This chapter provides a brief description of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and a review of its influences and histories. The perspective here emphasizes multiple approaches to CDA and foregrounds influences from European social theorists as well as Black scholars in the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

CDA is an analytic approach that makes visible how language and various semiotic systems are implicated in social structures and social control, incorporating multiple disciplines and methodological approaches grounded in multiple histories (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA can be characterized as having an overtly political agenda (cf. Kress 1990), examining how power and inequality are reproduced and enacted through text and talk in various social and political contexts (Van Dijk, 1993). Researchers using CDA are interested in understanding how discursive sources of power and dominance are reproduced, maintained, and transformed (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 2003).

CDA and related approaches (such as Critical Applied Linguistics cf., Pennycook, 2001) are becoming more widely used in research on the teaching and learning of the English language arts as researchers seek to better understand problems with language, literacy, and academic learning (e.g., Ivanic, 1998; Luke, 1995; Rogers, 2004; Sarroub, 2004). Particular attention has been paid to how some groups’ literacy practices are marginalized and viewed as failing, while the literacy practices from dominant groups are viewed as high achieving (e.g., Carter, 2007; Kumasi, 2008). CDA is useful because many English language arts researchers see power relations as key to addressing educational inequities (see Bloome, Power-Carter, Morton-Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Farris, 2005, for further discussion of power).

Power relations are most effective when they are taken for granted, not questioned, and assumed to be “natural” without reasonable alternative. Gramsci (1971) called such extension and naturalization of power relations hegemonic. One agenda of CDA has been to make such “naturalized” and hegemonic power relations visible and thereby open to analysis, critique, and deconstruction.

CDA focuses on both micro and macro power relationships. Micro power relations involve local contexts (e.g., teacher-student interaction) within which a form of dominance or injustice occurs; macro power relations involve larger institutional and social contexts, and may be inscribed in particular laws and state policies. Both micro and macro level power relations are derivative of cultural ideologies and social, political, and economic structures. The distinction of micro and macro levels of power relations is a heuristic one. Power relations located at a macro level are experienced in everyday events (a micro level); and what people do in everyday events influences power relations at a macro level.

For example, consider the classroom discussion below from an ethnographic study on African American girls in a required high school British Literature classroom in the United States (see Carter, 2001). During this particular class they are discussing one of Shakespeare’s sonnets, *My Mistresses Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun* (Sonnet 130). The teacher has engaged the students in discussing what the main idea is and, after several student responses, the teacher provides an “official” interpretation. She says:

> What we can read into it. Most of the sonnets before this had this most beautiful woman always being tall, long blonde hair, pretty big blue eyes and that was the universal beauty and that was Dante’s beauty. From the Italians. So you had to be tall, slender, long blonde hair, pretty blue eyes, rosy checks. Ugh so if you weren’t that you were not, not attractive. Ugly. So if you’re a-a tall brunette, not attractive, with brown eyes, you’re still ugly according to the sonneteers. You’re still not attractive. You’re nothing.

What we can read into it. Most of the sonnets before this had this most beautiful woman always being tall, long blonde hair, pretty big blue eyes and that was the universal beauty and that was Dante’s beauty. From the Italians. So you had to be tall, slender, long blonde hair, pretty blue eyes, rosy checks. Ugh so if you weren’t that you were not, not attractive. Ugly. So if you’re a-a tall brunette, not attractive, with brown eyes, you’re still ugly according to the sonneteers. You’re still not attractive. You’re nothing.

The teacher’s use of the phrase “read into it” suggests that she is asking students to do more than decode text; she is also asking them to read between the lines while perhaps also directing them toward a particular “reading” of the
text. She uses the third person pronoun “we” to create a collective sense of identity and a shared, standard “reading” for which the students are accountable. The teacher describes the sonneteers’ representation of beautiful women as “tall” “long blonde hair” with “pretty big blue eyes.” She describes those characteristics as “universal beauty.” Women without those characteristics are not only ugly, they’re “nothing.” Although this may not be the teacher’s point of view about women’s beauty, it is presented as a “universal” view of beauty and it derives from official and valorized literary texts.

The public, standard “reading” is problematic for students who are unable to attain these qualities, particularly, the African American girls. During interviews with the girls, they stated that they viewed the teacher as calling them ugly. And while this may not have been at all the teacher’s intention, promulgating a raced definition of beauty (one prevalent in contemporary magazine and television advertisements as well as in the sonnets) marginalizes the African American girls both in terms of “beauty” and as readers (the way they read the sonnet is outside the standard reading).

A close examination of the sonnet shows that it can be read as arguing against the use of beauty as a criteria for the sonneteer’s love. Yet, even in the dismissal it acknowledges what counts as “universal beauty” as he loves her in spite of not having those universal beauty characteristics. The characteristics of “universal beauty” are those of a particular set women of European descent.

There is a tense change during the discussion, from past to present tense. The teacher says, “according to the sonneteers you’re still not attractive you’re nothing.” The tense shift suggests that certain dominant positions that support a particular view of beauty are also current. The Elizabethan sonneteers, white males of the European bourgeoisie, define “universal beauty” both then and now.

The brief analysis above illustrates how CDA makes visible how various linguistic and text based content and structures embed power relations at a macro level (sexist and racist concepts of beauty) within micro level contexts, how they valorize dominant ideologies (in this case about beauty, race, and gender relations), and marginalize and attack the personhood of some within local settings (the classroom) and in the broader society (Black women in general).

CDA Influences and Histories

The historical roots of CDA, in part, can be traced back to the Frankfurt School of the 1930s. Among the scholars associated with the Frankfurt School are Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Aron, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Jurgen Habermas. The Frankfurt School is often credited with creating one of the first models of critical cultural studies (Kellner, 1989; see also Wiggershaus, 1994) and combined cultural and communication studies, textual analysis, and the analysis of social and ideological effects. An analysis of power was explicit in these studies as they argued that popular culture was used to manipulate the masses to become un receptive and docile.

More recently, CDA has become associated with a group of European scholars (Teen van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, Ruth Wodak, among others) that emerged in the 1991 following a symposium at the University of Amsterdam (see Rogers, 2004; Wodak, 2004). Building on a broad range of European social theorists (including the Frankfurt School), they sought an agenda that would make visible how discourse is produced, interpreted and reproduced; structured by dominance; highly contextualized; and socially and historically situated (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

There are important variations among the perspectives taken by scholars employing CDA. Approaches vary with regard to the linguistic perspectives employed (systemic functional linguistics, e.g., Kress & Hodge, 1979; applied linguistics, e.g., Pennycook, 2001; American models of grammatical and textual analysis, sociolinguistics, and literacy criticism, e.g., Gee, 1999, 2004), the interdisciplinary nature of the analysis (i.e., which set disciplines are employed; see Wodak & Chilton, 2005, for one set of interdisciplinary variations) and how discourse analysis is connected to various social theories and perspectives including history, ethnography, cultural studies, and social theories derivative of particular theorists such as Foucault, Bourdieu, and Bernstein (see van Leeuwen, 2005).

Although not labeled “Critical Discourse Analysis,” the scholarship of Black scholars in the United States in the later 19th and early 20th centuries also provides a foundation for current iterations of critical discourse analysis. These scholars include W.E.B. DuBois, Ana Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, Sojourner Truth, among others. Their experiences were informed by a unique social location rooted in a history of marginalization (DuBois, 1903). Their experiences in their everyday lives and as scholars were rooted in different epistemological understandings that were often ignored or invisible to dominant society. In their scholarship, they examined societal problems as well as how power and inequality were reproduced and enacted through text and talk in various social and political contexts.

For example, consider Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman Speech” at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was born a slave and became an activist and lecturer. The societal problem in which she focused was personhood. Personhood is a construct that examines “who and what is considered to be a person, what attributes and rights are constructed as inherent to being a person, an what social positions are available” (Egan-Robertson, 1998, p. 453). In her speech, in a mainly unfriendly and hostile environment, Sojourner Truth sought to challenge existing sexist and racist ideologies that positioned Black women negatively but that were nonetheless naturalized. The excerpt from her speech below was recorded in a manner that attempted to capture her use of African American language.
Analyzing Text and Talk Through Critical Discourse Analysis

Excerpt from Ain’t I A Woman

Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber halps me into carriages, or ober mudpuddles, or gib me any best place! And ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! [And here she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power] I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ar’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And ar’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off the slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ar’n’t I a woman? (http://www.kyphilom.com/www/truth.html)

The talk in this excerpt situates Sojourner Truth in a particular historical contexts where women are positioned as “needs to be helped.” Sojourner Truth acknowledges the complexities of power relations and how she has been positioned as a Black woman by the dominant group, noting that “Nobody eber halps me into carriages, or ober mudpuddles, or gib me any best place!” Moreover, by posing the question “Aren’t I a woman,” she begins to make visible complexities of power relations among women and how most women from the dominant group did not even recognize her personhood, womanhood, or intellect. Part of what she is challenging is how “woman” is being defined and the underlying narrative of women’s lives, including the raced nature of an assumed and taken for granted definition and narrative of “woman” and the relationship of women to men. Her use of Black vernacular also constitutes a critique of the location of knowledge. Assuming that the recording of her speech is reasonably accurate, she challenges the naturalized assumption that knowledge is located in and validated by the formalized language of professional and “educated” classes, and instead locates knowledge in the everyday experiences of Black women (which can be viewed as a precursor to some aspects of critical race theory, see Crenshaw, Gotanda, & Thomas, 1995, and to Black feminist theory, see Collins, 1990).

Final Comments

What counts as CDA is defined by its purpose: to examine how texts, language practices, and related semiotic systems structure power relations that result in social, civil, economic, and political inequities. The epistemological basis of CDA derives from many histories including European social theorists, Black scholars and activists, and others, who seek to make visible how discourses at both a micro and macro level privilege some at the expense of others, deny personhood to some, and do so in a manner that appears natural and common sense and unassailable. CDA challenges those discourses, reveals the linguistic and semiotic means by which they assert and promulgate, and creates opportunities to imagine alternatives.

In researching the teaching and learning of the English language arts, CDA provides a way to make visible the power relations implicit in the literary texts read and in class discussions. But CDA can also be a curricular component providing teachers and students with a framework for analyzing as well as a way of articulating how they have been marginalized or had their personhood attacked.

References


