An Analytical Perspective on Critical Discourse Analysis Based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics

Mohammad Bagher Aghaei
Department of English language, Islamic Azad University, Ta.C., Tabriz, Iran
aghaeimb@yahoo.com

Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as conceptualized by scholars such as Fairclough, Van Dijk, and Wodak, emphasizes the critical examination of language to uncover the underlying ideologies and power structures embedded in discourse. Despite of other related previous approaches for discourse analysis, they share a foundational commitment to analyzing discourse through a critical lens, often drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a theoretical framework. The ideational dimension of discourse, particularly through the lens of transitivity analysis, is primarily to uncover how linguistic choices reflect and reinforce ideological positions in a discourse. Therefore, in this study, Halliday's SFL is selected as methodology for the exploration of ideational dimension through its three transitive verbs—material, mental, and relational—as main procedure for the detailed analysis of ideological aspects of discourse. The data corpus comprises a selection of a variety of televised and printed interviews with Barack Obama from which three have been selected for the analysis. The findings indicate that Obama's political discourse heavily relies on relational and mental processes, with material processes used slightly less frequently. This pattern indicates a shift away from purely action-oriented rhetoric toward a more reflective and identity-driven communication style.

Introduction

The advent of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the 1990s marked a crucial moment in the evolution of discourse analysis, introducing a critical orientation that significantly influenced the field of applied linguistics. The salient purpose of CDA which differs from other related approaches is that it tends to explore the implicit underlined ideological and power patterns in the written and spoken discourses. The primary foundation of CDA begins from Fariclough's theoretical idea. He was the first notable scholar whose emphasis on the relationship between language, power, and society was cornerstone for the formation of CDA. He provides a tripartite framework which was an influential approach for critical discourse analysis. Later, the foundation of CDA became more fortified by the outstanding approaches from other leading scholars such as Van Dijk and Wodak. Their approaches share a common point

which emphasizes the interconnection of discourse, power and ideology. This is distinctive feature of CDA which differentiates it from other critical theories and approaches such as socio-linguistics, conversation analysis and pragmatics. CDA tends to explore social and political issues such as power abuse, discrimination and hegemony which are mostly implicit in the different layers of social discourses. Van Dijk (2001) believes that term CDA is a field that is concerned with studying and analyzing written and spoken texts to reveal the discursive source of power, dominance, inequality and bias. It investigates how these discourse sources are manifested and reproduced within a special social and historical context. Fairclough (1995) asserts that CAD is to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is a factor securing power and hegemony (p. 135). CDA tends to uncover the implicit ideological prejudice in the discourse which brings about a dominance, hegemony, inequality and racism, and discrimination.

According to the above explanation, the CDA offers an analytic approach which can be basically applied to the analysis of social issues and problems implicitly reflected in the textual or linguistic elements of spoken or written discourse. Two questions are posed on the contribution of Halliday's model in the manifestation of these issues within interrelated textual elements of a discourse.

1. How does Halliday's systemic function provide a linguistic approach for analyzing a politic discourse?
2. According to Halliday's approach, which textual elements are the main consideration for exploring the ideological aspects and power dimension of a discourse?

Review of Literature

Politics and Discourse

Politics is one of the complicated genres which is the main consideration of CDA. Political discourse is not a separate genre by itself; rather, it is related to the social domain. The function and thematic of a text are the main criteria for determining its (non)-political feature. Schaffner (1996) claims that politics is a challenge for power to secure specific opinions, attitudes and make the practical. Fairclough (2000) defines politics as an ongoing struggle to achieve dominance of one political position over others which is partly enacted as s struggle for the dominance of political language discourse (p. 3). Van Dijk (1997) asserts that political elites are those people who have dominance over others because they can have legislative power which permits them to have an important role, they make important decision on social or political issues. They

have influence and control on public decisions and opinions. In a political discourse, legitimization is the main purpose of politicians who tend to accept their attitudes, opinions and actions.

Power and dominance are two main aspects of political discourse in which the dominant individuals or groups want to dominate or control the other individuals or groups in society.

Fariclough (1995) mentions that political discourses can show some sorts of reality in some ways that depend on the social positions and objectives of those who produce them. Politicians use specific discourse to reach their goals in politics. They choose at different levels when they want to produce texts, they think about what they should include and what to exclude, what to make explicit and what to leave implicit, what to be foregrounded and what to be backgrounded. They try to build and rebuild context and events in the discourse to keep power. Politicians always try to build a new reality in such a way that people trust them and accept their attitudes, decisions and future.

Ideology and Power

Two central concerns of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are the mechanisms through which powerful social groups control public discourse and the broader societal implications of such discursive dominance. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that discourse is not merely a reflection of social reality but a tool through which power is exercised and maintained. As such, CDA explores how dominance is established not only through overt coercion but also through subtle, normalized forms of language use embedded in institutional and everyday interactions.

According to Flowerdew and Richardson (2018), discursive power operates through the capacity of dominant groups to shape public discourse, thereby legitimizing ideologies while marginalizing others. This form of control has far-reaching social consequences, including the reinforcement of inequality, the silencing of dissenting voices, and the reproduction of dominant ideologies across media, education, and politics. Similarly, Ledin and Machin (2017) argue that everyday texts and communicative practices serve as vehicles for ideological dissemination, often masking their power implications under the guise of neutrality or common sense. Thus, CDA provides a critical framework to expose these hidden mechanisms, enabling researchers to interrogate how discourse contributes to the normalization of social inequality and the reproduction of hegemony in various sociocultural contexts.

Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics

Halliday's systematic functional linguistics (SFL) is one of influential frameworks which has been extensively applied for the textual analysis of

several domains such as critical discourse analysis. Halliday's ideational perspective to the language use was the major inspiration to the development of critical discourse analysis by Van Dijk and Fairclough who give an ideological orientation to their approaches. SFL was a revolutionary attempt to direct the attitude of linguistic analysts toward the transitivity of discourse.

Halliday attends on the functionality of text and offers a functional classification in which the text is categorized into three metafunctions; 'ideational' which is related to the expression of participant's ideas and world experience by applying the different types of transitive verbs; 'interpersonal' which is related to the expression of their attitudes and feelings by applying the different types of moods of clause and modal verbs, adjectives adverbs and nouns; 'textual' which is related to the logical and coherent construction of text by applying cohesive lexical and grammatical words or phrases. In this study, the attention is only on the 'ideational metafunction' which serves as the methodological framework of study.

This metafunction is categorized into two sub-functions: 'experimental' one related to ideas and 'logical' one related to relationships between ideas. It means that one uses a language to express one's own ideas and experiences by employing the different types of transitive verbs in a logical and coherent text or talk. These verbs are classified into six groups: 'material', 'mental', 'relational', 'behavioral', 'verbal', and 'existential' verbs. Only first three of them are selected as methodological framework for the analysis of the different interviews of former President Barak Obama's in 2006-9.

This study adopts Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the primary methodological framework, with a specific focus on the ideational metafunction to analyze the discourse of former President Barack Obama in interviews conducted between 2006 and 2009. Halliday's SFL is widely recognized for its emphasis on the functionality of language in context, and it has been extensively applied in various domains, including Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The ideational metafunction serves as a foundational element in understanding how individuals use language to construct experiential meaning and represent their reality.

The ideational metafunction consists of two interrelated components: the experiential function, which is concerned with the representation of events, participants, and circumstances, and the logical function, which addresses the relationships between these elements. In this study, the focus is placed primarily on the experiential function, operationalized through the analysis of transitivity structures in the selected interviews.

Transitivity, in Hallidayan terms, refers to the grammatical system that represents processes (verbs), participants involved in these processes (nouns), and the circumstances surrounding them (adverbs or prepositional phrases). The six process types identified in SFL—material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential—serve as the basis for the classification of verbal clauses in the data. However, for the purposes of this study, only the first three process types—material, mental, and relational—are selected for detailed analysis, as they are most directly associated with the expression of experience, cognition, and identity (Thompson, 2014). Material verbs are related to 'doing a tangible action by an actor'; verbs such as *make, destroy, give, start, kill, destroy, judge, get, allow, use, respect, hunt, thank, study, agree, etc.*

Mental verbs entail the mental processes of thinking, feeling and perceiving. The verbs include *think, believe, love, want, know, feel, realize, recognize, expect, etc.* Halliday (1994) divides mental verbs into three groups; 'cognition' (verbs of thinking, knowing and understanding), 'affection' (verbs of liking, fearing), and 'perception' (verbs of seeing and hearing). The participant is called Senser. Relation verbs are related to attributing and identifying processes which mostly associate a person or object with the state or condition; relational verbs include *be, have, seem, appear, become etc.* There are two types of relational processes; 'possessive' which indicates that one entity owns another; 'circumstantial' which defines the entity in terms of *location, time, manner etc.*

Method

Data Corpus

The data corpus comprises a selection of televised and printed interviews with Barack Obama from the years 2006 to 2009. These interviews were chosen to reflect a variety of communicative contexts, including political campaigning, policy discussions, and public engagement. The transcribed texts were subjected to a clause-level analysis, where each clause was coded for its process type based on Halliday's criteria. This systematic coding enabled the identification of patterns in Obama's discursive construction of experience and ideology during a critical period of his political career.

Through this methodological lens, the study aims to uncover how linguistic choices reflect ideological positioning and contribute to meaning making within political discourse.

These interviews were chosen to reflect a variety of communicative contexts, including political campaigning, policy discussions, and public engagement. The transcribed texts were subjected to a clause-level analysis, where each clause was coded for its process type based on Halliday's criteria. This

systematic coding enabled the identification of patterns in Obama's discursive construction of experience and ideology during a critical period of his political career.

Data Analysis

This study analyzed selected statements from three key interviews with former U.S. President Barack Obama: (1) an interview with Bret Baier on Fox News in 2006, (2) an interview with Hisham Melhem of Al-Arabiya in 2009, and (3) a Reuters interview in 2009 titled *"Not Going to Meddle in GM's Decisions."* The transcribed clauses from these interviews were categorized using Halliday's (2014) ideational metafunction framework, specifically focusing on material, mental, and relational processes.

A total of 33 transitivity processes were extracted from the interview excerpts and classified into the three process types in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Analyses of Process Types

Process Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Material Processes	9	27.3%
Mental Processes	10	30.3%
Relational Processes	14	42.4%
Total	33	100%

Material Processes

Material processes, which represent physical or action-oriented events, account for 27.3% of the identified clauses. In these instances, Obama frequently positions himself or collective actors (e.g., "we," "they") as agents capable of initiating action and progress:

"We can make significant progress."
"They destroy things."

This dominance of material processes reflects Obama's rhetorical strategy to project agency, goal-directedness, and pragmatism—a feature often seen in political discourse to enhance leadership ethos (Fairclough, 2001). Some examples are provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Material Process Samples

We	*can **make***	*significant progress*
Actor	material process	Goal

We	might **pursu**e	Peace
Actor	material process	Goal

We	**start**	the steady **progress**
Actor	Material process	Goal

They	**destro**y	Things
Actor	material process	Goal

We	have got to **rebuil**d	Our social safty
Actor	material process	Goal

People	could **los**e	Confidence
Actor	material process	Goal

We	are **setting up**	a pathway
Actor	material process	Goal

We	can **ge**t	It done
Actor	material process	Goal

We	**ge**t	**Final numbe**r
Actor	material process	Goal

Mental Processes

Mental processes, representing internal states such as thinking, believing, or perceiving, appeared in 30.3% of the clauses. These included expressions like:

"I think the most important…"
"We are expecting a different paradigm."

The use of first-person senser (mostly "I") indicates Obama's inclination to personalize his perspectives and establish empathy with his audience by foreground thought and emotion. This aligns with Van Dijk's (2006) assertion that political speakers often use mental processes to signal cognitive responsibility and ideological positioning. Some examples are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Mental Process Sample

I	**think**	the most important
Senser	mental process	

I	***believe***	*that moment is ripe for both sides*
Senser	mental process	

We	*are **expecting***	*a different paradigm*
Senser	mental process	

You	*are going to **see***	*Me*
Senser	mental process	

I	***wan**t*	*people to recognize*
Senser	mental process	

I	***understan**d*	*that had to be……..*
Senser	mental process	

I	***wish***	*her well….*
Senser	mental process	

I	***kno**w*	*this was going to……*
Senser	mental process	

I	*was pleased to **see***	*that GM thinks …..*
senser	mental process	

Relational Processes

Relational processes—used to describe states of being or identification—comprised the largest share (42.4%) of the data:

"I am a big believer in tolerance."
"It is a big, complicated piece of business."
Some examples are provided in Table 4.

Table 4
Relational Process Samples

1	I **am** not willing to accept…..	9	His father **is** Muslim
2	That growing us **is** hard enough…..	10	I **am** big believer in tolerance
3	It **was** not tough for me to have to…	11	It **is** perfectly consistent to say that
4	I **am** not willing to accept…..	12	They **get** confused
5	It might not **be** enough….	13	Former moments **are** scared.
6	I could not **be** president	14	I **am** a follower.
7	We have not **been** perfect….	15	It **is** a big, complicated piece of business
8	They **seem** nervous…	16	I **was** pleased to see……

The high frequency of rational processes suggests a discursive strategy of self-representation and value construction. By using relational processes, Obama not only defines identities (his own or others') but also constructs evaluative stances on sociopolitical issues. This supports Fairclough's (1995) view that such linguistic forms play a critical role in shaping ideology through discourse.

Discussion

Critical discourse analysis is formed on the foundation that discourse analysis should be a sort of critique of ideological dimension which explicitly or implicitly manifests the social problems and political issues such as power abuse, inequality and hegemony. This ideological dimension of CDA was inspired by Fairclough from Halliday's systematic functional linguistics in which the ideational aspects of text are mostly considered in comparison with its other aspects such as interpersonal and textual ones. In the ideational aspect, the writers or speakers express their ideas and world experience in a coherently constructed text by employing different types of modal and transitive verbs. But, in CDA, this ideational aspect is represented in the form of ideology of dominant individuals or groups who tend to control the wealth, income and thought of the rest of society for their own benefits. These dominants represent their ideology in the form of power patterns by applying the different textual styles and rhetoric. Modality and transitivity are parts of rhetoric by which the writers or speakers realize their ideology in the text or discourse.

Therefore, in answer to the first question, as Halliday's SFL is developed on the basis of three factors of text such as ideology, interpersonality and textuality of a text, it can be inferred that the modal and transitive aspects of a discourse are main textual elements which play an essential role in manifestation of his ideology. Due to the transitivity process, the politicians have a tendency to apply different types of model verbs for reflecting their ideology in the different contexts. The transitivity process serves as a link between the political language and ideology behind it. Therefore, it deepens the interpretation of political discourse

In answer to the second question, it can be asserted that the ideology, perspective or positive or negative attitude of a politician towards a particular social group or race are primarily reflected in the way of his application of modal and transitive verbs in a discourse. These types of verbs are deliberately used within a textual discourse in which each textual element is interrelated to each other and has an influential impact of the signification of these verbs. For

this reason, sometimes, they may be interpreted in an ambiguous way. Ambiguity is an inherent feature of political discourse.

Overall, the distribution of transitivity types reveals that Obama's political discourse heavily relies on relational and mental processes, with material processes used slightly less frequently. This pattern indicates a shift away from purely action-oriented rhetoric toward a more reflective and identity-driven communication style.

The frequent use of relational clauses positions Obama as an ideologically anchored and ethically conscious leader. Meanwhile, the mental clauses highlight his introspective stance, fostering a sense of authenticity and strategic emotional appeal—an effective rhetorical device for building trust with diverse audiences (Martin & White, 2005).

While material processes are present, they mainly appear in clauses expressing future initiatives or collective responsibility (e.g., "We are setting up a pathway"). This reflects a deliberate political balancing between action and reflection—asserting control without authoritarianism.

Overall, Halliday's ideational metafunction provides a robust tool for unpacking the implicit ideological meanings and power representations embedded in Obama's discourse. The analysis affirms that political language functions not only to inform or persuade but also to construct social reality.

Regarding the implications, as during three decades, Halliday's SFL was a great contribution and effective inspiration for the development of a number of theories and approaches by the celebrated scholars in the field of textual analysis, particularly discourse analysis, it can be applied by a comprehensive model in the educational system for the interpretation and analysis of different types of texts in teaching subject materials. Thus, the teachers or trainers should pay a special attention on the modal and transitive verbs as fundamental, textual, instruments for the interpretation of a text in the classroom situation. They should find out the effective skill or strategies for presenting these verbs in the different texts and familiarize the learners with the significance of these verbs in transferring of meaning in a text.

References

Eggins, S. (2004). *An introduction to systemic functional linguistics* (2nd ed.). Continuum.

Fairclough, N. (1985). Critical and descriptive goals in discourse analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *9*, 739–763.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.
Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.
Flowerdew, J., & Richardson, J. E. (Eds.). (2018). *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies*. Routledge. Fox News interview: Barack Obama. (n.d.). *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/aa85faa8-d454-11de-990c-00144feabdc0
Flowerdew, J., and Richardson, J. E. (Eds.). (2018). The Routledge handbook ofcritical discourse studies. Taylor and Francis
Halliday, M. A. K. (1961). Categories of the theory of grammar. *Word*, *17*(3), 242–292.
Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *Introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *Introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th ed.). Routledge.
Ledin, P., & Machin, D. (2017). *Doing critical discourse studies: A multimodal introduction*. SAGE Publications.
Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
NBC News. (2009a). President Barack Obama's interview with Hisham Melhem of the
Al-Arabiya television network. Retrievedfromhttps://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna28870724 NBC News. (2009b). Obama warns of 'double-dip recession'. Retrieved from https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna34016726
Reuters. (2009). Obama says 'not going to meddle in GM's decisions'. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/autos-gm-obama/update-1-obama-says-not-going-to-meddle-in-gms-decisions-idUSN1811254020091118/
Thompson, G. (2014). *Introducing functional grammar* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
Van Dijk, T. A. (1977). *Current trends in text linguistics*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.
Van Dijk, T. A. (1984). *Prejudice in discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Van Dijk, T. A. (1988). *News as discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
Van Dijk, T. A. (1990). Social cognition and discourse. In H. Giles & W. P. Robinson (Eds.), *Handbook of language and social psychology* (pp. 163–186). Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1991). *Racism and the press*. London: Routledge.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). *Elite discourse and racism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, *4*(2), 249–283.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction*. London: Sage   Publications.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: Sage.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352–371). Blackwell.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, *17*(3), 359–383.

Van Dijk, T. A. (Ed.). (1985). *Handbook of discourse analysis* (Vols. 1–4). New York: Academic Press.

Wodak, R. (1995). *Handbook of pragmatics*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Wodak, R. (1996). *Disorders of discourse*. London and New York: Longman.

Wodak, R. (2002). Aspects of critical discourse analysis. *ZFAL*, *36*, 5–31.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage Publications.