized values, for instance against a set of values that define human well-being. Explanatory critique seeks to explain why social realities are as they are, and how they are sustained or changed. Both types of critique are necessary in critical social research, which starts from judgments that the society or aspect of social life in focus is significantly but avoidably damaging to human well-being in particular respects. But while normative critique is directly concerned with such judgements in evaluating behaviour, actions and social practices as, for example, just or unjust, fair or exploitative, racist or non-racist, sexist or non-sexist, explanatory critique seeks to explain, for example, why and how existing social realities endure despite their damaging effects. Explanatory critique seeks understanding of what makes a given social order work, which is clearly necessary if it is to be changed in order to enhance human well-being. (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2011)

Once again Scene is implicated as both source and target of critique and transformation. Ethical judgements are largely constrained to a Scientistic conception of truth, even where issues of manipulation by Attitudinal means are concerned—which is to say that matters of obligation, necessity, desirability, and so on are not susceptible to evaluation of truthfulness. They are however susceptible to judgements of sincerity (Attitude). Yet the intent is entirely Dramatistic in that elements of the social order need to be changed to enhance ‘human well-being’. The enhancements would come by implication through politically motivated Acts that are decided upon in truthful, respectful argumentation.

Discussion

The ethics of CDA are overwhelmingly directed at Scene – context in the broadest possible sense of the word – as both motive site of injustice and critical target of transformation. Proceeding from an unjust Scene of some kind, generally with an explicit Purpose of emancipation and equality, some approaches focus on Agency, such as van Dijk, concerned to improve abilities in the detection and analysis of the kinds of injustice that have their
manifestation in language. Others aim at Action in its totality, such as Lemke, with a consciousness of critical potential in every aspect of Action. Others target Action indirectly, through specific Agents, such as Wodak (2001) and Fairclough and Fairclough (2013). Throughout CDA there is very much a class-based approach to Agents; that is, any Agents identified as enacting or instantiating harmful, discriminatory discourses are treated as socially “representative” rather than individually “reprobate”. Similarly, where transformation is concerned, specific classes of Agents – elites and experts, for example – are assumed to have transformative abilities. The paradox of that strategy is that it requires the social structure (Scene) to remain intact in order that elite or expert Agents have the influence to effect change. In that respect Lemke is probably the most thoroughgoing critic of those analysed above, since every aspect of Act is for him a site for critical (ethical) attention, with the entire analytical project being understood as continuous (“topological”) action, with even Scene being construed as a function of people actively “making space”.

Burke reminds us that the power of critique is at the very centre of both human achievement and its opposite (1954/1965, p. 6). He argues that our critical abilities enable us continually ‘to build up cultural structures so complex that still greater powers of criticism are needed’ to distinguish between beneficial and harmful processes that are buried under the ‘cultural tangles’ that inevitably develop from cultural complexity (p. 6). CDA, and critical semiotic analysis more generally, aim at those tangles and the injustices in which they are involved with the aim of transforming social life such that it becomes more equal, democratic, and less discriminatory. Those are the aims that attract criticisms of CDA as “moralising”, as if the aim of beneficially transforming social practices through applied analysis of language is somehow “more moral” (or moralising) than transforming the social fabric through, say, the development of a literacy curriculum, a TESOL program, a grammar for an undocumented language, or a program to preserve a language that is falling into “disuse”. The idea that we can engage in any analysis of meaning and remain exempt from issues of morality (custom, choice, orientation, piety) is to ignore basic characteristics of language or to mistake it as somehow external to us, as something that we that we “use”. Language is action and we do it with and to each other.

The fact that technique and critique have become perceived as being so markedly separated in both vernacular and academic discourse that they are often viewed as being opposed,
even by linguists, speaks to the “brokenness” of contemporary intellectual life, and of a “bad” relationship between the Scientistic and Dramatistic aspects of life. Assertions that CDA’s critical orientation makes it “unscientific” conveniently forget that scientific method is itself a thoroughgoing and ceaseless process of criticism, ‘a deliberate and untiring questioner of any and all established canons’ (Burke, 1935/1984, p. 63). Science often presents itself as objective, without bias, and therefore free from ethical scrutiny beyond its abilities to establish truths of one kind or another. But an “is” is never an “ought”. As linguists we know the selectivity of sheer vocabulary is without exception a function of some kind of perspective and therefore some kind of fundamental bias. As critical analysts we need but be explicit about this in each case.

The ethics of technique and methodology present themselves in every case analysed here. At this stage of our development it ought to be obvious that no technical advance is available without a corresponding cost in social and environmental terms. Since any human advantage is inevitably a function of symbolic action of one sort or another, its damaging effects ought to be evident from the outset in the language by which it is proposed. At the very least it ought to be obvious that with a new advantage at one level a cost must be borne at some other and we should go looking for it “up front” as a matter of caution.

In that sense, CDA can be seen as a kind of cultural “accountancy” concerned with first drawing attention to, and then ideally anticipating and changing (for the better), the “side effects” of technical developments (whether good or bad) that result in harm to specific groups of people and in concomitant increases in inequality. Despite the pervasive Scenic motive throughout CDA there is relatively little work that directly addresses the our linguistic action on the environment. That is to say, analysis tends to limit itself to the social Scene where environment is concerned. While there has been some work in CDA that focuses on the environment, by which I mean the general degradation of nature as evidenced by climate change and so forth, such issues are typically treated in terms of their obfuscation or revelation in discourse, not on how we grasp our environment in language. I mention this here only to emphasis that, seen as a form of symbolic action, the language through which we grasp our natural environment must have direct impacts upon that environment and is therefore an even wider Scene and is as much a direct ethical issue for
discourse analysis as racism, sexism, or any other kind of social or interpersonal discrimination.

It can be argued that critique and transformation of Scene is the sole aim of all CDA, regardless of whether Scene is construed as an historical background of discourses and cultural orientations (as with racist and sexist discourses), a specific configuration of Agents (as with institutional discourses), a myriad of connected Acts (as in warfare and preparations for war), an historically specific configuration of Means (as in “the media” or “technology”), or even the natural environment itself. Even Purpose can be construed as Scenic. During specific periods of history, typically those marked by “afterlife” religious orientations, or by intense financial speculation, the irreal is reified in discourses of salvation, financial speculation, or some other prophetic form and “put to work” as a means of managing expectations and “spatialising” the future (Graham, 2006). Critical attention to the increasingly “filled out” Scenic aspect of the future would therefore seem to be one of the most pressing ethical aspects presently facing CDA.

Conclusions

The ethics of CDA are its stock in trade. They are its evaluative resources collectively drawn upon and extended by the field’s various practitioners when identifying texts, issues, and aims of analysis. They also form a basic ground for analysis, and for methods of analysis. The recurrent emphasis on Scene and Agency in different weightings indicates a need for some more teasing out. There is a sense in which Agency (technique) might be construed as “value free” (in so far as ends can ever justify means or in so far as means in an of themselves are not value laden). However it is not the nature of Agency per se that resonates ethically for CDA; rather it is the choice of Agency that is of critical importance, whether for analysis or practice. The same goes for all other aspects of the Pentad when seen as sites of ethical choice for CDA.

All of that indicates that we need, as analysts, to make our own position clear about what we are analysing, and why, how, and to what end we are analysing it. To pretend that CDA is anything other than a primarily moral pursuit would seem to me to be dishonest, even in places where analysis demonstrates a strict Scientism (a focus on the true-false binary). It
must also lead to bad analysis that misses the point. The prognosis for the entire project is presently unclear. CDA has been an interdisciplinary force for over 25 years yet the problems we have spent our time critiquing and attempting to transform seem to have grown exponentially during that same period: inequality, racism, violence, discrimination, religious extremism, right wing discourse more generally – all of these have come to dominate the public sphere. Political systems in allegedly developed democracies have steadily deteriorated into little more than cynical vaccuums tuned to the most flagrantly corrupt practices while a reality television star cum crypto-fascist is the presumptive Republican presidential nominee for the world’s most dangerous and destructive nation. Environmental degradation continues apace. Questions of truth have never been so insignificant in comparison with the problems of action. Truth and technique are necessary foundations for critical action, but they are tangential to the problems of action which turn at least as significantly on emotion, orientation, habit, class, attitude, and opportunity as they do on strict issues of rationality and truth.

CDA is primarily ethical. Its aim is to transform action and values such that the social scene becomes increasingly equal, more democratic, less victimising. It has more in common with law than grammar; less in common with semantics than rhetoric. Any charge that it does not behave scientifically simply because its practitioners make their values explicit merely indicates either a Scientistic view on a Dramatistic pursuit or the self-concealment of a some agenda that might disrupt the cogency of an argument or position if the agenda were made explicit. The need to persuade is also implied in the critical transformative aim. If we are to transform any Scene we must learn to be more broadly persuasive and communicative, thinking beyond the structural limitations of our current circumstances and communicating the importance of change – as well as how to approach it – in any given circumstance. That implies further responsibilities, further levels of critique, and increasing levels of critical self awareness.
References


