Chapter 5

Information Technology: A Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Information technology (IT) has permeated many fields and aspects of modern society such as education, business, health and entertainment. It provides users with innovative and powerful products which were unimaginable decades ago. The Internet is one of the most powerful IT developments. The introduction of the Internet has brought in new areas such as e-commerce, e-health and e-learning. Thus the instrumental role of IT is unquestionable in this digital age. However, from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, IT is socially situated and its role and impacts cannot be divorced from its socio-cultural context. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach which studies linguistic and social issues in relation to social discourse with a main aim to examine how social power permeates and controls discourses and consequently creates social inequality and injustice. As IT is closely linked to its social discourse, its use and value are embedded in social structures and processes which are organized through institutions and practices such as political systems, business, education and the media, each of which is located in and structured by a particular discursive field. There are different social groups with competing discourses and they can exert power to use IT to their advantage. The challenge to IT experts, educators and IT users is not about the instrumental power that IT has brought to them. The real challenge is how to use it wisely to enhance humanity.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of information technology (IT) in various aspects of society strongly confirms that we are firmly situated in the information age. A small technical problem or breakdown in a local network can create a huge problem for its user community. One could not imagine the devastating impacts on society if there were a crash involving computer networks around the world. Thus, industrialized
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societies are at the mercy of information technology as our destiny is strongly tied to it. It appears that IT, like many other technologies, exists for a utilitarian purpose. Its presence is fundamentally instrumental in the sense that its nature intrinsically is neither good nor bad. In other words, it is value-free. IT itself is not the master who exerts powerful control over people. It is the human and social factors within the IT discourse which cause social disunity, social injustice, and ideological imposition to society. This chapter attempts to examine IT from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective as the discussion is based on the tenet that as IT is embedded in social discourses, its function is not ideologically free. The chapter will first discuss what CDA is and will examine how IT is viewed from a CDA perspective.

What is Critical Discourse Analysis?

According to Fairclough (2003), CDA is fundamentally critical social research aimed at achieving a better understanding of how societies work, both in terms of beneficial and detrimental effects, and particularly how to end or mitigate detrimental effects. For Fairclough the following questions are considered:

- How do existing societies provide people with the possibilities and resources for rich and fulfilling lives?
- On the other hand, how do these societies deny people the possibilities and resources?
- What is it about existing societies that produce poverty, deprivation, misery, and insecurity in people’s lives?
- What possibilities are there for social change which would reduce these problems and enhance the quality of the lives of human beings? (Fairclough, 2003, p. 202).

Critical Discourse Analysis is an interdisciplinary approach which studies linguistic and social issues in relation to social discourse with a main aim to examine how social power permeates and controls discourses and consequently creates social inequality and injustice. Thus it provides evidence against social and cultural injustice such as racism, social abuse, discrimination and cultural imperialism. Thus, the term ‘critical’ is vital here as the aim of CDA is not merely to describe a discourse but fundamentally it is against unfair hegemonic practices of social discourses which need social solutions for improving human life. ‘Critical’ does not mean being ‘negative’ in disagreement due to conflict of personal views and worldviews, it means that CDA research takes a stance against social injustice by contributing its research vigour to providing important insights into selected social issues.

CDA is interdisciplinary in the sense that it does not belong to one single academic discipline or rely on a single research method. CDA research is undertaken in different areas such as linguistics, management, health, psychology and sociology. Though CDA is an interdisciplinary approach, its development has been strongly influenced by linguistics, postmodernism and modern sociology. CDA often utilises concepts and ideas derived from linguistics such as ‘text’, ‘intersexuality’, ‘nominalization’ and ‘metaphor’. Fairclough (1992) who is renowned for his contribution to CDA, has incorporated Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) into CDA. While traditional linguistic theories have a common focus on syntax and discourse is restricted to sentence structure, SFL deals with a much wider scope involving semantics, genres, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Thus SFL is seen by Fairclough as a powerful tool for CDA in its analysis of discourses. The term ‘discourse’ itself can be problematic for some readers. Depending on the academic context, the term ‘discourse’ can be used to mean a number of things such as ‘text’, ‘phenomenon’, ‘ways with power and ideology’.

The focus of CDA is emancipation and empowerment which has inspired researchers to