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Critical Discourse Analysis in Organizational Studies: Towards an Integrationist Methodology

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ABSTRACT   We engage with Leitch and Palmer's (2010) analysis of Critical Discourse Analytical (CDA) scholarship in organizational and management studies, in order to argue that, whereas they rightly point to the need for further reflexivity in the field, their recommendation for a strict methodological protocol in CDA studies may be reproducing some of the problems they identify in their analysis. We put forward an alternative, relational-dialectic conception of discourse that defends an integrationist orientation to research methodology, privileging trans-disciplinarity over rigour.

INTRODUCTION

The critical engagement with assumptions informing the analysis of texts in context within organizational studies is an important and welcome endeavour. Leitch and Palmer's article, 'Analysing texts in context' (Leitch and Palmer, 2010), does just that. Focusing on the ways in which Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is applied in a large body of scientific papers, the article uses content analysis to identify five, largely implicit, conceptualizations of context in the study of organizational texts: *space*, *time*, *practice*, *change*, and *frame*. This conceptual diversity, the article argues, is evidence of a broad, albeit unarticulated, confusion regarding what context is and how it should be integrated in the analysis of texts within CDA-oriented organizational studies. It thus concludes by proposing a rigorous approach to methodology consisting of nine 'protocols', which may not only hold conceptual and analytical procedures in check but also serve as explicit criteria for evaluating CDA research in the field.

There are, at least, three positive aspects to this argument: the systematicity of its critical approach to the use of CDA across organizational studies; its thematization of context as a way of problematizing taken-for-granted conceptual territories in CDA; and finally, its emphasis on some form of researcher's reflexivity in the process of analysis. We see all three as sustaining an immanent form of critique from within the field of management and organizational studies, which points to 'the limitations of, and uncertainties behind, the

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manufactured unity and coherence of texts', but further seeks to overcome these in productive ways (Alvesson et al., 2008, pp. 494–7). In this sense, the paper comes to contribute to an ongoing reflexive conversation about the theory and practice of critically analysing discourse in management and organizational studies, as well in other interdisciplinary contexts (for examples of discourse analyses on the texts of organizational studies, see Harley and Hardy, 2004, pp. 377–400; Heracleous, 2006, pp. 1057–87).

We feel, however, that, in certain ways, the paper might be reproducing the very problem it seeks to address, by itself operating on an implicit view of context and an unacknowledged view of the theoretical and epistemological premises of CDA. We proceed therefore by outlining the three areas where the paper tends towards the fallacy it claims to remedy and, in the process, we outline a dialectical-relational view of CDA in terms of (1) attending to the simultaneous articulation of moments of the social (including language and text), (2) focusing on the discursive operation of power relations, and (3) working within a framework of interdisciplinary research. This view of CDA suggests that the way forward for CDA in organizational studies should be less towards tight definitions of context or rigorous methodological protocols and more towards stronger conceptual links between discourse, power, and other 'moments' of the social process that emerge as theoretical and empirical problems within organizational studies, as well as towards more versatile and porous methodologies that make space for novel, interdisciplinary research designs in the field.

DISCOURSE, POWER, INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Leitch and Palmer's argument rests on three major claims, which are meant to work towards creating a more precise and rigorous account of CDA, but ultimately present us with a somewhat reductive and, potentially, misleading view of it. In a nutshell, these claims are: (1) emphasis on context can be separated from, what the authors posit as, the other two premises of CDA, namely 'critical scholarship' and the 'turn to language'; (2) theoretical and methodological considerations in CDA research can be separated in ways that allow for methodology to function as a terrain for the resolution of theoretical tensions; and (3) methodological considerations in CDA have a regularity and uniformity that can be encapsulated in a single research protocol about 'conceptual definitions, data selection and data analysis'. We address each claim, in turn.

Discourse and the Question of Context

Regarding the first claim, our reservation is that the choice to focus on context alone (Leitch and Palmer, 2010, p. 2) runs the risk of reducing the epistemological complexity of CDA, which rests precisely on the articulation between an interest in critique (relations of power, domination, hegemony) and a view of language as mutually constitutive of the social – the 'turn to language' as discourse.

CDA views language as discourse, understood as an element of the social process which is dialectically related to others. Relations between language and other elements are dialectical in the sense of being different but not 'discrete', i.e. not fully separate. We might say that each element 'internalizes' the others without being reducible to them

(Harvey, 1996) – for example, social relations, power, institutions, beliefs, and cultural values are in part discursive, in the sense that they 'internalize' discourse without being reducible to it. This means that, although we should analyse business organizations as partly discursive objects, we should simultaneously keep a constant analytical focus not just upon discourse as such, but on *relations between discursive and other social elements*.

The epistemic interest in this form of critical research is on explicating how these dialectical processes and relations are shaped by relations of power, how the dialectics of discourse figures in the constitution and consolidation of forms of social life which lead to and perpetuate injustices and inequalities and are detrimental to the well-being of many people, and how it figures and might figure in social movements and struggles for fairer, more democratic, ecologically sustainable forms of social life. The nature of these processes and relationships, including their consolidation and effects on social life, vary between institutions and organizations, and according to time and place, and it needs to be established through analysis.

This view of discourse as the internalization of 'moments' has implications for the definition of context in CDA. Context here is not conceptualized as a distinct and separable dimension of CDA epistemology, alongside critique and the turn to language, but as an analytical construct that emerges within specific research questions and seeks to define the specific articulation of moments that is relevant to the constitution of specific bodies of organizational texts. As such, context should be best conceptualized as itself an epistemic object, dialectically arising out of the multiple ways by which CDA problematizes language as an instrument of power (see below), rather than as a constitutive dimension of CDA epistemology that can, in itself, become the focus of methodological reflexivity.

Power and the Question of Methodology

Regarding the second claim, namely that difficulties in the conceptual definition of context can be addressed through increased *methodological rigour* (Leitch and Palmer, 2010, pp. 2 and 6), our concern is the following. In the light of the epistemological principle above, CDA is a mode of critical inquiry where theory and methodology are inherently linked to one another. This means that the methodological relationalism of CDA, privileging social relations rather than entities or individual actions, cannot be thought of independently of its theoretical premises: a dialectical constructionism that views discourse and power as constitutive of social relations through a process of articulation between different but not discrete 'moments' of the social.

The critical interest of CDA focuses, in particular, on four general objects of research: the emergence, hegemony, recontextualization, and operationalization of discourses (Fairclough, 2005). Discourses emerge as particular ways of construing (representing, interpreting) particular aspects of the social process that become relatively recurrent and enduring and which necessarily simplify and condense complex realities, include certain aspects of them but not others, and focalize certain aspects whilst marginalizing others. Many aspects of the social process are construed in different ways in different discourses; certain discourses endure longer than others, are taken up and accepted by more people, and thus achieve varying measures of dominance over others, and may become hege-

monic. Certain discourses – and this is really just a particular facet of dominance – come to be more extensively recontextualized than others, shifted from one practice or organization or institution or field to others, shifted from one scale to others (e.g. from local to national, from national to international). Achieving a significant measure of dominance is one precondition for discourses coming to be operationalized, 'put into practice', dialectically transformed into new ways acting and interacting, new identities, new material realities. The operationalization of discourses is both a matter of dialectical relations between discourse and material reality, and 'intra-semiotic' dialectical relations between discourses and genres and styles: the discourse of the 'knowledge-based' economy for instance is not only having transformative effects on material reality, it is also being operationalized in new workplace genres (ways of communicatively interacting) and styles (discursive facets of the identities of 'knowledge-based' workers).

Thus a major issue which can be addressed through analysis of the dialectics of discourse is how certain simplifying and complexity-reducing construals of complex realities may come to have constructive effects upon those complex realities, transforming them in particular ways and directions (such as for instance the construal of modern economies as 'knowledge-based' economies, Jessop et al., 2008; see also Alvesson, 1993, pp. 997–1015, for an early articulation of organizations as rhetorical constructs embedded in relations of power).

Such questions cannot be addressed through the urge for researchers to produce more explicit definitions of context (conceptually or empirically; Leitch and Palmer, 2010, pp. 12–14). Such questions should rather be seen as part of a broader reflexive engagement with the ways in which specific research designs approach the question of power in organizations (in terms of the four processes outlined), how they conceptualize agency within these processes, or how they see organizational and other institutional texts as being articulated with other 'moments' of institutional practice at specific historical junctures. Whereas these choices may be invariably informed by the dialectical-relational epistemology of CDA, they can only be formulated in contingent ways within specific research designs, rendering methodological protocols deliberately unstable, flexible, and versatile – sometimes using the concept of 'context' (in terms of *frame*, *practice*, or *change*, as it was indeed shown in Leitch and Palmer's study), and sometimes replacing it with other relevant terms (theorizing agency, identity, power in various ways; for an interesting debate exemplifying competing epistemologies of power and agency in organizational studies between post-structuralism and critical realism, see Contu and Willmott, 2005, pp. 1645–62; Reed, 2005a, pp. 1621–44; 2005b, pp. 1663–72).

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Question of Interdisciplinarity

Regarding the third claim, that a methodological protocol guarantees a degree of consistency and regularity across CDA projects, our reservation is that such consistency may not only be impossible but also undesirable. It may be impossible because, as it has become evident so far, the critical focus on how discourse constitutes social relationships of power opens up a multiplicity of possibilities in CDA for configuring dimensions of 'context' – with different research questions taking a different aspect of context as relevant.

It may be undesirable because, given the CDA concern with dialectical relations between discursive and other 'moments' of the social, 'protocols' for analysis should be left deliberately contingent and porous, rather than being contained by a universalist procedure of strict and continuous explications of research choices (either as the level of data selection or analysis). CDA research designs, in other words, must necessarily be inter-disciplinary, that is to say, they must function as a resource for bringing a focus on discourse in its relations with other social elements to various forms of interdisciplinary critical social research, for providing a discursive 'point of entry' into researching relevant relations.

We prefer the term '*trans*-disciplinary' because, in our interpretation, it sees the 'dialogue' between different disciplines and theories in particular research projects as a source of theoretical and methodological development for each of them (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). For example, *recontextualization* was introduced and developed (through articulation with other CDA categories – 'discourse', 'genre', 'genre chain') as a category within CDA through a dialogue with Basil Bernstein's sociology of pedagogy, where it originated (Chouliaraki, 1995, 1998).

A *trans*-disciplinary approach is also committed to addressing the 'commensurability' or compatibility between categories in different disciplines and theories; for instance, in the discussion of the commensurability of CDA categories and categories of regulationist political economy (Fairclough and Wodak, 2008) or the relationship between media, discourse, and identity in organizations (Chouliaraki and Morsing, 2009). In the case of organizational studies, developing a *trans*-disciplinary methodology incorporating CDA is a matter of enhancing the capacity of existing critical paradigms for organizational research to address dialectical relations between discourse and other social elements, on the basis of an identification of limits and gaps in their treatment of these dialectical relations which deployment of CDA may help to fill.

For instance, CDA can be used (and has, indeed, been used) to enhance theorizations and analyses of power relations in organizations or of processes of formation and contestation of identities, developing theory to encompass discourse and the dialectics of discourse, and developing effective methods for analysing the dialectics of discourse in these relations and processes.

Such *trans*-disciplinary research can be best evaluated by asking three types of questions: first, how successfully and productively analysis of text is integrated with other forms and levels of organizational analysis; second, what advances are made in establishing relations of commensurability between discourse-analytical categories and categories in other relevant *trans*-disciplinary theories and paradigms; and, finally, in more general terms, how it addresses core conceptual and empirical problems within the field, thereby managing to advance organizational theory and analysis.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we welcome Leitch and Palmer's article for opening up an important debate regarding key theoretical, conceptual, and analytical issues in CDA within organizational studies. We find, however, their argument to be itself informed by an implicit theory of context that (1) reflects a somewhat simplified CDA epistemology devoid of

critical force; (2) separates critical theory from methodology, risking the reduction of CDA to a series of instrumental choices and operations; and (3) tends to equate CDA with a universalistic conception of method, ignoring its inherent contextual contingency and theoretical versatility.

We have, instead, put forward a relational-dialectic conception of discourse that understands context in deliberately contingent and broad terms, as articulations of language with other 'moments' of social practice, and defends a purposefully porous and integrationist orientation to research methodology that privileges *trans*-disciplinarity over rigour. It is this conception of discourse, we believe, that renders CDA a powerful critical theoretical and methodological tool in the social sciences, including organizational studies.

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