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# Mystification and social agent absences: a critical discourse analysis using evolutionary psychology

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## Abstract

One focus in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been the detection of absences from texts which mystify the social agents being described. This is the focus of this article, the text-data coming from a UK newspaper website campaign to allow parents access to information about child sex offenders. CDA is explicit about being politically committed in its text analysis. But this commitment becomes problematic when CD analysts are analysing texts to assess how texts are likely to mystify readers generally. To make such assessments valid, I argue that analysts need to try to reduce the intrusion of their own subjectivity especially if they are not members of the target readership. CDA is theoretically eclectic, but absent from its theoretical sources is biologically-based explanation.

This article contributes to mystification analysis in CDA. Using the text-data mentioned above as illustration, I show the following: how evolutionary psychology, a biologically-grounded paradigm, can be used as a lens over potentially any text-data relating to child sex offenders to highlight social agent absences which are mystifying for readers generally, while simultaneously reducing analyst subjectivity. The article also contributes more generally to CDA methodology for the detection of mystifying absences from texts.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Orientation

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a branch of linguistics that is concerned, broadly-speaking, with highlighting the traces of cultural and ideological meaning in spoken and written texts (see, for example, Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard, 1996; Fairclough, 1992, 2001; Hodge and Kress, 1993; Weiss and Wodak, 2003). It has become well-established drawing on a number of research methodologies and analytical approaches (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). One particular focus in CDA is to highlight how texts can obscure or mystify the events being described and more specifically mystify the nature of the social agents associated with the event.<sup>1</sup> This article is concerned with this particular focus in CDA and with the problem of analyst subjectivity in the following: assessing a text as being mystifying, for readers generally, of events and associated social agents, and so not just from the perspective of the analyst. In relation to text-data on child sex offenders (this phrase henceforth, unless otherwise stated, referring to adults who sexually abuse children), I address this problem, offering a solution through employment of the biologically-based paradigm of Evolutionary Psychology. First, though, in 1.2 some background on the problem of analyst subjectivity in CDA.

### 1.2. The problem of analyst subjectivity in CDA

One of the charges made against CDA in recent years is that it merely makes partial readings of text-data, subjective interpretations of text-data in line with the commitments, the political values, etc. of the individual analyst (Widdowson, 1995); a related charge is that CD analysts neglect to pick up on aspects of a text which may be in tension with their interpretations (Widdowson, 1998). CDA's explicitness about being committed in analysis of texts is understandable from a diagnostic viewpoint. Many, if not most critical discourse analysts are left-liberal, politically-speaking. When critical discourse analysts look at texts to diagnose their values, ideologies, etc., it is because many of these values are problematic from a left-liberal perspective. So it would be difficult not to be politically committed in such analysis. And indeed, critical discourse analysts (e.g. Fairclough, 1996) have argued that it is impossible to analyse a text without such commitment, the intrusion of the analyst's subjectivity being a normal part of any hermeneutic procedure. But this commitment becomes problematic when CD analysts are analysing texts to assess how texts are likely to be *read generally*. Indeed, it becomes even more problematic when critical discourse analysts do this kind of analysis by proxy when they are not members of the target readership (see O'Halloran and Coffin, 2004). One kind of analysis by proxy is mystification analysis.

In hard news reports of demonstrations, conflicts, wars, etc. where people are killed or injured, CDA is on reasonably safe ground in its analysis of mystification and its

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<sup>1</sup> The branch of CDA which is concerned, in part, with locating and describing mystifying language is known as Critical Linguistics (Fowler et al., 1979; Hodge and Kress, 1993). See also Fairclough and Wodak (1997) on where Critical Linguistics is situated in CDA.

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