

*In His
Sublime Name*

کلیه حقوق مادی مترتب بر نتایج مطالعات، ابتکارات و
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**Faculty of Literature and Humanities
Department of English**

M.A. Thesis

**Assessing Various Interactions and Attitudes of Advisors,
Supervisors, and the Examiners in MA viva sessions: A Critical
Discourse Analysis Approach**

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December 2011



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ABSTRACT

Working within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, as a new approach for exploring different features of the viva voce context, the data of the present study were carefully described, analyzed, and assessed in order to see into the various processes and features of interactions of professors and defending students. This new tool, viz. CDA, assisted in recognizing that there were some hidden cognitive processes in minds of all those taking part in viva sessions. Inevitably, these commonsensical cognitive processes created some legitimate asymmetrical power relations in the form of hierarchical orders manifest in the discourses of members of the elite group.

According to Critical Discourse Analysis theories and strategies, the findings of this study were considered firstly to reveal the naturalized status quo, and then to make trouble in the traditional, taken-for-granted attitudes and assumptions existing in academic settings, generally, and in the viva voce contexts, specifically. This social struggle is done, for the most part, by augmenting the consciousness, for it is the most important action agenda towards emancipation of the marginalized. Furthermore, if this social struggle does not take place, some clichéd, ready-made orders of discourse are transferred through and to the minds resulting in unchanged re-producing of social and institutional events by academic social actors of the next generation.

Most importantly, the ideological and hegemonic themes emerging from the data were unfortunate for the academic groups and people, since they ascribe the term 'defence' to the final stage of an MA, invisibly implying some forms of verbal or nonverbal attacks which may create a great distance among professors and the defending students instead of making caring relations towards the better conditions.

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To

My family

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* Note: All of these figures are drawn by the researcher of this study, and they have not been taken from anywhere.

List of Abbreviations

Symbol	English words
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDS	Critical Discourse Studies
QDA	Qualitative Data Analysis
CLA	Critical Language Awareness
CLS	Critical Language Studies
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
MA	Master of Arts
MR	Member Resources

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Processes of a thesis are often “a source of great anxiety for many students in higher education” (Sachs, 2002, p. 99).

Upon the very first time I took part in an MA viva session, I experienced a kind of unknown fear. However, this fear was not just mine; others spoke of their fears too. Taking part in further viva sessions, this unknown fear turned to appear in the form of a question. This unknown fear and henceforward this question made me familiar with Critical Discourse Analysis.

As a new approach for studying the viva voce settings, Critical Discourse Analysis aided me in answering my problem. Its very useful theories and strategies assisted me a lot for getting deep into the various features and issues of the final stage of master’s degrees, viz., the viva. Hence, CDA gave me a new look, a new stance, and a new tool for exploring the relationships of all the participants in the viva sessions. Fairclough’s (1989) three stages of critically analyzing the discourses were mainly used in this study for some reasons. The first one was that the three stages of CDA direct the analysts to pace the way in a step by step fashion. The second was that these steps are comprehensive, that is, they include everything which has been stated even in the recent decades, though recent scholars seek assistance from the new terminology. The other reason was that these stages have a great logic behind them. For instance, they follow a rational order from text to context. Finally, these stages are appropriate pedagogically, since they seem like a guidebook which analysts can refer to at every moment of confusion or inevitability. It means that even novice researchers can get help from these three stages for the very powerful and at the same time simple style of explaining.

For all these main reasons, I decided on this model as a theoretical lens by which I could enlighten my way. Other scholars’ theories and strategies were also parallel with Fairclough’s (1989) three stages of CDA.

CDA, as a very novel approach in the viva settings, has some helpful theories which were also manifested in this work. These are inequality, power relations, ideology, dominance, hierarchical orders, and so on. All these key concepts are very well fitted in

Fairclough's (1989) three stages of CDA. The first stage is called the text analysis which is the very initial step the analyst goes through when coming across the different orders of discourse connected with different social orders. It includes carefully transcribing the interactions, and then describing and organizing the text. According to the scholars of CDA, this stage should be done deliberately, that is, the interactions need to be chosen *a priori* and purposefully. However, upon the first days of transcribing the data, I transcribed each and every thing ranging from verbal to nonverbal communications. I thought even every trivial point in transcriptions may be of importance later when I get acquainted with CDA more than before.

The second stage is sometimes called processing analysis. It is a step forward, broadening the scope of analyses. It mainly deals with how people understand and produce things when interacting; for instance, how we get and interpret what is said is the main issue of this stage. Also, this stage has to do with ideological assumptions which have stuck to the minds in the forms of commonsensical attitudes. Hence, in this stage, I tried to find ideological themes among the collected codes. Interestingly, I found out a lot of themes in my data related to the naturalized ideologies.

The broadest scope is for the third stage. It is called the social analysis. This stage searches for getting any super-ordinate and subordinate relations of power. While the second stage is considered as invisible, this stage is a visible and unambiguous manifestation of the social actors and relations of power. It explores hegemonic conditions and dominating factors. Accordingly, the present study focused on the social themes. Cases of power in and behind discourse were explored in the interactions of members of the elite group, the defending students and others taking part in MA viva sessions. All these time-consuming stages were thoughtfully analyzed.

However, they were not all! After going through these stages, I had to do something with the results. So, I pondered upon a further emancipatory action. It is called social struggle or making trouble. Any critical discourse analyst needs to foreground the unequal encounters in the hope to bring about change. This is hidden in the word 'critical' which is part and parcel of CDA. Critical means to carefully examine, to creatively reveal the asymmetrical relations, to challenge the traditional settings and to make trouble in the taken-for-granted structures. It is to some extent similar to the deconstruction approaches.

The present study tried to meticulously and carefully explore various relations of advisors, supervisors, external and internal examiners, audiences, members of higher

education committee, and the defending students for unpacking and assessing the unexplored features of the academic context and culture of vivas.

Having participatory/ advocacy knowledge claims, I found the qualitative approach most relevant for this study, as I will mention in chapter 3, for the kind of problem and methodology I have, the qualitative inquiry is the most relevant. Ethnography was also my strategy of inquiry by which I got involved in academic cultures and settings for discovering culture sharing attitudes and ideologies. Again, I will explain the rationale for choosing ethnography for this study in chapter 3.

Specific methods of this study are a long term observation and a detailed textual analysis. These methods are suitable for the problem and the strategy of inquiry of this study. Observations were accompanied by field notes in the form of some unknown questions which later on led to ideological or hegemonic themes. For the textual analysis, I also went through three stages of coding, organizing, and thematizing.

The data of this study were taken from the natural setting of academics, specifically from 5 viva voce sessions in Linguistics –a major related to the English Language and Literature Department of Razi University, Iran. These data were recorded by a handy camera over a two-year time span.

The present thesis consists of 5 chapters. The first chapter is opened with the general, and some points about the purpose statement, definitions, significance and value of the study, and a scheme of the work. Chapter two has a discussion on the theoretical framework and the review of the literature while linking the theories and studies with the present work. The third chapter deals with the methodology and the data, and the rationales for what I did in this study. Chapter four is the data-based chapter of this study. It includes all the ideological and hegemonic themes of the study along with examples of each. Chapter five discusses the findings and comes to conclusions about the work. There have been efforts to follow a logical order in all the chapters of this thesis.

1.2. Statement of the Problem (the Advocacy Issue)

This study focuses on the unknown features of MA viva sessions, while exploring some hierarchical relations among members of the elite group, defending students, audiences, etc. The advocacy issue or the problem of this study is the unequal relations in viva settings. So, the findings of this study first of all help uncovering different relations and features of MA viva sessions, and second embark on emancipatory actions for changing the

status quo towards the equal caring relations.

Advocating the marginalized attitudes of the defending students, the findings of the present study make trouble in the academic contexts and bring the relations to the social struggle. By bringing evidence from the ideological and hegemonic themes, the present study unpacks and uncovers the common attitudes each of the participants has. This study shows some commonsensical and naturalized beliefs stuck to the minds as well as some unequal relations which are supported through the link to ideologies. These unusual and very strange (when foregrounded) relations are transferred to the other generations without even a minor change. CDA theories and strategies assisted in revealing some culture sharing ideologies which had been traditionally kept and transferred to the others.

Here, the role of raising consciousness is really important, for if all the external and internal examiners, advisors, supervisors, students, audiences, etc. get aware of what they are doing to each other by their specific discourses, their stances change towards the caring relations, instead of power relations. Caring relations can help both students and professors improve their scope of knowledge, instead of focusing on forms which can easily be taught in the form of some workshops. Unfortunately, in the data I videotaped and transcribed, the frequency of focusing on formal features like punctuations, grammar, fonts, typos, etc. was very high, and some professors even confessed that they do not have special knowledge of the thesis. So, they really had to focus on forms, an instance of power behind discourse, according to Fairclough (1989).

Focusing on formal conventions is regarded as a characteristic of power of the educational or higher education system. However, I think, if something is to be maintained as influential in the academic world, it needs to be interactive and caring instead of being asymmetrical and hegemonic, and focusing on forms is suggestive of the system's power.

However it is better to hold some workshops before the vivas which can be of a great help to the students to overcome their confusions. It is also helpful in saving the time of vivas in favor of focusing on contents.

1.3. Research Questions

The data of this study tried to answer three main questions. Each question is in line with a stage of critical discourse analysis. The first research question of this study is this:

1. What linguistic and semiotic strategies are used by students, advisors, supervisors, external and internal examiners, and the audiences?

The answer to this research question was in line with the first stage of CDA, viz., text analysis. For this, I carefully transcribed and described various orders of verbal and nonverbal discourse. Hence, I collected some meaningful silent discourses such as eyework, facial expressions, head and hand movements and so on as well as some meaningful verbal discourses like accusatory pronoun usage, specific dictions, and so on. All of these were acquired upon the first stage of analysis, which resulted in the above-mentioned answers.

The second research question's answer was very much connected with the second stage of CDA, that is, processing analysis:

2. How can CDA assist us in understanding the features of various discourses?

Understanding the features of various discourses requires getting acquainted with the processes running in the minds for understanding and assessing these features. Mind plays a very key role in shaping actions. So, CDA's very helpful cognitive interface assisted in understanding the commonsensical ideologies kept in the minds of all the students and professors when legitimating the traditional hegemonic communications. This stage sought assistance from two useful strategies of presuppositions and schemata for relating the text to its historical root for following the previous discourses of the viva voce sessions. This is, however, normative and without any minor creativity in the recent discourses. The third research question's answer was acquired by analyzing the third stage of CDA:

3. What super-ordinate and subordinate relations can exist in a viva session?

By examining the third stage, hegemonic and asymmetrical relations of power were explored in the present study. The power asymmetrical themes showed that there are inequalities in the recorded viva sessions. Answering these questions can assist in understanding the status quo of our academic cultures. By so doing, I hope there will be great useful changes towards the better situations.

1.4. Significance and objectives of the Study

This study is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, it is a novel study for making use of critical discourse analysis as a new approach for investigating what is going on in viva

contexts. No study ever resorted to critical discourse analysis to unpack the interactions existing in the viva settings.

The other thing which made this study significant is that it is an emancipatory study in favor of the disenfranchised. It tries to give voice to the voiceless. The voiceless are those who do not regard rights of voicing for themselves! So, this study, I hope, helps in foregrounding the widespread commonsensical and traditional assumptions regarding the way of behaving with members of the elite group.

Another point is that the findings may be of importance to the higher education committees to think of some workshops for familiarizing the defending students with forms.

Also, it would be appropriate to think of changing the term 'defence' to a better alternative, because the term 'defence' implies a hidden meaning, of having someone to attack, and this is really troublesome according to CDA theories.

CDA calls the attention of all to the social context of the viva voce in order to break down the taken-for-granted relations and assumptions.

The usefulness of this study is that this study aims to make trouble using social struggle strategies. It points to the role of awareness in any educational or academic setting. Raising someone's awareness can be a more potent strategy than forcing her to do something.

The objective of this study is to augment the awareness of academicians and students by justifying that variations in discourse are also possible, not to think that there is just one way to state a discourse in a specific session.

So, awareness is accompanied by struggle and resistance. When resisting the hegemonic status quo, the same orders of discourse are not re-produced. So, re-producing occurs in new emancipatory ways. If relations in the viva settings get symmetrical, the educational and academic contexts will surely get influenced by the change. It will be good news for all the people of the society in general, because their MR -interpretive procedures or less elegantly background knowledge an interpreter brings to the process of interpretation- are affected and determined by other social factors.

1.5. Scheme of the Work

The scheme of this qualitative and ethnography-based work is depicted below. First of all, I started observing different MA viva sessions and recorded some field notes in the form of some questions. The second stage was recording 5 viva sessions for reviewing the interactions with care. After that, I transcribed and described the 5 viva sessions carefully

and exactly. Then, I organized the codes going under the same categories. It was then that I went through analyzing using maxims of critical discourse analysis. I mostly focused on hegemonic and ideological themes for CDA scholars take them into serious account. I sought to see how some attitudes and relations become naturalized that later they turn to creating hierarchical orders.

Power, as a very important element in CDA, was also in two forms of power in discourse and power behind discourse. I could observe instances of each type.

After going through all these steps, I tried to foreground the attitudes and relations which ignored or marginalized the defending students. Foregrounding was equal to showing what exists. After this, I called the attentions towards doing something for bringing about change in the ever taken-for-granted structures of the viva voce. It was analogous to social struggle in all the academic settings, and especially in the viva voce contexts. I also criticized the term 'defence' for it does not seem to be an academic term and we always think of attacks from the powerful dominating groups. It requires more thinking since we can say that the defending students also possess some knowledge about their own thesis, if we believe in the old saying that 'knowledge is power.'

Key words: MA Viva Voce, CDA, Multimodal Interactions

MA Viva Voce: an oral exam in the last part of an MA or PhD, along with question-answer interactions for evaluating the student's capability for finishing studies.

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis is an approach dealing with social events like hegemony, dominance, inequality, power and the like.

Multimodal Interactions: It is a kind of nonverbal communication like facial expressions, gestures, eyework and so on.