What is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is simply the study of anything larger than a sentence or utterance. Firth (1951) asserted that 'the main concern of descriptive linguistics is to make statements of meaning.' He also emphasized that the descriptive process must begin with collecting a set of contextually defined homogeneous texts and the aim of description is to explain how the sentences or utterances are meaningful in their contexts.

In any spoken text, there are at least four major levels of organization-phonology, grammar, discourse, and non-linguistic. The structure in each of these levels can be expressed in terms of small units combining to form larger units.

Labov (1970, 1972), Sacks (passim), Schegloff (1968, 1972), and Jefferson (1972, 1973) regard the utterance as the basic unit of analysis. Labov also emphasizes that the first and most important step is to distinguish 'what is said from what is done'; that is, discourse analysis must be concerned with the functional use of language.

Based on many studied interactions and conversations in the past, discourse does not consist simply of a string of grammatically well-formed utterances or sentences. For the public, discourse means discussions. However, in academia, it includes all forms of communication. Foucault (1972, 1980) looked at discourse as textual passages that are connected by writings or speech. He argued that rules and practices produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse within historical conditions and how to constitute knowledge together with social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations.

Foucault also suggested that discourse was about both language and practice, distinguishing between what one says and what one does and how one puts those ideas into practice. Hall (1992) claims very similar ideas inspired by the former that all social practices entail meaning shapes and influences what we do and all the practices that we possess a discursive aspect.

Wodak & Meyer (2016) proposed that CDA studies language and other semiotic systems in use and subsumes "a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda. The discipline is interested in "analyzing hidden, opaque, and visible structures of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language." Thus, according to them, the objective is to examine critically the relationship between language, ideology, power, and social structure, for example, social inequality as it is constructed, re-produced, legitimized, and resisted in language and other modes of communication.

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