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TOOLS AND METHODS

How to use critical discourse analysis for policy analysis: a guideline for policymakers and other professionals

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This tool aims to explain how critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be used to analyse policy texts, based on the example of ways in which we have employed CDA in recent academic papers. In these papers, using CDA has represented a process of learning by doing and we have tried to distil this process for others. We have adapted the methodology developed by Fairclough, making it more accessible for a non-specialist audience by improving the clarity of the language and describing the four phases of the methodology in more detail.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; discourse analysis; methodologies; policy analysis; tools

Introduction

Discourse analysis is a collective name for a number scientific methodologies for analysing semiosis, namely how meaning is created and communicated through written, vocal or sign language. Discourse analysis is used in many disciplines in the social sciences, each with its own assumptions and methodologies. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is one type of discourse analysis which aims to 'understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality' (van Dijk, 2005: 352). CDA focuses on the relationship between discourse and other elements of social practices, such as policymaking. According to Fairclough (2012), social practices networked in a particular way constitute a social order. As Fairclough argues, 'one aspect of this ordering is dominance: some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream in a particular order of discourse, others are marginal, or oppositional, or alternative' (Fairclough 2012: 2).

CDA has been widely used for policy analysis by academics (see for example Hornidge 2011; Langan 2011; Fairclough 2012) because it can be employed to identify dominant, marginal, oppositional or alternative discourses within policy texts, such as policy documents and speeches. To demonstrate its current relevance and efficacy, many authors (see, for example, Briant Carant 2016, Spangenberg 2017; Cummings et al 2018) have used it to analyse the text

of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030. This text, 'Transforming our world' (UN, 2015), is probably currently *the* most influential policy document in international development and it has had an enormous impact at international and national level. For this reason, it has attracted attention from academics using CDA.

Although CDA is a very useful tool for policy analysis, it remains complex to apply to two reasons. First, it is described in the literature in a specialist, academic way and, second, its application is not explained in clear steps. In this tool, we aim to explain how CDA can be employed to analyse policy texts, following the path that we used in a paper published last year (Cummings et al, 2018) which we will call Example 1, as well as in another paper which we have not yet published (Example 2) (Cummings et al, 2019). In these papers, the use of CDA represented a process of learning by doing so we have tried to distil this process so that others can learn too. Examples 1 and 2 are also used to illustrate how we applied CDA in two slightly different ways.

We have written this tool because we are of the opinion that CDA is a very useful methodology, also for non-specialists. Using CDA, we were able to develop novel insights. During this process of learning by doing, we adapted the methodology, developed by Fairclough (1995, 2005), to make it more appropriate to policy documents where the sub-discourse within the text is the focus, namely a discourse which is not the main theme within the text. In writing this tool, we have also attempted to clarify the methodology further by simplifying the language. For example, what is identified as the 'genealogy of past discourses' as a step in the methodology (Phase 1, Step 2), we have simplified as 'which discourses have already been identified in the area you are investigating?' In this way, we are trying to overcome the problems of undertaking discourse analysis which others have argued is 'like riding a bike' without sequential stages and analytical method (Parker 1990: 187, citing Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

The strengths of the CDA methodology are two-fold. First, it allows you to analyse policy documents by revealing their inner biases and claims in systemic, structured way, revealing their hidden pre-occupations and how they reflect different discourses: dominant, marginal, oppositional or alternative. Second, the methodology is also intrinsically activist because the final stage involves the identification of new discourses, narratives and arguments which can counteract 'social wrongs' in current, dominant discourse. From our experience, CDA can be employed in two ways in policy analysis: addressing a social issue or exploring a social issue. In Example 1, CDA was used to address a social issue, namely we had identified that local knowledge and local realities had been mentioned very rarely in the text of the SDGs (Cummings et al, 2018). In Example 2, we wanted to explore which discourses on the private sector were dominant within sustainable development (Cummings et al, 2019).

What is discourse?

Parker calls discourse 'a system of statements which constructs an object' (1990: 187). He argues that:

> Discourses do not simply describe the social world, but categorize it, they bring phenomena into sight… discourses allow us to focus on things that are not 'really' there, and that once an object has been circumscribed by discourses it is difficult not to refer to it as if it were real. They provide frameworks for debating the value of one way of talking about reality over other ways (1990: 187)

Discourses are also subject to institutions, power relations and ideology (Parker 1990). In this process, discourse can also be used to manipulate and obscure:

> … the will to exercise...control in society and history has also discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy and wrap itself systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value, and knowledge. And this language in its naturalness, authority, professionalism, assertiveness and antitheoretical directness is....discourse. (Said, 1983: 216, cited in Hook, 2001).

To give some examples, there are discourses related to the knowledge society (Hornidge, 2011), globalization (Fairclough, 2006), and the war on terror (Jarvis 2009).

Policy as text

The first step in undertaking CDA is to take a closer look at the concept, semiosis. Although semiosis relates to written, vocal or sign language, in the analysis of policy documents, we are looking at texts. Policy documents are not formed by chance. As discussed by Fairclough, they are '… formed, disseminated and legitimised within complex chains and networks of events (committee meetings, reports, parliamentary debates, press statements and press conferences, etc.)' (Fairclough 2013: 244-245). As Freeman and Maybin explain:

> Policy documents, through their writers and editors, may state truths - or they may suppress, elide or embellish them. The process of writing a statement or briefing, for example, is often a matter of sorting - selecting and ordering - the many truths it might contain. It matters very much, therefore, just who is allowed or tasked to write what and by whom - and this testifies again, above all, to the real or assumed power of the document itself. (2009: 7)

To give an example of how this works, Briant Carant considers that 'Both the ['Millennium Declaration'] and ['Transforming our world'] are branded as agreed-upon documents representative of the UN as a whole. Yet the UN approach to poverty abatement is one programme among many possible. Alternative programmes also exist but critics allege that they are under-represented as a result of particular power configurations and voting patterns within the organisation' (2016: 1). These power configurations and voting patterns have an important impact on what finally appears in policy documents.

Not only are the contents of policy documents subject to political processes when they are being written, Hornidge (2011) also consider that they are can be used to legitimize already existing government policies by presenting a vision of the future. In making this point, she considers discourses around the knowledge society:

> … the vision of a self-emerging knowledge society therefore acted as basis for legitimising government programmes and activities towards the realisation of the envisioned future stage of development' (2011: 4).

In this way, policy documents can be used to present an inspirational vision which convinces stakeholders of the need for action while ultimately also preserving the *status quo*, enshrined in the dominant discourse. Fairclough argues that 'dominant construals of the "new global order" have certain predicable linguistic categories' (2013: 247), namely that processes of change are divorced from social actors, history, time and place; that statements are presented as truths; and that they are normative. This divorce from social actors, history, time and place, the normative nature, and the presentation of a truth are also aspects of policy documents which can be given attention during CDA.

The four phase research process

This tool comprises an adapted version of transdisciplinary CDA (Fairclough 2012b), comprising a four phase research process. The first phase involves the selection of a research topic that relates to a social question that can be productively approached by a focus on language and, specifically, texts. The second phase involves the identification of a suitable text as well as an analysis of pre-existing discourses in the policy or academic literature. Once an appropriate text has been identified, the text is analysed. The third phase considers how the text has been developed and how this relates to the discourses identified . For example, which actors were involved in developing the policy and how this relates to the discourses. The fourth phase is based on the identification of possible ways past the obstacles or problems identified by the use of discourses, narratives and arguments. In short, the final phase of CDA uses words in texts and speech to identify social questions and then considers how words in texts and speech could be employed to contest the discourses which have been identified.

Given the nature of mainstream policy documents, analysis of them will often involve an unpicking of the dominant discourse. This means that the final phase may involve the promotion of marginal, oppositional or alternative discourses.

In this tool, the methodology has been adapted to make it more suited to the analysis of a key policy document and to make the methodology clearer for readers who are not necessarily experts in discourse analysis; people like ourselves. It also places much greater, explicit emphasis on identifying pre-existing discourses which now receives a full step in its own right. Although Fairclough refers to the 'genealogy of past discourses' as an important issue, it is not explicitly included in the original methodology. We consider that making this stage explicit is an important amendment to the methodology, making it particularly effective for identifying sub-discourses, our purpose here. In addition, we have also added an extra step which describes why and how the text was developed, an important issue for policy documents. In one further adaptation of the methodology, we analyse what we consider to be a 'social question' rather than what Fairclough identifies as a social wrong. This aspect of CDA makes it clear that the methodology is strongly normative. We use 'social question' rather than 'social wrong' because our purpose is to create an opportunity for discussion, rather than necessarily attributing blame for a social wrong. This represents an effort to move away 'from binary contrasts which polarise, exaggerate differences and even caricature' (Chambers 2010, 42).

According to Fairclough (2005), this methodology is transdisciplinary because it assembles diverse disciplinary resources, without expecting or seeking any substantive change as a result and without confronting 'thorny theoretical and methodological problems involved in transcending theoretical boundaries' (Fairclough 2005, 53). However, we would argue that this type of CDA represents a particular interdisciplinary approach. Based on the transdisciplinary tradition within which the authors are located, transdisciplinary research is characterised by 'a focus on real world problems, involvement of multiple stakeholders, integration of different forms of knowledge, and crossing boundaries between disciplines and between science and society' (Cummings, Regeer et al 2013, 11). Given the lack of involvement of multiple stakeholders, we question whether this methodology can be seen as transdisciplinary.

Methodology

Phase 1: Selection of research topic and providing an overview of past discourses

Step 1: Select a research topic that relates to a social question that can be productively approached with a focus on text.

Example 1: We had observed, along with others, that knowledge and knowledge societies were mentioned very little in the main text of the SDGs. In this way, we had already identified the text that we would be examining.

Example 2: We were interested to investigate how discourses on the private sector were related to sustainable development but had not, at this stage, identified an appropriate text.

Step 2: Which discourses have already been identified in the area you are investigating?

Example 1: In this case, we found an existing paper which proposed two different discourses on the knowledge society (Hornidge 2011). Although we still adapted this further, it laid the framework for the two discourses on the knowledge society that we employed to examine the text of the SDGs: the techno-scientific-economic discourse and the pluralist-participatory discourse.

Example 2: In this case, there was no previous analysis of the different discourses related to the private sector that we could employ as the basis for this step. For this reason, we had to start by identifying the discourses ourselves. From the literature, we concluded that there were four discourses on the private sector related to sustainable development: the dominant, pro-private sector discourse showing unconditional support for the private sector; the skeptical discourse which questioned the pro-private sector discourse; the middle-ground discourse with new approaches, specifically designed to leverage development relevance, such as social entrepreneurship; and the anti-private sector discourse which considers that the private sector is unable to support sustainable development.

Phase 2: Selection and analysis of texts

Step 1: Select texts appropriate to the object of research

Example 1: We had already identified the SDG text for analysis because we recognized that it did not refer at all to knowledge, and specifically local knowledge and local realities.

Example 2: We decided to analyse and compare the main text of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), namely the 'Millennium Declaration' (UN, 2000) and the SDG text (UN, 2015).

Step 2: Analysis of texts at the level of:

- individual words and phrases
- how the words and phrases relate to each other in the text
- the priority given to different themes

Example 1: In this step, the text is analysed to identify vision, strategy, means of implementation, and goals at the level of: individual words and phrases, how the words and phrases relate to each other in the text, and priority given to different themes. We first looked at the references to knowledge and knowledge societies, and the context within which they appear. Given that there are very few explicit references to knowledge within the SDGs, we also searched for characteristics of the knowledge discourses identified in Phase 1, Step 2.

Example 2: In this step, the text was analysed at the level of individual words and phrases related to the private sector, how the words and phrases relate to each other in the text, and priority given to different themes.

Step 3: Identify discourses in the text, based on the prior discourses identified in Phase 1.

Example 1: Based on this analysis, we reached the conclusion that the SDG text had very little reference to knowledge and, that when it did, it was within the dominant discourse of technical-scientific-economic discourse.

Example 2: We established that the SDG text was exhibiting the dominant discourse related to the private sector and this discourse was less evident in the MDGs where the private sector was less in the foreground.

Phase 3: Describe how the text was created and how this potentially relates to the discourses identified in your analysis of the text and the discourses which have been identified

Examples 1 and 2 both show the influence of the developed countries and the private sector in the way in which the texts were developed. In addition, they also demonstrate how an aspirational text with an emphasis on transformation is used to obscure a process which represents business as usual. In Example 2, an anonymous reviewer also required us to relate our analysis to the post-Washington Consensus, a policy framework which appeared after the 2007-2009 economic crisis which, like the Washington Consensus which preceded it, favoured the private sector.

Phase 4: Possible solutions or ways past the dominant discourse in terms of creating new discourses, narratives and arguments

Example 1: In addition to the paper which creates a new narrative around the role of knowledge for development, the analysis in the paper played a key role in the development of the ‘Agenda Knowledge for Development’ (Brandner and Cummings 2018) which has been developed during a participatory process to complement the SDGs from the perspective of knowledge. This Agenda, with 14 Knowledge Development Goals, also includes 200 personal statements which comprise individual perspectives on knowledge for development. The

analysis in the paper was particularly powerful when colleagues argued 'There is no need to develop an Agenda Knowledge for Development because knowledge is an intrinsic part of the SDGs.' Based on the analysis within the paper which is Example 1, we could counter this by arguing that although knowledge was barely mentioned, where knowledge was mentioned at all the emphasis was on the technical-scientific-economic role of knowledge, and that a new discourse on knowledge was needed to represent the pluralist-participatory discourse, including local knowledge.

Example 2: In addition to the recently published paper, it has yet to be decided how the analysis will be able to contribute new narratives and arguments.

Next steps

We will inform networks, such as KM4Dev, about this new tool. Based on feedback from colleagues, we will aim to improve it further. In addition, we hope that some colleagues will use it to undertake CDA of policy documents. We will also be using the tool ourselves to further employ CDA in our academic papers.

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