Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse of Condescension

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Introduction. During the past 15 years or so, as the gap between rich and poor in our country has reached alarming proportions, many of us in the business of teaching composition have become increasingly concerned with the larger sociopolitical context in which our students, and we, live. One of the pleasures of teaching composition is that we can justifiably address these sorts of concerns in our classrooms. Indeed, in keeping with the original spirit of classical rhetoric, it is common practice in composition classrooms across the country to have students engage in critical thinking and writing about current issues.

In this light, the need for context-sensitive forms of discourse analysis has become increasingly acute. Teachers, students, scholars, and others engaged in composition studies all stand to benefit from being able to analyze written texts and discursive practices in ways that encourage students to address and, ideally, act on important social problems. In recent years, several closely-related forms of discourse analysis have emerged which promise to satisfy this need: critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993; Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard, 1996; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997), social linguistics (Gee, 1996, 1999), and social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Lemke, 1995). These three approaches embody the generic features that any critical rhetoric,
according to McKerrow (1989), must satisfy: They share “the same ‘critical spirit’ that is held in common among the divergent perspectives of Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas, and Foucault”; they “serve a demystifying function . . . by demonstrating the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship with power/knowledge”; they are “not detached and impersonal, but rather have as their object something which they are ‘against’”; and they have “consequences” in the sense that they “identify the possibilities of future action available to the participants” (p. 92). In particular, these context-sensitive forms of discourse analysis all share the following distinctive characteristics:

1. They address contemporary societal issues, seeking to show how people are manipulated by powerful interests through the medium of public discourse.
2. They give special attention to underlying factors of ideology, power, and resistance.
3. They link together analyses of text, discursive practices, and social context.
4. They combine rhetorical theory and social theory.
5. They see genres as key structural elements.
6. They incorporate intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and other poststructural conceptions of discourse.
7. They take into account omissions, implicatures, presuppositions, ambiguities, and other covert but powerful aspects of discourse.
8. They take note of interpersonal aspects of discourse such as politeness, identity, and ethos.
9. Unlike other forms of cultural criticism, they ground their analyses in close, detailed inspection of texts.

10. To encourage political activism, they try to make their analyses accessible to the general public by, for example, minimizing the use of technical jargon and belletristic style.

Beyond these commonalities, there are several differences among these three approaches that are worth noting. First, they tend to differ in their principal objects of study. Critical discourse analysts, up to now, have focused mainly on the media (news reports, popular books, advertisements, TV shows, and speeches). Social semioticians, meanwhile, have emphasized cartoons, paintings, children’s drawings, policy statements, and conversations. And social linguists have emphasized spontaneous, private oral narratives. Thus, on the face of it, critical discourse analysis might be the best choice for analyzing written texts, social semiotics for visual media, and social linguistics for classroom discourse. Second, social semiotics and critical discourse analysis both have a distinctive British flavor, having developed out of Hallidayan systemic linguistics and often using texts from British media as objects of study. Finally, critical discourse analysis is far more fully developed, has more followers and contributors, and is more prominent in the published literature. For these reasons, and because I feel it is better suited to the needs of composition teachers and scholars, the remainder of this chapter will focus on critical discourse analysis.

**Overview**

Critical discourse analysis is useful to both composition research and composition teaching. For researchers, CDA offers a powerful arsenal of analytic tools that can be
deployed in the close reading of editorials, op-ed columns, advertisements, and other public texts. It enriches the analysis further by insisting that such close reading be done in conjunction with a broader contextual analysis, including consideration of discursive practices, intertextual relations, and sociocultural factors. To some extent, these activities resemble the sort of analysis done in cultural studies; but CDA puts more emphasis both on the fine-grained details of text and on the political aspects of discursive manipulation.

Critical discourse analysis is also a valuable tool for composition teachers and students. CDA can readily be used in undergraduate writing courses whenever students are required to analyze a text critically and then write about it. Because of CDA’s heavy emphasis on contextual knowledge, texts that work best are those for which students already have substantial contextual knowledge, e.g., texts dealing with current topics in public discourse. Typical examples of such texts include news reports, editorials, letters to the editor, advertisements, Internet postings, political campaign literature, fundraising letters, and junk mail. For example, students could be presented with different news reports of the same event and asked to write a comparative analysis; or they could be given an editorial or letter to the editor and asked to write a response; or they could be required to critique an advertisement. Although such assignments are already quite common in many composition classrooms, using critical discourse analysis as a supplementary tool enables students to delve deeper into the sociopolitical aspects of a topic by focusing their attention on specific kinds of textual, discursive, and contextual features.

CDA’s insistence on including discursive practices in the analysis gives rise to another distinguishing aspect of how the sort of writing assignment described above should be carried out. Since the main purpose of critical discourse analysis is to understand how
people are manipulated by public discourse and thereby subjected to abuses of power, it is important for students to try to experience being manipulated themselves before taking a more critical view. In other words, their reading of a text should proceed in two distinct stages. First, they should try to simulate how an intended reader might read and react to the given text. Just as an appreciation of Star Trek requires a “willing suspension of disbelief”, an appreciation of the manipulative power of editorials, advertisements, and other public texts requires that students first put themselves in what post-structuralists call the intended “reading position” (Kress) or “reading formation” (Bennett). For example, if students are going to critique an advertisement in Seventeen magazine, they should first identify the target readership (teenage American girls, presumably) and then try to role-play such readers responding innocently to such a text. This requires educated guesswork, of course, but it is the sort of guesswork needed for good rhetorical analysis (Who is the target audience for this text? What sorts of interests and background knowledge might such readers have in common? What is the ostensible purpose of this text? and so on.), and so it should fit naturally into any composition course. Students should keep mental notes of their reactions as they work through this first stage of reading.

The second stage of analysis calls for a more resistant stance, one that allows students to analyze the text-reader interaction in a more critical fashion (Scholes, 1985). Here students should be encouraged to “step back” and analyze both the text itself and their initial reaction to it. This is where the main focus of instruction should lie, using the analytical concepts discussed below.
Students must be trained to adopt, in sequence, these two different roles. Without such training, many students may try to jump to the second stage without having experienced the first, and thus will fail to appreciate how manipulation occurs.

A final distinguishing feature of applying CDA in the composition classroom is its attention to textual detail. Although most composition courses include sociopolitical or cultural readings, class discussion of these readings often neglects close textual examination. In my view, this is because many instructors lack the sort of analytic vocabulary that is needed to make such an examination sociopolitically engaging. Critical discourse analysis, fortunately, offers instructors precisely such a vocabulary. It is to this topic that we now turn.

Analytic Concepts

At the heart of any form of discourse analysis are the concepts that practitioners find most useful in doing close textual analysis, concepts that are most fruitful in allowing the analyst to pursue the stated aims and purposes of the analysis. Since the main purpose of critical discourse analysis is to show how public discourse often serves the interests of powerful forces over those of the less privileged, analysts have generally focused on those aspects of language which often facilitate such abuses. For example, metaphor is commonly used by writers to give meanings a certain slant (in contrast, say, to grammatical parallelism, which serves only to promote readability). Thus, critical discourse analysts have paid much closer attention to metaphor than, say, to parallelism. This section details many of the concepts that critical discourse analysts typically use in doing close textual work. These concepts are applied at different levels of granularity, ranging from single words to entire texts.
Word/phrase level concepts include classification, connotation, metaphor, lexical presupposition, modality, and register. Classification refers to how one chooses to name and label things. In today’s abortion debate, for example, the decision to use the term “pro-choice” (or, alternatively, “pro-abortion”) is one that positions the writer as favoring one side in the debate. Connotation refers to the associations and nuances of meaning that go beyond a word’s dictionary definition. A special type of connotation is found in code words, words whose nuances of meaning are meant to be understood only by a subset of the general population (Fish; Scholes). The term “family values” in today’s political landscape, for example, is a code term for social conservatism. As mentioned above, the use of metaphor is another way of casting ideas in a certain light. Indeed, as is pointed out by George Lakoff and colleagues, much of our thinking and communicating is done in metaphorical terms (Lakoff and Johnson), and this is often exploited in political discourse (Lakoff; Gee).

Presuppositions are another type of linguistic device that can be used at the word/phrase level to manipulate readers. These are words or phrases that assume the truth of the statements in which they are found. For example, in the sentence, “President Clinton’s liberal views are not popular with many Congressional Republicans,” it is presupposed that President Clinton has “liberal” views. In this case, it is the possessive form (Clinton’s) that triggers the presupposition; many other kinds of linguistic constructions can also serve as presupposition triggers (Simpson; Jalbert). Modality is the use of modal verbs and phrases like might, should, will, we think, and commands to project a certain authorial “voice” or attitude (Simpson). Modal constructions facilitate various forms of manipulation including the hedging of claims in advertisements and reporters’ accounts of statements from sources.
Register refers to the linguistic style of a discourse that connects it to a particular discursive activity or group (Biber et al.). Academic writing constitutes a distinct register, as does surfboarding slang or journalese. Politicians, entertainers, and other performers are adept at shifting from one register to another, sometimes within the same stretch of discourse.

At the **sentence/utterance level**, the most useful analytic concepts are transitivity, deletion, topicalization, register, politeness, presupposition, insinuation, and intertextuality. **Transitivity** refers to the agent-patient relations in a sentence, or how the main action of a sentence is encoded (Fairclough). It answers the question, Who is doing what to whom? In most cases, the semantic agent (or actor) in a sentence is depicted as having more power than the patient. If a text consistently has the same agent from sentence to sentence, it may reflect a perspective favoring that agent’s status. **Deletion** refers to the deliberate omission of information in a sentence (Jalbert). A common instance of this occurs when a writer chooses, for one reason or another, to omit mentioning the agent of an action. For example, in the sentence, “Many women are subjected to domestic violence,” the causative agent (in this case, “by men”) has been omitted. This type of construction, known as the agentless passive, is one of the most common forms of agent-deletion. Agents can also be deleted through the use of heavily nominalized sentences, as in, “Many women are victims of domestic violence.”

**Topicalization** is the positioning of a sentence element at the beginning of the sentence so as to give it prominence (or foregrounding). In the sentence above, *many women* has been topicalized. **Register** is determined not only by word and phrase usage, as noted above, but also by sentence structure. The well-known shifts of register that occur in
advertisements, for example, are due as much to syntactic differences as to lexical ones. **Politeness** refers to the interpersonal stance effected in the discourse by cues such as pronoun usage, terms of address, and register (Brown and Levinson). As illustrated below, “positive” politeness seeks to establish solidarity with the reader or listener while “negative” politeness seeks to maintain independence and privacy. **Presupposition** can be enacted through sentence structure as well. In the sentence, “The FBI kept tabs on King, Carmichael, and other trouble makers,” it is presupposed that King and Carmichael were troublemakers. **Insinuation** is another sentence-level device used for manipulative purposes. Whereas all that is needed to identify a presupposition is a knowledge of the language, insinuation requires also some background knowledge. For example, if the above sentence about the FBI were followed by this one, “Director Hoover wanted to preserve American traditions,” it would insinuate, at least for some readers, that Hoover was opposed to full-scale racial integration. **Intertextuality**, or the recognizable “borrowing” of words or phrases from another source (Selzer), sometimes occurs with entire sentences. Sayings, aphorisms, and other fixed phrases are examples of this.

**Text level** concepts include genre, heteroglossia, coherence, framing, extended metaphor, foregrounding/backgrounding, omission, and auxiliary embellishments. **Genre** refers to the recognizable type of text that a piece of discourse embodies (Swales). A genre is a patterned response to similar rhetorical situations (Miller). But genres can be manipulated for rhetorical effect (Bazerman; Myers; Berkenkotter and Huckin), thus making them of interest to the critical discourse analyst. **Heteroglossia** is the inclusion of discursive differences, register shifts, or multiple “voices” (Bakhtin) in a text. Identifying these different voices enables the analyst to point out intertextual linkages
(Lemke), thus situating the text more firmly in a sociocultural context. Coherence refers to the ability of a text to “hang together.” Although textual coherence requires certain textual cues including consistent use of verb tense, sentence topics, pronoun reference, and so on, it also requires active interpretation on the part of the reader, drawing on his/her background knowledge (Brown and Yule). By studying the coherence of a text, the critical discourse analyst can see what kind of background knowledge the text is evoking. Framing is the slant or “spin” an author gives to a text (Parenti; Mumby & Clair). The ability to cast a story in a certain light is one of the most powerful weapons at an author’s disposal. Extended metaphors are those that continue beyond a single sentence. They contribute to textual coherence and can serve as framing devices. Foregrounding means the prominence given to parts of a text, either by their physical placement or size or by the emphasis given them through word choice or syntactic structure. The opposite of foregrounding is backgrounding. The choice of whether to emphasize or de-emphasize a piece of information through foregrounding or backgrounding, respectively, is yet another authorial resource, one that critical discourse analysts should pay close attention to. The ultimate form of backgrounding is omission, or leaving relevant information out of a text. In some cases, such textual silences are of a broad ideological sort (Chomsky), in others they are more tactical (Jaworski). In any case, what is left unsaid is often more important that what is said. Auxiliary embellishments are the non-linguistic aspects of a text: graphics, sound effects, and so on (Parenti). They draw attention and so can make a quick and powerful impression.

**Higher level concepts.** As mentioned earlier, critical discourse analysis involves the integrated study of text, discursive practices, and broader social context.
The concepts just discussed belong only to the first of these categories. At higher levels of analysis—those involving discursive processes and broader contextual factors—certain other, more general concepts typically come into play. As in the case of textual analysis, these concepts are felt to be especially pertinent to the abuse of power. Following are some of the higher-level concepts that critical discourse analysts have found useful in explaining how particular discourses can lead to abuses of power.

Readers read texts in different ways according to their interests, purposes, time constraints, and so on. When they read with close attention, they are using “central” processing, whereas when they are just glancing at something they are using “peripheral” processing (Pratkanis and Aronson). The former allows the reader to apply critical scrutiny, while the latter does not. In our information-saturated world, people are forced to do a lot of peripheral processing, which makes them vulnerable to manipulation by text producers. This peripheral-mode manipulation encourages time-pressed readers to use cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics (Pratkanis and Aronson), and to assume the intended reading position (see above). If the same heuristics and the same reading positions are repeatedly invoked, it leads to a naturalization of the ideas presented; that is, they come to seem “natural” or commonsensical. This is especially so if the ideas conform to widely-accepted cultural models and myths such as the American Dream or the US as exporter of democracy (Gee; Hackett & Zhao). Discourse that represents dominant interests sometimes encounters resistance from subordinated readers. Sophisticated text-producers typically co-opt such resistance by appealing to so-called “common interests.” This results in a hegemonic form of discourse whose aim is to defuse political resistance and maintain existing power structures (Gramsci; Eagleton). Ideology clearly plays a
key role in the construction of such discourses (Eagleton; Kress). Critical discourse analysts should try to identify the ideological themes that run through texts, and also the apparent interests that motivate text-producers. Readers can also be persuaded by argumentation, and so this should be analyzed as well.

**General strategy.** It is important to emphasize that the concepts just described are meant to be used selectively, not exhaustively. Critical discourse analysis is an approach, a way of looking at texts, not a rigorously systematic method of analysis. In a manner not unlike that of the literary critic, a critical discourse analyst should use his or her best judgment as to which concepts are most appropriate to an insightful understanding of the text at hand. In most cases, the basic insight is gained during an initial reading of the text, before the CDA concepts are fully applied. In other words, CDA is not a “discovery” mechanism per se; rather, it serves to confirm, explain, and enrich the initial insight and to communicate that insight, in detailed fashion, to others.

Procedurally, one begins by selecting a public text or set of public texts that illustrates a predetermined general insight, as just discussed. In the case below, for example, I selected the text I did because I felt, when first reading it, that it was noticeably condescending. And I felt that this was (a) inconsistent with the supposed role of an elected representative and yet (b) all too common of such representatives. My goal in using CDA was not to discover this perception but rather to explain and discuss it. It is often desirable to use a fairly large corpus of texts all having some point of interest in common (e.g., genre, topic, purpose) rather than a single text, as this allows the researcher or student to see patterns that would otherwise be difficult to discern. In a full-blown study, that’s what I
would do; but in the case at hand, for reasons of space, I could only deal with a single text. In analyzing the text, it’s usually best to start with the higher-level concepts, using the two-stage reading process described earlier and taking note of any salient features of the text. One then goes through the text again and again at increasingly microscopic levels of analysis (from text-level to sentence-level to word-level).

**Case study**

It might be helpful at this point to illustrate CDA at work. Throughout the long and distinguished history of rhetoric, its foremost goal has been to enable citizens to participate effectively in civic and political life. One small way in which I personally try to promote this is by encouraging my students to write letters to their political representatives. To quote Sandra Stotsky, “What citizens write and how legislators respond to their writing may contribute to a self-generating cycle of writing and reading in possibly the most important context it can occur” (p. 408). *How legislators respond* is a key step in this process, one that merits close critical analysis.

In trying to help my students attain this sort of civic literacy, I find it useful to offer up for analysis my own correspondence with elected officials. In doing so, I hope to draw my students’ attention to important local issues, show them how citizens can participate in local politics, and make clear to them the importance of good writing. This pedagogy is not unique to critical discourse analysis; by using CDA, however, I can generate additional benefits as well, such as honing my students’ rhetorical sensibilities and opening their eyes to how official power can be abused.
As an example, let us consider a letter I recently received from a state legislator (Figure 2) in response to a letter of my own (Figure 1). The state in which I live is currently facing a massive reconstruction project on our local highways, in part because of an anticipated major increase in tourism, in part because of longstanding procrastination by the state legislature. At the time I wrote my letter, the legislature was planning to fund this $1.4 billion project not by raising the appropriate tax revenues but, as might be expected in a conservative legislature, by transferring money from social and educational programs.

Senator Johnson, a Republican, is a senior member of the State Senate and one of the state’s most powerful politicians.
February 16, 1997
Sen. Clayton Johnson
Executive Appropriations
State Senate

Dear Senator Johnson:

As a citizen, parent, voter, and taxpayer, I am greatly distressed by what is apparently happening in this year’s legislative session regarding funding for higher education. According to a number of news reports, the Legislature intends to slash education funding in order to free up money for roadbuilding. The state’s two research universities seem to have been specially targeted, even though these institutions bring far more benefits to our state than they cost. Although we clearly need to do something about our deteriorating roads, it makes no sense to do so at the expense of all our young people. Roadbuilding funds can be raised in far better ways, for example by charging those people who use the roads (via increased gas taxes, toll roads, extra trucking fees, etc.).

Let me just emphasize a few points about higher education in our state:

1. Every year our state’s two research universities together generate more than $250 million in external research funding. The U. of ____ is arguably the most cost-effective research institution in the country, ranking #1 in number of patented inventions per million dollars of research. This research has led directly to the creation of 43 companies in the state, which generate $300 million in annual sales and employ 3000 of our citizens with a payroll of $160 million.

2. These two institutions provide 100% of all doctoral/professional level instruction and 97% of all master’s level instruction in public education in our state. This kind of instruction is fundamentally different from that carried out in the state’s other institutions of higher learning. If professors at the U. of ____ and ____SU are forced to carry teaching loads similar to those at the local 2-year colleges, they will not be able to do any research and thus will not be able to provide the necessary high-level instruction. And in that case, where are we supposed to get our future doctors, lawyers, architects, business executives, teachers, scientists, and other professionals?

3. Our state has proportionately more young people than any other state in the Union, and young people are the future of this state. Indeed, business leaders constantly point to our state’s educated workforce as a main reason why corporations are increasingly choosing to relocate here. According to local demographers, the number of college-age citizens in this state is expected to increase significantly during the next 5 years or more. And if President Clinton’s proposed $10,000 annual deduction and $1,500/yr tax credit for post-secondary tuition are enacted, there will be even more pressure on our universities. Why gut these universities just when we will be needing them most?
When the pioneers came westward 150 years ago, their leader instructed them to “pay particular attention to the education of your children.” At this moment in our state’s history, I hope you will pay heed to his words. Instead of giving in to the shortsightedness that seems to be dominating this legislative session, please give your support to the people who need it most—our children.

Sincerely yours,

Thomas N. Huckin
783 East Capitol Blvd
Tel. 355-0971

Figure 1  Constituent’s letter to Sen. Johnson
February 19, 1997

Thomas N. Huckin
783 East Capitol Blvd

Dear Thomas:

Thank you very much for your recent letter regarding education. I deeply appreciate your concern and interest in this important issue and I echo many of your sentiments. It is very easy to form an opinion on a matter, but to be truly objective it is important to understand all of the issues from all of the different sides. With your background and experiences in life, I am sure you understand that the realities of life differ from the perceptions of life. Many have false perceptions created by a lack of correct information and improper representation from a variety of sources. Understanding the importance of the legislation, I assure you that I am carefully analyzing both sides of the issue to ensure that your rights are protected and concerns addressed.

Thank you again for your letter and for your continued efforts in doing your part as a citizen of our great state. Your efforts are important and help us see the needs and concerns of all our citizens.

Sincerely,

Clayton Johnson
Ranking member, Executive Appropriations Committee
State Senate

Figure 2 Sen. Johnson’s response
Senator Johnson’s letter clearly belongs to the genre of response-to-a-constituent letter. After a polite two-sentence opening, it offers a 4-sentence noncommittal response of sorts and then ends with a formulaic two-sentence closing. Its extreme vagueness – never even mentioning any of the topics I had raised in my letter – plus its timing – it was sent in the middle of a hectic legislative session – mark it as the sort of all-purpose form letter that Senator Johnson and his staff might have composed prior to the start of the legislative session a month earlier.

As the recipient of this letter, I was not surprised that it was a form letter, but I was surprised – and offended – that it was so patronizing. Indeed, it struck me as a classic example of what we might call “the discourse of condescension.” Just to make sure, I showed it to about two dozen other people (mostly women, who have more experience with this kind of discourse than I do), who agreed with my perceptions. As one of them said, “I get queasy every time I read it.” Now I doubt very much that Senator Johnson intended his writing to be seen this way; certainly a major politician would not deliberately want to offend his constituents. So what is it about this letter that makes it sound condescending, and what sorts of critical interpretations might it give rise to?

To answer the first question, the discourse of condescension has three main characteristics: First, it contains nothing overtly critical or negative, and often proffers insincere praise; second, it assumes a difference in status and worth between speaker and listener (cf. Goffman (1967) on “alignment”); and third, this assumed difference is disputed by the listener. Johnson’s letter satisfies the first two of these criteria [the third is a function of the recipient; see below]. It contains nothing overtly critical and even tries to indulge me in a
few halfhearted compliments. It projects an assumed power differential through the contrast of his official stationery, title, and “objectivity” against my simple first name and implied ignorance. And while insinuating that I have “false perceptions” due to incorrect information from unreliable sources, he offers no information of his own that might help me out, thereby implying that I’m incapable of making good use of it.

But clearly there’s more to his letter than just this. Though I’ve received many epistolary brush-offs from government officials over the years, never have I received one containing such an abundance of indirectness and philosophical platitudes. Indeed, I think it qualifies as an example of what Habermas (1976) has called “systematically distorted communication,” where a departure from generic expectations can be seen as possibly reflecting broader sociopolitical conflicts. Using critical discourse analysis, there are many ways to analyze this, and of course different readers might read this letter differently. But in the brief space I have available here, let me just offer a sketch of some of the things a discourse analyst might notice.

First, one might begin by taking note of what’s been left out of this letter--the textual silences. In keeping with politics as the art of concealment, Senator Johnson’s letter reveals more through what it fails to say, I believe, than through what it actually does say. My letter raised a number of topics for the senator to consider, including the universities’ generating of research dollars, the need for doctoral/professional level instruction, the importance of the state’s educated workforce, increasing enrollment pressures, and the idea of raising user fees to pay for roadbuilding instead of cutting the budget for higher education. Johnson’s failure to mention any of these topics in his response constitutes a violation of what social psychologists call the “norm of reciprocity,” an unspoken rule that regulates the exchange of
goods and services in many cultures around the world. This norm states, roughly, that “if I do something for you, then you are obligated to return the favor and do something for me” (Pratkanis and Aronson, 1991, p. 180). By this norm, I would have expected Sen. Johnson to acknowledge the length and substance of my letter by at least touching on some of the topics I had raised. Alternatively--since the norm of reciprocity can be suspended in certain exigencies--I would have accepted, say, a 2-sentence response saying that he unfortunately did not have time at the moment to provide a proper answer. But Sen. Johnson’s response took neither of these paths. Instead, he wrote a letter long enough (8 sentences) to tell me that he did have time for an answer, but one that nonetheless failed to address any of my specific topics. I could only see this as a form of evasion.

Second, one would want to analyze the interdiscursive and intertextual aspects of this document, since these too are salient features. I find Johnson’s letter to be a pastiche of different discourses, including the bureaucratese of the opening and closing couplets, the fortune-cookie discourse of sentences 3 and 5, and the paternalistic discourse of sentences 4 and 6. Intertextual analysis depends heavily on the reader’s experience, but computer searches can help out, too. For example, the term “improper representation” is not part of my lexicon, but a WestLaw computer search turned up 299 occurrences of it in state and federal legal cases. Interestingly, it appears to mean something quite different from the way Senator Johnson is using it: for example, all twelve of the state statutes using the term do so in a phrase like “improper representation as an official inspection station.”

Third, we might consider the speech-act inferencing that this letter invites. Although it is filled with I’s and you’s, suggesting a one-on-one, mutually respectful exchange, there are two intervening sentences containing no such pronouns at all, making them distinctly
ambiguous. First, Sen. Johnson writes, “It is very easy to form an opinion on a matter, but to be truly objective it is important that one understands all of the issues from all of the different sides.” Coming immediately after the polite two-sentence opening sequence, this sentence initiates the body of his letter, in effect serving as a topic statement. As the recipient of the letter, I interpreted this sentence as the Senator’s basic response to my long and substantive letter. Although couched as a generalization, I couldn’t help applying it to the case at hand and wondering exactly what he mean. Is he implying that I have just “formed an opinion”? Does he think that I need to be “truly objective” and that I should “try to understand all of the issues from all of the different sides”? In short, is he subtly criticizing me here? Or is he referring only to himself? In a so-called personal letter starting out with I’s and you’s, it would be normal for any reader to apply the Relevance Principle (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1987) in this way and insert whatever referents seem most appropriate to the specific situation.

The same kind of ambiguity resides in sentence 5: “Many have false perceptions created by a lack of correct information and improper representation from a variety of sources.” Again, the platitudinous nature of this statement invites the reader to supply a more specific interpretation. Is the Senator insinuating that I have “false perceptions”? Does he think that I am the victim of “a lack of correct information” and “improper representations”? Or is he only talking about himself? The sentence immediately following this one offers a clear answer. Sen. Johnson writes: “Understanding the importance of the legislation, I assure you that I am carefully analyzing both sides of the issue . . . .” In other words, since he is analyzing both sides of the issue, he cannot be laboring under “false
perceptions. (Note that in sentence 3 he says that “to be truly objective it is important to understand all of the issues from all of the different sides.”)

So the logic of the Senator’s response works like this:

**MAJOR PREMISE:** “To be truly objective it is important to understand all of the issues from all of the different sides.”

**MINOR PREMISE:** “I am carefully analyzing both sides of the issue.”

**CONCLUSION:** I am truly objective (and thus cannot have “false perceptions”).

At the same time, by repeatedly referring to (mere) “opinion” and “false perceptions,” he insinuates that I am not truly objective, not in possession of true understanding. I should be happy, I guess, that he will protect my “rights” (something, it should be noted, my letter did not ask for).

It is possible, of course, that the Senator thought he was just being polite. But if we apply politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), we can see that his letter represents a very clumsy attempt at doing what is called “face work” (Goffman, 1967). First it presents a positive face, offering involvement or solidarity (sentences 1-2); then it abruptly switches and presents a negative face, signaling a desire for distance and privacy. This odd alternation continues throughout the middle section, producing a schizophrenic effect. In this context, the sentences containing personal pronouns stand out as instances of what Fairclough (1992, 1995) calls “synthetic personalization.” The sense of phoniness is furthered by the writer’s use of the phrase, “With your background and experiences in life.” What does Johnson know of, or even care about, my life experiences? Nothing in his letter offers the slightest trace.
In their fine book on social semiotics, Hodge & Kress (1988) use the term “ideological complex” to denote a “functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world” (p. 3). “An ideological complex exists to sustain relationships of both power and solidarity, and it represents the social order as simultaneously serving the interests of both dominant and subordinate” (ibid.). In Hodge & Kress’s description, an ideological complex is usually the product either of clever rhetorical manipulation or of naturalized hegemonic discourse; in either case, it is difficult to spot. But Senator Johnson’s letter shows that this doesn’t have to be the case. Here we have what I think is a transparent attempt to contrive an ideological complex: At times it appears to be trying to establish some kind of odd solidarity with me, at other times, it is clearly trying to assert power. But the whole thing is so badly done that its artificiality is baldly apparent.

All the textual incoherences I have just described do more than present Senator Johnson and/or his staff as incompetent and uncaring. They betray as well an ideological incoherence in his politics. On the one hand, Johnson has long presented himself as an upstanding member of the Republican Revolution, determined to “get government off our backs.” But his letter says just the opposite. First, he assures me that he is “carefully analyzing both sides of the issue to ensure that my rights are protected and concerns addressed.” He considers himself more “objective” than I am, in possession of better information. In short, despite my lengthy, substantive, and I believe somewhat well-informed letter on a topic dear to my heart, the good Senator says he knows more about it than I do! Furthermore, since this is likely an all-purpose form letter with the word education plugged in just for the occasion, he presumably sends out a similar letter to his other constituents on all manner of other topics. Which means he presents himself in the
same way to *them*, as knowing more about all these *other* subjects as well. The clear message is that he considers himself superior to all of us ordinary citizens – not by virtue of any inherent qualities but by virtue of his position as a *government* official, someone who gets “correct information and proper representation from a variety of sources.” To me, this doesn’t sound like “getting government off our backs.” This sounds like Big Brother incarnate.

As Stotsky notes, “A thoughtful issue-oriented letter by a constituent can serve important intellectual purposes to a legislator and a staff that is willing to invest time in a more personal response. In return, legislators who show their constituents that they care about what their constituents specifically have to say may encourage them even more to believe that what they think as citizens is important” (p. 408). Johnson’s refusal to respond to any of the issues or proposals in my letter tells me that he doesn’t really care what I think.

Wondering if my reaction to Sen. Johnson’s letter was just a quirk of my own, I was curious to know how others might see his letter. To this end I asked 79 students in a variety of undergraduate writing courses for their opinions. I showed them both letters and asked them to “write down two or three adjectives describing [Sen. Johnson’s] letter (its tone, its substance, etc.).” The results are given below in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“vague”</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“form letter”</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“condescending”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“formal”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“concerned”</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>“impersonal”</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>“noncommittal”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“reassuring”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“patronizing”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“uninformative”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Adjectives used by 79 undergraduate writing students to describe Sen. Johnson’s letter

As can be seen, many of these students reacted to Sen. Johnson’s letter in a fashion quite similar to my own. At least 30 considered it vague, uninformative, lacking in substance, or “political b.s.”; 22 saw it as an impersonal, unconcerned form letter; 14 felt it was condescending or patronizing. On the other hand, quite a few other students saw it differently, using adjectives like “concerned,” “appreciative,” “reassuring,” “informative,” and “friendly.” These findings illustrate quite clearly how condescension is not something that is automatically identifiable in text. Rather, it depends crucially on the reader’s perception, in particular on how the reader perceives his or her status relative to that of the writer.

In a full class period, of course, one would want to consider other possible text-supported interpretations, speculate about why Senator Johnson might have written this letter the way he did, and discuss ways in which citizens might be able to encourage or pressure their legislators to be more accountable to them, i.e. in McKerrow’s words, “to identify the possibilities of future action.” Presumably, such efforts would include substantial writing (see, for example, the projects described in Stotsky (1996)).
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given a brief overview of the main features of critical discourse analysis and provided one illustration of how it can be applied. Unfortunately, one example does not do justice to a rich methodology that, as Michael Stubbs (1997) points out, is part of a social constructivist tradition including Fish, Said, Foucault, Berger & Luckman, Whorf, and even Aristotle. As Stubbs notes, there are excellent opportunities for critical discourse analysts to engage in projects such as the ethnographic study of actual text production and reception, the analysis of co-occurring linguistic features as in Biber (1988), and comparative studies of texts (p. 111). In all such work, Stubbs adds, critical discourse analysts should endeavor to give the analysis a firmer empirical basis than is the case in many CDA studies to date. In particular, critical discourse analysts should be more explicit about exactly how texts influence the formation of beliefs and values. Similar criticisms can be found in Hammersley (1996) and Widdowson (1996). In the composition literature, Faigley’s Fragments of Rationality is often cited as being critical of CDA (Faigley, 1994). However, Faigley’s criticism is actually directed at Critical Linguistics, a forerunner of CDA that bears little resemblance to contemporary CDA. Faigley is certainly correct in asserting that Critical Linguistics put too much emphasis on linguistic form (especially transformational grammar) and ignored textual silences and contradictions as well as the complexities of sociopolitical relations; but these criticisms do not apply to CDA, especially in its more current manifestations.

Critical discourse analysis has developed rapidly over the last seven or eight years, and it is still rapidly evolving. For scholars and teachers of composition, I think it offers a rich form of textual analysis that builds on techniques and concepts already familiar to most
compositionists because they are found also in literary close reading, cultural studies, rhetorical analysis, and linguistic stylistics. But it offers new things as well, and blends them all together in a way that is unique, fruitful, and, I think, exciting.

References:


