

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND POWER RELATIONS: A DISCOURSEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Discourse functions as a socially embedded practice through which knowledge, ideology, and power are constructed, reproduced, and contested. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Fairclough (1992, 1995), van Dijk (1997, 2008), and Wodak (2001), this study applies a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to examine how language shapes social realities and legitimises competing political positions in the context of conflict. Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine demonstrates that military resistance is inseparable from discursive struggle: global media coverage, political discourse, and digital communication arenas play a crucial role in representing Ukraine as a victim of aggression, a geopolitical actor, or a resilient democratic nation. To illustrate this dynamic, the article analyses representative excerpts from international news media, including Reuters, BBC News, Fox News, and Axios, as well as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's political address to the US Congress. The analysis shows how various narrative strategies influence global solidarity, public opinion, and political decision-making. The findings highlight the importance of discourse analysis (CDA) in uncovering the mechanisms through which ideology, power, and inequality are maintained, as well as in identifying discursive spaces that facilitate resistance and the restoration of sovereignty. For Ukraine, narrative control and representational activity are important aspects of national identity, cultural survival, and democratic resilience. Looking ahead, the article argues that CDA must take into account new communicative realities shaped by digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and hybrid information warfare, while integrating global theoretical approaches with Ukrainian scholarly perspectives. This positions discourse studies as a field capable of considering both universal dynamics and context-specific struggles over meaning.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, discourse and power, media framing, language of conflict, political speech, disinformation, international media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse is not a neutral medium of communication, but a socially situated practice through which knowledge, ideology and power are produced and contested (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). CDA provides a methodological framework for examining how language constructs social reality, legitimises power and challenges dominance.

The Russian war against Ukraine underscores the importance of such an inquiry. Ukraine's survival depends not only on military resistance but also on discursive struggle in parliaments, newsrooms, and

digital platforms. Framing strategies in media and political discourse determine whether Ukraine is perceived as a victim, an aggressor, or a resilient democracy.

This article examines the relationship between discourse and power, investigating how international media and political discourse construct competing narratives of the same war and how these narratives influence global solidarity, politics, and democratic resilience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Foucault: Discourse and the Power/Knowledge Neighbourhood

Foucault (1972) conceptualises discourse as inseparable from the power/knowledge nexus. Discourses do not simply reflect social reality; they actively construct “regimes of truth” that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge. Through discursive formations, institutions such as law, medicine, and education establish categorical distinctions, such as “healthy” versus “sick” or “guilty” versus “innocent,” that shape subjectivity and regulate behaviour. From this perspective, discourse is a mechanism of social control that normalises certain practices while marginalising others.

2.2. Fairclough: Discourse as Social Practice

Fairclough (1992, 1995) develops an understanding of discourse as a socially situated practice that both reflects and reproduces social structures. His three-dimensional model distinguishes between the textual level (linguistic features and organisation), discursive practices (processes of production, circulation, and interpretation), and social practices (broader institutional and societal contexts). This model enables analysis at both the micro and macro levels, demonstrating how everyday language use both shapes and is shaped by broader power relations.

2.3. Van Dijk: Ideology and Sociocognition

Van Dijk (1997, 2008) foregrounds the cognitive dimension of discourse, emphasising how ideological positions are encoded and reproduced through communicative practices. His sociocognitive approach explains how discourse structures influence mental models – shared ways of interpreting events and social relations. The discourse of political, media, and academic elites thus plays a central role in shaping public opinion, legitimising social hierarchies, and maintaining or challenging dominance.

2.4. Vodak: Discursive-Historical Contextualization

Vodak (2001) advances a discursive-historical approach that links detailed linguistic analysis to socio-political and historical conditions. Texts are interpreted as products of specific temporal contexts, communicative traditions, and intertextual networks. For example, political discourse cannot be understood without reference to collective memory, cultural narratives, and institutional continuity. This approach emphasises how meaning emerges not only from language itself, but also from the cultural and historical frameworks in which it is embedded.

2.5. Ukrainian Contributions to CDA

Ukrainian studies have significantly expanded the scope of CDA, integrating psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and political perspectives. Shymko (2021) applies neural network modelling to discourse, demonstrating how linguistic structures shape cognitive processes and forms of consciousness. Masenko (2017) analyses how political elites use language to legitimise power and construct national identity in the post-Soviet context. Selivanova (2008) offers a systematic framework for contemporary linguistic research, situating discourse at the intersection of semiotics, pragmatics, and communicative practice.

Kulyk (2011) examines how discourses surrounding linguistic diversity in Ukraine exacerbate ideological divisions and impact political coherence. Together, these contributions highlight that Ukrainian CDA is both contextually grounded and globally relevant, offering perspectives that enrich and diversify international discourse studies.

3. CDA IN PRACTICE: CASE STUDIES

3.1 Academic Discourse: Citation as Gatekeeping

Academic discourse constructs authority through citation practices, specialised vocabulary, and disciplinary norms. Those who master these norms gain legitimacy, while others are marginalised. CDA shows how citation hierarchies reproduce dominance and shape the production of knowledge.

3.2 Legal Discourse: Authority Through Language

Legal discourse illustrates institutional power through formality, intertextuality, and performative speech acts (Austin, 1962). The passive state and references to legal codes reinforce institutional legitimacy, transforming language into a vehicle of power and compliance.

3.3 Media and Political Discourse: Competing Frames in the War on Ukraine

Media and political discourse play an essential role in shaping public perceptions of legitimacy, agency, and victimhood during armed conflict. Russia's war against Ukraine is a prime example of how global news outlets and political leaders frame events through linguistic and rhetorical strategies that foreground certain realities while silencing others. Each source creates a distinct narrative universe, contributing to an international debate over meaning, morality, and power.

Case Study 1: Reuters – Military Agency and Resistance

Extract (Reuters, 18 September 2025):

“Ukrainian forces have taken back 160 square km (62 square miles) since the start of the operation, he said, adding that over 170 square km and another nine settlements had been ‘cleared of the occupiers’ ” (Reuters, 2025).

Analysis:

Reuters uses a factual and action-oriented register to highlight Ukraine's military competence and activities. Verbs such as “returned” and “cleared of occupiers” construct Ukraine as an active and sovereign entity regaining control over its territory. The lexical choice of “occupiers” simultaneously delegitimises Russia by labelling it as an aggressor. The quantification of the results -“160 square kilometres,” “nine settlements”- adds an appearance of precision and credibility, lending the report a scholarly neutrality that nonetheless serves a legitimising function. Through this linguistic choice, Reuters positions Ukraine as a resilient player, projecting control and progress within a narrative of justified resistance.

Case Study 2: BBC – Civilian Victimisation and Illegitimacy of Attacks

Extract (BBC News, 15 August 2023):

“At least three people have been killed and more than 30 injured in a ‘massive’ overnight Russian aerial attack on Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky says. He says regions across the country were targeted as part of a ‘deliberate strategy’ to

‘intimidate civilians and destroy our infrastructure,’ with one direct missile hit reported on a residential building” (BBC News, 2023).

Analysis:

BBC News portrays the conflict primarily through a humanitarian discourse. The enumeration of victims personalises suffering, transforming abstract violence into measurable human losses. President Zelensky’s repeated quotes (“deliberate strategy,” “intimidation of civilians”) foreground intentionality and moral culpability, framing Russia’s actions as illegal under international norms. The lexical amplifier “massive” heightens the emotional resonance of the attack, while the hybrid register of reporting—balancing factual accuracy with affective citation—creates an authoritative yet sympathetic tone. Through this framing, the BBC portrays Ukraine as the moral victim of an unlawful aggression, mobilising global empathy and ethical condemnation.

Case Study 3: Fox News – Psychological Warfare and Expert Authority

Extract (Fox News Digital, 23 November 2022):

“Russian missile strikes are hammering Ukrainian infrastructure, leaving civilians without heat, electricity and drinking water, amid freezing temperatures,” Rebekah Koffler, a former DIA intelligence officer and the author of *Putin’s Playbook: Russia’s Secret Plan to Defeat America*, told Fox News Digital. “Putin’s goal is to dislodge Ukrainians psychologically and abandon the fight” (Koffler, 2022).

Analysis:

Fox News combines a humanitarian narrative with the rhetoric of strategic expertise. The vivid verb “hammer blow” evokes an impression of relentless brutality, appealing to sensory imagery and emotional impact. References to poverty (“without heat, electricity, or drinking water”) portray civilians as suffering both physically and psychologically. References to an expert source—a “former DIA intelligence officer”—add institutional authority, transforming the commentary into a credible interpretation of intelligence. The emphasis on psychological warfare expands the battlefield beyond the physical realm, highlighting Russia’s attempts to undermine morale and resilience. This discursive strategy positions the Ukrainian people as both victims and psychological fighters, emphasising resilience as a central theme.

Case Study 4: Axios – Digital Disinformation and AI

Extract (Axios, 9 September 2025):

“AI tools are helping Russia scale up its disinformation campaign against Ukraine, according to new PeakMetrics data shared first with Axios. ... PeakMetrics ... studied a sample of 5,780 social media posts predominantly on X, Reddit and Instagram ... 28.2% of them showed strong signs of being bots tied to pro-Russian causes. The posts pushed several major narratives ... including the false claim that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is ‘illegitimate’ and that the Ukrainian government is corrupt and laundering money” (Sabin, 2025).

Analysis:

Axios reframes the conflict within a technological and information paradigm. The use of quantitative metrics (“5,780 posts,” “28.2% bots”) lends empirical weight, aligning the article with scholarly

discourse. The concept of AI-driven disinformation positions technology as both a weapon and a site of warfare, extending the notion of conflict into the digital realm. Lexical markers such as false claims and pro-Russian reasons expose ideological manipulation, while the publication's signature framing techniques ("Why it matters," "Zoom in") guide the reader's interpretation, emphasising urgency and relevance. Through this lens, war becomes a hybrid confrontation, fought as much with algorithms and narratives as with conventional weapons and territorial control.

Case Study 5: Political Speech – Zelenskyy's Address to the U.S. Congress (December 2022)

Extract:

"Against all odds and doom-and-gloom scenarios, Ukraine did not fall. Ukraine is alive and kicking."

Analysis:

Zelenskyy's address to the US Congress is an example of political discourse as performance. The phrase "alive and kicking" personifies Ukraine as a living, energetic subject, transforming national resilience into a shared emotional experience. The contrastive structure "against all odds" reinforces defiance and collective courage, associating it with the David and Goliath narrative familiar to Western audiences. Through interdiscursive resonance with democratic and moral values, the speech transforms Ukraine's survival into a universal struggle for freedom. The rhetorical power of pathos combines moral appeal with political strategy, transforming the discourse itself into a form of diplomatic action that seeks both material and symbolic support.

Synthesis

In these journalistic and political texts, CDA shows how framing, lexical choice, and metaphor together construct competing realities of the same conflict.

- Reuters emphasises determination and resilience, portraying Ukraine as a capable military player.
- BBC focuses on humanitarian losses and moral illegitimacy, evoking sympathy and outrage.
- Fox News emphasises psychological support, combining expert analysis with emotional storytelling.
- Axios introduces a technological framework that rethinks warfare in terms of digital manipulation and artificial intelligence.
- Zelenskyy's political discourse synthesises these frames, transforming them into a coherent narrative of unity, legitimacy, and hope.

Together, these examples demonstrate that a war for territory is also a war for meaning. Media and political discourse shape not only international opinion but also the symbolic architecture of legitimacy, solidarity, and survival.

4. METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) uses a multi-level and integrative methodology that combines linguistic description with social interpretation. This allows the analyst to explore how language functions both as a textual artefact and as a form of social action.

Textual analysis focuses on the internal organisation of discourse, examining vocabulary, syntax, modality, metaphor, and cohesion. Using these linguistic features, CTA determines how ideological meanings are encoded and how evaluative or persuasive effects are achieved. Particular attention is paid to lexical choices and grammatical structures that naturalise or challenge social hierarchies.

Intertextual analysis examines how texts draw on, resonate with, or resist other discourses and communicative traditions. This dimension emphasises the dialogic nature of discourse—its tendency to quote, reinterpret, or challenge prior assertions—and shows how meaning is co-constructed across texts, genres, and institutions.

Contextual embedding situates discourse in the historical, institutional, and political environments in which it circulates. By linking linguistic patterns to the sociopolitical conditions of their production and reception, CDA reveals how language reflects and reproduces structures of dominance and resistance.

Critical reflection recognises that discourse analysis is itself a discursive practice. Researchers must therefore be aware of their own positionality, theoretical assumptions, and interpretative choices. Such reflexivity enhances the transparency and validity of the research process, ensuring that the analysis does not simply reproduce the power dynamics it seeks to uncover.

Together, these dimensions make CDA a dynamic and self-aware methodology capable of revealing the complex interplay between language, ideology, and power.

5. DISCUSSION: DISCOURSE AS DOMINATION AND RESISTANCE

CDA demonstrates that discourse functions not only as an instrument of domination but also as a field of struggle and resistance. Institutions use discourse to stabilise power, but it is this discursive space that allows counter-narratives to emerge. For example, feminist research has challenged patriarchal assumptions embedded in legal and academic discourse, while independent media have exposed state propaganda by offering alternative narratives of events.

In Ukraine, this duality is particularly evident. Competing narratives in media coverage of the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and the ongoing Russian invasion show how discourse shapes international legitimacy. Terms such as “annexation” versus “reunification” or “war” versus “special operation” illustrate how lexical choices encode ideological preferences. At the same time, Ukrainian civil society has generated powerful counter-discourses asserting sovereignty, solidarity, and resilience. These discourses are spreading not only domestically but also globally, influencing diplomatic negotiations and public opinion abroad.

Resistance is not simply oppositional, but constructive: counter-discourses create new categories of identity, belonging, and legitimacy. Social movements, for example, reinterpret terms that were once used pejoratively, transforming them into symbols of pride and empowerment. CDA thus provides tools for tracing both mechanisms of dominance and strategies of resistance within the same communicative practices.

6. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR CDA AND DISCOURSE STUDY

As societies face new communication challenges, CDA must adapt and expand its capabilities to meet these challenges. Three areas stand out.

1. Digital and Algorithmic Discourse

Social media platforms and AI-generated texts are transforming the dynamics of discursive power. Algorithms prioritise some voices while silencing others, shaping visibility and influence. Therefore, CDA must examine not only human-generated texts but also the hidden architectures of algorithmic discourse.

2. Transnational and Multilingual Contexts

Globalisation has intensified the diffusion of discourse across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Ukrainian scholars, for example, offer perspectives that enrich the predominantly Western canon of CDA. Future research should focus on comparative studies that trace how discourses travel, adapt, or collide in different contexts.

3. Applied Interventions

CDA is not simply diagnostic, but potentially transformative. Applied CDA can be effectively incorporated into educational programs, legal reform initiatives, media literacy programs, and intercultural communication efforts. By making discursive inequalities visible, CDA provides individuals and institutions with tools to promote more inclusive and democratic communication practices.

7. CONCLUSION

Critical discourse analysis, considered a branch of discourse studies, highlights the deep relationship between language and power. By analysing academic, legal, and media discourses, CDA reveals how authority, ideology, and inequality are reproduced and challenged.

The significance of CDA lies in its dual focus: it exposes hidden mechanisms of domination while simultaneously opening up space for resistance and alternative discourses. For Ukraine, this means that discursive practices are not secondary to political and cultural struggles, but are an integral part of them. Control over narrative, terminology, and representation is inextricably linked to issues of sovereignty and identity.

Looking to the future, CDA must take into account new communicative realities, including the development of digital platforms, the impact of artificial intelligence on text production, and the complex interplay of global and local discourses. By integrating international theories with Ukrainian scholarly research, discourse studies are evolving into a global field that remains attentive to both universal dynamics and specific contexts.

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Received: April 14, 2025; **revised:** June 28, 2025; **accepted:** August 07, 2025; **published:** December 22, 2025

Алла Шугай, Оксана Харченко, Ганна Новікова. Критичний дискурс-аналіз і владні відносини: дискурсологічний підхід. *Журнал Прикарпатського університету імені Василя Стефаника. Філологія*, 12 (2025), 33–41.

Дискурс функціонує як соціально вмонтована практика, через яку знання, ідеологія та влада конструюються, відтворюються та оскаржуються. Спираючись на теоретичні положення Феркло (1992, 1995), ван Дейка (1997, 2008) та Водак (2001), у дослідженні застосовано методологію критичного дискурс-аналізу (КДА) для вивчення того, як мова формує соціальні реальності та легітимізує конкуруючі політичні позиції в умовах конфлікту. Триваюча російська війна проти України показує, що військовий спротив є нерозривним із дискурсивною боротьбою: глобальне медіа-висвітлення, політичний дискурс і цифрові комунікаційні платформи відіграють ключову роль у репрезентації України як жертви агресії, геополітичного актора та стійкої демократичної держави. Для ілюстрації цього процесу в статті проаналізовано репрезентативні фрагменти матеріалів міжнародних ЗМІ,

зокрема Reuters, BBC News, Fox News і Axios, а також політичне звернення Президента Володимира Зеленського до Конгресу США. Аналіз показує, як різні наративні стратегії впливають на глобальну солідарність, громадську думку та політичне ухвалення рішень.

Результати підкреслюють важливість критичного дискурс-аналізу (КДА) у виявленні механізмів, за допомогою яких підтримуються ідеологія, влада та нерівність, а також у визначенні дискурсивних просторів, що сприяють опору та відновленню суверенітету. Для України контроль над наративом та репрезентаційна активність є важливими компонентами національної ідентичності, культурного виживання та демократичної стійкості. Говорячи про перспективу, стаття стверджує, що КДА має враховувати нові комунікативні реалії, сформовані цифровими платформами, штучним інтелектом та гібридною інформаційною війною, одночасно інтегруючи глобальні теоретичні підходи з українськими науковими напрацюваннями. Таким чином дискурсологія постає як галузь, яка здатна аналізувати як універсальні динаміки, так і контекстуально специфічну боротьбу за зміст.

Ключові слова: критичний дискурс-аналіз, дискурс і влада, медійне фреймування, мова конфлікту, політичне мовлення, дезінформація, міжнародні медіа.