

What Is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Ruth Wodak in Conversation With Gavin Kendall

Key words: critical discourse analysis, interdisciplinarity, methodology

Abstract: In this interview, Ruth WODAK discusses the beginnings of her career, and what propelled her into critical discourse analysis. She analyses what makes critical discourse analysis "critical", distinguishes criticalness from dogmatism, but expounds upon the relationship between critique and norms. Finally, she discusses how "integrative indisciplinarity" might help us with problems of disciplinary incommensurability.

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About the Interview

The editors of this special edition were keen to discuss with Ruth WODAK some core issues around Critical Discourse Analysis—its past, present, and future. Gavin KENDALL began the discussion with WODAK in March 2007, and the interview was concluded in May 2007. The interview was conducted by means of email, and over several iterations, new questions and replies were generated. [1]

About Ruth WODAK

Ruth WODAK has held a personal chair in Discourse Studies at Lancaster University since September 2004. She moved from Vienna, Austria, where she had been full professor of Applied Linguistics since 1991. She has remained co-director of the Austrian National Focal Point (NFP) of the European Monitoring Centre for Racism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism.¹ [2]

In addition to various other prizes, she was awarded the Wittgenstein Prize for Elite Researchers in 1996, which made six years of continuous interdisciplinary team research possible. The main projects focussed on "Discourses on Un/employment in EU Organisations"; "Debates on NATO and Neutrality in Austria and Hungary"; "The Discursive Construction of European Identities"; "Attitudes towards EU-Enlargement; Racism at the Top"; "Parliamentary Debates on Immigration in six EU countries"; and "The Discursive Construction of the Past—Individual and Collective Memories of the German *Wehrmacht* and the Second World War". In October 2006 she was awarded the Woman's Prize of the City of Vienna. [3]

1 See <http://www.eumc.eu.int/> for more information on the work of the EUMC and the NFP's (now renamed European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, FRA).

Her research is mainly located in Discourse Studies and in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Together with her colleagues and Ph.D students in Vienna (Rudolf DE CILLIA, Gertraud BENKE, Helmut GRUBER, Florian MENZ, Martin REISIGL, Usama SULEIMAN, Christine ANTHONISSEN), she elaborated the "Discourse-Historical Approach in CDA" which is interdisciplinary, problem-oriented, and analyses changes in discursive practices over time and in various genres. [4]

Ruth's research agenda focuses on the development of theoretical approaches in discourse studies (combining ethnography, argumentation theory, rhetoric and functional systemic linguistics); gender studies; language and/in politics; prejudice and discrimination. [5]

She is a member of the editorial board of a range of linguistic journals, co-editor of the journal *Discourse and Society* and editor of *Critical Discourse Studies* (together with Norman FAIRCLOUGH, Phil GRAHAM and Jay LEMKE) and of the *Journal of Language and Politics* (together with Paul CHILTON). Together with Greg MYERS, also at Lancaster University, she edits the book series DAPSAC (Benjamins). She was also section editor of "Language and Politics" for the Second Edition of the *Elsevier Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. She is chair of the Humanities and Social Sciences Panel for the EURYI award, in the European Science Foundation. [6]

Ruth WODAK has held visiting professorships in Uppsala, Stanford University, University of Minnesota and Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. In the spring of 2004, she was awarded a Leverhulme Visiting Professorship at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. Recently, she was awarded the *Karen Hesselgren Chair* of the Swedish Parliament and will be staying at University of Örebro, Sweden, from March to June 2008 (and possibly for another three months in 2009 and in 2010). Publications include:

- Wodak, Ruth & Paul Chilton (Eds.) (2005). *New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Weiss, Gilbert & Wodak, Ruth (Eds.) (2003). *CDA. Theory and Interdisciplinarity*. London: Palgrave/MacMillan.
- Reisigl, Martin & Wodak, Ruth (2001). *Discourse and Discrimination*. London: Routledge.
- Van Dijk, Teun & Wodak, Ruth (Eds.) (2000). *Racism at the Top*. Klagenfurt: Drava
- Wodak, Ruth (1997). *Gender and Discourse*. London: Sage.
- Wodak, Ruth (1996). *Disorders of Discourse*. London: Longman. [7]

1. From Sociolinguistics to Critical Discourse Analysis

KENDALL: Ruth, could you describe your academic path to discourse analysis? What influences, motivations and perspectives were especially important for your becoming and continuing to be a qualitative researcher? [8]

WODAK: I started out as a sociolinguist and also, before this, as a CHOMSKYan grammarian and syntactician. However, because of the many stimulating and important debates after 1968, I became acquainted with Critical Theory and was very influenced by the work of Jürgen HABERMAS, Basil BERNSTEIN, and Aaron CICOUREL, and decided to turn to the study of "language in use" and thus Sociolinguistics. My PhD thesis (published 1976), accordingly, was on "The Language Defendants Use at Court", analysing tape-recorded interactions between judge and defendants at court while focusing on the impact of social class and gender on interactive patterns and, on the outcome of the trials. [9]

At that time, text linguistics and speech act theory were becoming *en vogue* which then also led me from my primary focus on sociophonology to the in-depth qualitative analysis of text and discourse (influenced by scholars such as Konrad EHLICH, Teun VAN DIJK, Robert DE BEAUGRANDE, Wolfgang DRESSLER, and so forth). Later on, I continued my research on organisational discourse in more depth, analysing therapeutic discourse in a crisis intervention centre for suicidal patients (WODAK 1981, 1986), schizophrenic language behaviour in a big psychiatric clinic in Vienna, and the communication modes between mothers and daughters (WODAK, 1984; WODAK & SCHULZ, 1986). Furthermore, I then turned to the study of communication between doctors and patients, news discourse, legal discourse, and communication at schools in various funded research projects, always in teamwork with former students of mine (see for example, LALOUSCHEK, MENZ, WODAK, 1990; LUTZ & WODAK, 1986; PFEIFFER, STROUHAL & WODAK, 1987; WODAK, 1996). Our study of the communication in an out-patient clinic even attracted the attention of many medical doctors; we were awarded the Pharmig Prize for this study 1980, and were also able to implement some of our basic research in practical proposals advising how to change traditional communication patterns in doctor-patient interactions. [10]

Simultaneously, I became interested in the many meanings and strategies involved in political rhetoric; first, I analysed various Austrian election campaigns with my students; then, I started my extensive research on post-war anti-Semitic discourse in Austria as well as on commemorative rhetoric and racist discourse (WODAK, PELIKAN, NOWAK, GRUBER, DE CILLA & MITTEN, 1990; WODAK, MENZ, MITTEN & STERN, 1994; MATUSCHEK, WODAK & JANUSCHECK, 1995). This research was basically triggered by the so-called "Waldheim Affair" 1986 when Waldheim's alleged involvement in crimes of the German Wehrmacht was debated when he stood for election as president of Austria.² [11]

2 Kurt Waldheim had been general secretary of the UN before he became president of Austria; thus, this became a worldwide debate and huge scandal when his involvement with the German Wehrmacht was uncovered.

In 1989, I published an edited volume "Language, Power and Ideology"—coincidentally at the same time as VAN DIJK and FAIRCLOUGH also started publishing similar critical research (WODAK, 1989). We met in 1991 at a meeting organised by Teun VAN DIJK in Amsterdam, often viewed as "the" formal and institutionalised beginning of CDA. From then on, I continued my research focused on the study of discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism, and identity politics, as well as on narratives of the past (see more recent publications above). [12]

KENDALL: What would you say is your particular contribution to discourse analysis? [13]

WODAK: My specific contribution is most probably the focus on interdisciplinary and implementing interdisciplinarity; this is also one of the most important characteristics of the "Discourse-Historical Approach" in CDA. Moreover, in contrast to other CDA scholars (and probably because I was trained as a sociolinguist), I combine theoretical research strongly with empirical research, the analysis of large data corpora and ethnography. I have also been very influenced by the teamwork with historians and sociologists. I learnt a lot from such collaborations and by taking their contributions seriously and attempting integrative approaches. This fed into to my theory of context (WODAK, 2000). Another important characteristic of my work is the primary focus on text analysis, argumentation theory and rhetoric, more than on Functional Systemic Linguistics (FSL) and other grammar theories (however, I have also collaborated very fruitfully with Theo VAN LEEUWEN and other scholars in FSL, for example). I have recently become very interested in the function of social fields and genres in various social fields, while applying BOURDIEU (and LUHMANN) as macro approaches to much interdisciplinary research (primarily to the political field; MUNTIGL, WEISS & WODAK, 2000; REISIGL & WODAK, 2001). [14]

I need to add briefly that it is very important for me not to stay in the "ivory tower"—in Austria, I am perceived somewhat as a "public intellectual"; I have positioned myself explicitly with my research on anti-Semitism and racism, as well as on right-wing populist rhetoric. I have applied some of our research in guidelines and seminars with teachers, doctors, lawyers, and so forth. [15]

2. The Field of "Critical Discourse Analysis" (CDA)

KENDALL: Why "critical" discourse analysis? What is the gain, and what is the risk, in the moment of being "critical"? What are the most important developments in CDA? [16]

WODAK: "Critical" means not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, challenging reductionism, dogmatism and dichotomies, being self-reflective in my research, and through these processes, making opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest. "Critical", thus, does not imply the common sense meaning of "being negative"—rather "skeptical". Proposing alternatives is also part of being "critical" (see REISIGL and WODAK's definition of "critical" in REISIGL & WODAK, 2001, Chapter 2). [17]

Of course, there are risks involved: taking a stance and writing in other non-academic genres (newspapers) can make a scholar more vulnerable—this happened to me in Vienna, 2002/3, and basically also led to the closure of my research centre in 2003 in the Austrian Academy of Sciences where I was harassed by some right-wing, anti-Semitic, and sexist members of the Academy who also opposed interdisciplinary critical research vehemently (see the *Times Higher Education Supplement* November 2003, for details on this "case"). [18]

One of the most important developments in CDA is a new focus on identity politics ("transition and social change"), language policies, and on integrating macro social theories with linguistic analysis. Moreover, the analysis of new genres (visual, Internet, film, chat rooms, SMS, and so forth; "multimodality"). Basically, the following approaches/trends can be distinguished which I have summarised extensively in my chapter in SEALE, GIAMPETRO, GUBRIUM and SILVERMAN, 2004 (however, all typologies do not really fit; totally different classification would emerge by topics or also by theoretical underpinnings; many scholars are not mentioned here):

- Functional Systemic Grammar: FAIRCLOUGH, KRESS, GRAHAM, RICHARDSON
- Lesarten approach: MAAS, JANUSCHEK
- Duisburg approach: JÄGER, LINK
- Socio-cognitive approach: VAN DIJK, CHILTON, KOLLER
- Combining CDA and Corpus Linguistics: MAUTNER, Carmen CALDAS-COULTHARD
- Social Actors Approach: VAN LEEUWEN
- Visual Grammar: KRESS, VAN LEEUWEN, LEMKE, SCOLLON and SCOLLON
- Loughborough approach: BILLIG
- Vienna School: WODAK, MENZ, GRUBER, REISIGL, KRZYZANOWSKI, DE CILLIA, POLLAK [19]

KENDALL: Is there a tension between the aim of doing critical discourse analysis and developing methodologies which are normative? [20]

WODAK: I believe that any kind of dogmatism is opposed to being critical. This does not imply, of course, that there are no values, interests, or norms involved in research. In line with my discourse-historical approach, however, context-dependent normativity suggests itself. I believe that evaluations and judgements require much context knowledge, and that it makes little sense to propose general norms which might not be adequate for specific cultural or situational contexts. This is, of course, a very interesting debate nowadays; we just had a very good workshop on "Interdisciplinarity and Normativity" at Lancaster University in January 2007, organised by Andrew SAYER, and I am convinced that we will continue this debate. [21]

KENDALL: What would you say are the theoretical and methodological differences between the different positions in critical discourse analysis (for example, between Siegfried JÄGER, Norman FAIRCLOUGH and the "Wien School")? [22]

WODAK: The various schools differ in their theoretical underpinnings. JÄGER and FAIRCLOUGH draw heavily on FOUCAULT; the Vienna School more on the Frankfurt School, in their empirical research. FAIRCLOUGH usually tends to illustrate his theory with few selected data, whereas we proceed in a more abductive manner, as does JÄGER. The various schools also differ in the selection of topics for research. Moreover, all of us have developed different methodologies which are compatible in many ways (see WODAK & MEYER, 2001 for an overview). JÄGER focuses heavily on the study of metaphors, FAIRCLOUGH applies functional systematic grammar, and I use argumentation theory and rhetoric when analysing texts and discourses. [23]

3. Perspectives in CDA

KENDALL: What "fights" and challenges had to be faced and won in the development of CDA? [24]

WODAK: I personally do not like the metaphor of "war and fights" of course, all new paradigms need to be acknowledged in institutions and funding agencies. This is often accompanied by skepticism and criticism—and also takes time. Specifically, as interdisciplinarity is sometimes perceived as threatening, this was and still is a major challenge. Moreover, so-called "sensitive" topics might be perceived as threatening as well (see my experiences at the Austrian Academy above). Other criticisms focus on "non-objectivity", thus quasi-repeating the *Positivismusstreit*: some "fights" were reinvented and repeated which had taken place in other disciplines long ago. The biggest challenge, I believe, is to implement careful and detailed linguistic analysis while also venturing into the domains of macro social theory. Bridging the gap is not easy (WODAK, 2006). [25]

KENDALL: What future challenges do you see for the methodology of discourse analysis? [26]

WODAK: More systematicity and working on bridging of the gap between macro and micro in more transparent ways. [27]

KENDALL: It seems that CDA doesn't have its own methodology, but integrates linguistic methods with a critical social standpoint. What are the problems in methodologically reflecting this standpoint? It won't be enough to make it explicit *ex ante* (as "part of the context of discovery"), because in a BACHELARDian sense, the critical standpoint may become an unconsciousness of the research process. So how is this critical standpoint "controlled" and its reification in the process of empirical research avoided? [28]

WODAK: First, let me just repeat that there is no one CDA approach. All CDA approaches have their own theoretical position combined with a specific methodology and methods (see WODAK & MEYER, 2001; WODAK, 2004 for details). [29]

And I need to emphasise again, every theoretical approach in CDA is inherently interdisciplinary because it aims at investigating complex social phenomena which are inherently inter- or transdisciplinary and certainly not to be studied by linguistics alone. [30]

"Critical" (as mentioned above) is not to be understood in the common sense of the word, i.e. criticizing, or being negative. Thus, "positive" is in no way to be understood as the counterpart of critical research as recently proposed by Jim MARTIN in his version of "Positive Discourse Analysis"! [31]

The notion of critic stems from the Frankfurt School, for example, but also from other philosophical/epistemological backgrounds, and means: not taking anything for granted, opening up alternative readings (justifiable through cues in the texts); self-reflection of the research process; making ideological positions manifested in the respective text transparent, etc. [32]

In REISIGL and WODAK (2001), we distinguish between three dimensions of critique: text-immanent critique, socio-diagnostic critique, and prospective (retrospective) critique. These dimensions also imply integrating the many layers of context into the in-depth analysis (where we have presented very clear steps in the methodology which are implemented in a recursive manner: from text to context to text, etc.). [33]

Critical self-reflection must accompany the research process continuously: from the choice of the object under investigation to the choice of methods (categories) of analysis, the sampling, the construction of a theoretical framework designed for the object under investigation (middle range theories), to the interpretation of the results and possible recommendations for practice following the study. When involved in teamwork, this process can also be institutionalised through joint reflective team sessions at various points of the respective research project. In some cases, it has also been very useful to ask outside experts to comment on such reflection processes (for example, we had an international advisory board for my research centre "Discourse, Politics, Identity" at the University of Vienna 1996-2003, which fulfilled this function). [34]

KENDALL: One of the main theoretical and methodological problems in social discourse analysis is the tension between linguistics and sociology, their concepts and methods. Do you see the different paradigms as add-ons—like many discourse researchers do—or do you see problems of incommensurability? [35]

WODAK: Very true—the gap between different epistemological positions and paradigms, between macro and micro can not be bridged in a one-to-one fashion. There will necessarily always be a tension. However, I strive for what I call

"integrated interdisciplinarity": integrating approaches for an object under investigation in innovative ways. Of course, sometimes add-on interdisciplinarity occurs which can be very *ad hoc* and superficial; if various disciplinary perspectives are not discussed, and their epistemological framework not reflected before they are used or integrated, then interdisciplinarity does not make much sense. In WEISS and WODAK (2003) we define and spell out precise criteria for an interdisciplinary methodology and also discuss the limitations of interdisciplinary research. [36]

KENDALL: What could be criteria for evaluating the quality of discourse analytic research that are grounded in discourse analytic thinking and that are not just adaptations from other research approaches? [37]

WODAK: Discourse Studies is a separate field; of course, many other disciplines (such as history, sociology, psychology, etc.) study texts, but not in detailed, systematic and retroductable ways; moreover, discourse analysis is not only to be perceived as a "method" or "methodology" but also as theories about text production, and text reception. Moreover, social processes are inherently and dialectically linked to language (text and discourse). In this way, discourse analysis is both a theoretical and empirical enterprise. "Retroductable" (*nachvollziehbar*) means that such analyses should be transparent so that any reader can trace and understand the detailed in-depth textual analysis. In any case, all criteria which are usually applied to social science research apply to CDA as well. [38]

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Author

Gavin KENDALL is Associate Professor of Sociology at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Contact:

Dr Gavin Kendall

School of Humanities and Human Services
Queensland University of Technology
Carseldine campus
Beams Road
Carseldine QLD 4034
Australia

Tel.: (0061) 07 3138 4613

Fax: (0061) 07 3138 4719

E-mail: g.kendall@qut.edu.au

URL:

<http://www.hhs.qut.edu.au/about/kendall.jsp>

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