6 Critical discourse analysis in practice: interpretation, explanation, and the position of the analyst

The different stages of critical discourse analysis (CDA) are:

- **Description (Chapter 5):**
- **Interpretation (This Chapter):**
- **Explanation (This Chapter):**

The relationship between text and social structures is an indirect, mediated one.

1. Discourse (Stage 2: Interpretation):
Textual features gain meaning through social interaction (discourse) and Shared assumptions (part of members' resources MR) give **value** to these features.

2. Social Context (Stage 3: Explanation):
Discourses containing these values become real through social struggles. The common-sense assumptions of discourse incorporate ideologies that accord with particular power relations.

Interpretation
Interpretations are generated through a combination of what is in the text and what is 'in' the interpreter, in the sense of the members' resources (MR) which the latter brings to interpretation. From the point of view of the interpreter of a text, formal features of the text are 'cues' that activate elements of interpreters' MR, and that interpretations are generated through the dialectical interplay of cues and MR. In their role of helping to generate interpretations, we may refer to MR as interpretative procedures. In other words, text interpretation relies on a two-way street: cues from the text itself and the interpreter's background knowledge (MR). However, it is argued that MR is more than just knowledge because it includes ideological viewpoints that color how we understand those textual cues.
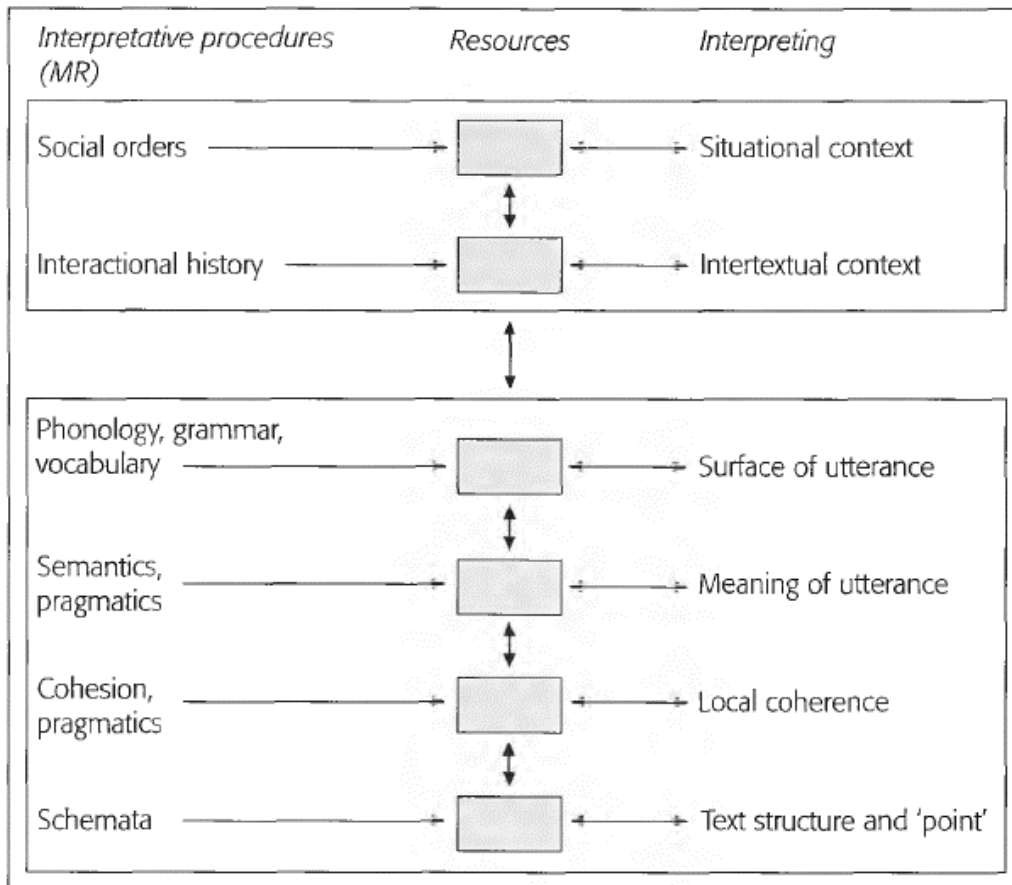
Figure 6.1   Interpretation

The model presented here explains the way people interpret text. The model focuses on two main aspects:

1. **Text Interpretation:** It has four levels:
a. Surface Meaning: The process by which interpreters convert strings of sounds or marks on paper into recognizable words, phrases and sentences. To do this, they have to draw upon that aspect of their MR which is often referred to as their 'knowledge of the language'.
b. Meaning of Utterances: Assigning meaning to constituent parts of the text. Interpreters here draw upon semantic aspects of their MR - representations of the meanings of words, their ability to combine word-meanings and grammatical information and work out implicit meanings to arrive at meanings for whole propositions. They also draw upon pragmatic conventions within their MR, which allow them to determine what speech act(s) an utterance is being used to 'perform'.
c. Local Coherence: the meaning connections between utterances to create a coherent interpretation between them. It's not concerned with

the overall structure of a whole text that's **global coherence.**
Interpreters draw upon that aspect of their 'knowledge of language' which has to do with cohesion, but coherence cannot be reduced to formal cohesion: interpreters can infer coherence relations between utterances even in the absence of formal cohesive cues. Thus, these inferential processes are generally regarded as a matter of pragmatics. In other words, this level considers both the mechanics of language (cohesion) and the unstated ideas that help sentences connect.

d. Text Structure and Point: Recognizing the overall structure of the text and its main idea (global coherence). This can be achieved by matching the text with one of a repertoire of schemata, or representations of characteristic patterns of organization associated with different types of discourse.

Example of schema: if you imagine a phone conversation schema. You expect greetings, topic introduction, topic shifts, concluding remarks, and goodbyes - a specific order for a phone call.

Once the structure is understood, the interpreter arrives at the **"point"** of the text. The 'point' of a text is a summary interpretation of the text as a whole which interpreters arrive at, and which is what tends to be stored in long-term memory to be available for recall.
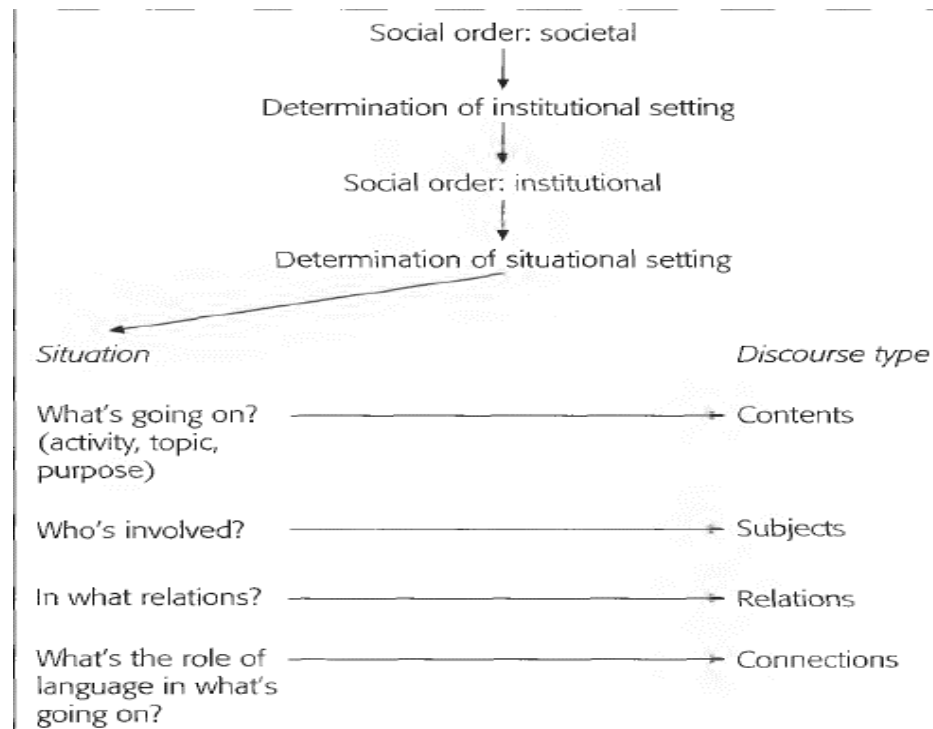
2. Context Interpretation: This involves understanding the context surrounding the text, including:

a. Situational Context: external cues - features of the physical situation, properties of participant, what has previously been said; it is also partly based on aspects of their MR in terms of which they interpret these cues - specifically, representations of societal and institutional social orders which allow them to ascribe the situations they are actually into particular situation types. How participants interpret the situation determines which discourse types are drawn upon, and this in turn affects the nature of the interpretative procedures which are drawn upon in textual interpretation.

b. Intertextual Context: The previous (series of) discourses the current one is connected to, and their assumptions determine what can be taken as given in the sense of part of common experience, what can be alluded to, disagreed with, and so on.

Situational context and discourse type
The figure below will be used to explain the way people decide what kind of communication style (discourse type) to use in a situation.

```
                        Social order: societal
                              |
                              v
            Determination of institutional setting
                              |
                              v
                  Social order: institutional
                              |
                              v
            Determination of situational setting
                          /
                        /
                      v
Situation                                        Discourse type

What's going on? ————————————————————→ Contents
(activity, topic,
purpose)

Who's involved? ————————————————————→ Subjects

In what relations? ——————————————————→ Relations

What's the role of ——————————————————→ Connections
language in what's
going on?
```

Situational Context of a conversation influences the type of language used (the situational context determining discourse type). This refers to four aspects of the situation:

1. What's going on? (activity, topic, purpose). It is the most general aspect and allows us to identify a situation in terms of one of a set of activity types, or distinctive categories of activity, which are recognized as distinct within a particular social order in a particular institution. The activity type is likely to constrain the set of possible topics.

Example:
Activity: Interviewing a witness
Topic: Describing an alleged offender
Purpose: Eliciting and documenting information about a crime

2. Who's involved? (people and their roles) In this case one is trying to specify which subject positions are set up; the set of subject positions differs according to the type of situation. It is important to note that subject positions are multi-dimensional. **Firstly**, one dimension derives from the activity type. **Secondly**, the institution ascribes social identities to the subjects who function within it. **Thirdly**, different situations have different speaking and listening positions associated with them - speaker, addressee, hearer, overhearer, spokesperson, and so forth.

Example:

* Subject Positions: Interviewer (police officer) and interviewee (witness)
* Social Identities: Policeman, member of the public (witness)
* Speaking/Listening Roles: Speaker and addressee roles alternate between the police officer and the witness.

3. **'In what relations?** This question investigates the power dynamics and social interactions between the people involved. Relationships between participants (power, social distance)

Example: The one completing procedures rather than showing empathy towards the witness.

4. **'What's the role of language? 'What's the role of language?** (e.g., informing, persuading):
Language is being used in an instrumental way as a part of a wider institutional and bureaucratic objective. The role of language not only determines its genre but also its channel, whether spoken or written language is used.
* Language is a tool for gathering information to fill out an official form (instrumental).
* The genre is a formal interview, conducted through spoken language.

The four dimensions of the discourse type (**content, subject, relation and connection**) are conventionally associated with the four dimensions of situation in the sense that they influence the discourse type.

The situational dependent determination of which discourse is to be drawn upon for producing and interpreting in the course of interaction, in turn controls elements of MR involved in the levels of text interpretation. A discourse type can be thought of as a meaning potential: a particular constrained configuration of possible experiential, expressive and relational, and connective meanings. Some of the elements of MR drawn upon as interpretative principles will be particular to this discourse type, and the realization of this meaning potential: vocabulary, semantic relations, pragmatic conventions, as well as schemata, frames and scripts.

We interpret situations in **two stages**. We use clues from the environment and past experiences (social orders in our minds) to categorize the situation **first broadly** (institutional setting like police station) and then more **specifically** (situation type like police interview). These social orders are like mental filing cabinets that help us make sense of the world around us.

The situation and the discourse type as two processes likely happen at the same time. Similarly, while the four aspects of a situation seem to independently influence the discourse type, they work together. Social orders establish typical situations that come with conventional ways of communicating (discourse types).

Because social orders depend on ideology and power, people from different backgrounds may interpret the same situation differently. This can lead to misunderstandings, both across cultures and within a single culture between people with different viewpoints.

Social ideologies and power structures significantly impact how we understand communication. Our assumptions about a situation (based on social orders) influence how we interpret the words themselves, not the other way around. This means the meaning of a text depends on the context we bring to it, shaped by our background and ideology. Therefore, Context can heavily influence how we interpret language. This is because the way we categorize situations and communication styles (social orders) is rooted in the social and power structures of society as a whole. In other words, every conversation reflects the bigger social picture.

Intertextual context and presupposition

Discourses and the texts have histories, they belong to historical series, and the interpretation of intertextual context is a matter of presupposition (assuming shared knowledge. Discourse participants may arrive at roughly the same interpretation or different ones, and the interpretation of the more powerful participant may be imposed upon others and consequently the powerful determines presuppositions. Presuppositions are not **properties** of texts; they are an **aspect** of text producers' interpretations of intertextual context. Presuppositions are cued in texts, by quite a considerable range of formal features. Two important ones are the definite article, and subordinate clauses. Others

are questions and that-clauses after certain verbs and adjectives (regret, realize, point out, aware, angry, etc.).

Media texts can't truly know a reader's background knowledge. Instead, writers create an "ideal reader" with a specific set of past experiences that the text assumes everyone shares. This allows the writer to potentially manipulate the audience by introducing ideas without explicitly stating them. Because these underlying assumptions aren't clear, it's harder for readers to identify and reject them if they disagree. So presuppositions can be, let us say, sincere or manipulative.

Presuppositions can also have ideological functions, when what they assume has the character of common sense in the service of power. An example is expressions like the Soviet threat, which become frequently repeated formulae in newspaper reports, for instance, and can cumulatively help to naturalize highly contentious propositions which are presupposed that there is a threat (to Britain, Europe, 'the West') from the Soviet Union. Such presuppositions do not evoke specific texts or textual series, but are rather attributed to readers' textual experience in a vague way: while presuppositions are sometimes drawn from particular texts, in other cases they make a general appeal to 'background knowledge'.

Writers can challenge or create assumptions (intertextual context) in their audience through negation (using negative statements). This technique, similar to presupposition), is a way for texts to connect and respond to other texts readers might have encountered.

The concept of intertextual context requires us to view discourses and texts from a historical perspective, in contrast with the more usual position in language studies which would regard a text as analysable without reference to other texts, in abstraction from its historical context.

Speech acts

Speech acts are a central aspect of pragmatics, which is concerned with the meanings that participants in a discourse ascribe to elements of a text based on their MR and their interpretations of context; it is part of the second level of text interpretation.

Speech acts can be defined as what a speaker is doing by saying something (promising, warning, etc.). A single sentence can have multiple purposes. However, Speech act values cannot be assigned simply on the basis of formal features of an utterance. In assigning values, interpreters consider the surrounding text, the situation, references to other texts, and the listener's background knowledge (MR).

Speech acts can be determined by the context. We can't understand speech acts without considering the context in which they are used. The way a speech act is interpreted depends on the situation and type of discourse it happens in. For example, a teacher's question might be a command depending on the classroom dynamic. Speech acts can be expressed directly or indirectly. The choice of directness is related to the social relationship between speaker and listener.

The way speech acts are used can reflect ideological assumptions about social roles and power. For example, a police officer has more right to question a witness than vice-versa.

Frames, scripts, and schemata

Schemata are a part of MR constituting interpretative procedures for the fourth level of text interpretation, and **frames** and **scripts** are closely related notions. They constitute a family of types of mental representation of aspects of the world, and share the property of mental representations in general of being ideologically variable. They can be differentiated in <u>three notions</u> which fits in with the contents-relations-subjects distinction.

1. **A schema** is a representation of a particular type of activity (**modes of social behaviour**)in terms of predictable elements in a predictable sequence. It is a mental representation of the larger-scale textual structures.

2. **Frames** represent the entities that populate the (natural and social) world. A frame is a representation of whatever can figure as a topic, or 'subject matter', or 'referent' within an activity. Frames can represent types of person or other animate beings (a woman, a teacher, a politician, a dog, etc.), or inanimate objects (a house, a computer, etc.), or processes (running, attacking, dying, etc.), or abstract concepts (democracy, love, etc.). They can also represent complex processes or series of events that involve combinations of such entities: an air crash, a car factory (car production), or a thunderstorm.

3. **Scripts** represent the subjects who are involved in these activities and their relationships. They typify how specific classes of subjects behave in social activities, and how members of specific classes of subjects behave towards each other - how they conduct relationships. For instance, people have scripts for a doctor, for a patient, and for how a doctor and a patient can be expected to interact.

The following table summarizing the key points:

Feature	Schema	Frame	Script
Represents	Order of events in an activity	Topics or entities	Roles and relationships of people
Example	Restaurant visit (entering, seating, ordering, eating, paying)	Restaurant (waiter, menu, tables, food)	Doctor-patient (doctor asking questions, examining, diagnosing)

There is an overlap between these terms:
1. **Scripts and frames:** there is a close connection between the script for a class of subject and the frame for the corresponding class of animate being.
2. **Schemata and frames**: frames for complex processes are not far from schemata.
The three terms identify three very broad dimensions of a highly complex network of mental representations. There are interdependencies between the three, in the sense that a particular schema will predict particular topics and subject matters, and particular subject positions and relationships, and therefore particular frames and scripts. Nevertheless, the three do vary independently to some extent, and it therefore does make sense to distinguish them in analysis. Frames and scripts function as interpretative procedures, for instance in arriving at interpretations of topic and point. They all do so in accordance with the dialectical relationship between textual cues and MR; textual cues evoke schemata, frames, or scripts, and these set up expectations which colour the way in which subsequent textual cues are interpreted.

Topic and point
How people interpret the point of a text is of considerable significance in terms of the effect of a text, for it is the point that is generally retained in memory, recalled, and intertextually alluded to or reported in other texts. The experiential or 'content' aspect of point is what is familiarly known as topic, but point cannot be reduced to topic because there are also relational and expressive dimensions of point.

An example that illustrates the difference:

Point	Topic
Main idea and intended effect	Subject matter
Military leader's wife's support implies she's a "good wife"	Military leader's wife

The point is not explicitly stated; People rely on their existing knowledge (mental representations) to understand the unsaid message. **Schemata, frames, and scripts are mental shortcuts** that help us make sense of the bigger picture in text by matching it to familiar patterns. Once we understand the main point using these mental shortcuts, we might forget the details and remember the overall idea. These shortcuts are influenced by our ideology and social experiences, which can be biased by societal power structures. This bias can lead everyone to interpret texts in certain ways, even if those interpretations favor powerful groups. This begins to take us into the stage of explanation,

Conclusion
The three questions which can be asked about a particular discourse
1. How do participants interpret the situation and background knowledge (context)?
2. What types of discourse are being used (e.g., news report, conversation)?
3. Do interpretations differ between participants or change over time?

Explanation: the second stage of discourse analysis
When aspects of MR are drawn upon as interpretative procedures in the production and interpretation of texts, they are thereby reproduced. Reproduction is for participants a generally unintended and unconscious side-effect, so to speak, of production and interpretation. Reproduction connects the stages of interpretation and explanation because whereas the former is concerned with how MR are drawn upon in processing discourse, the latter is concerned with the social constitution and change of MR, including of course their reproduction in discourse practice.
The social structures which are in focus are relations of power, and the social processes and practices which are in focus are processes and practices of social struggle. So, explanation is a matter of seeing a discourse as part of processes of social struggle, within a matrix of

relations of power. **Explanation** looks at how social structures and relations of power influence our mental resources, which in turn affect how texts are created and interpreted, potentially reinforcing or changing these social structures. The **"process" approach** emphasizes the potential for change through social movements, while the **"structure" approach** highlights how past power dynamics limit those possibilities.

 as it is illustrated in the following figure.
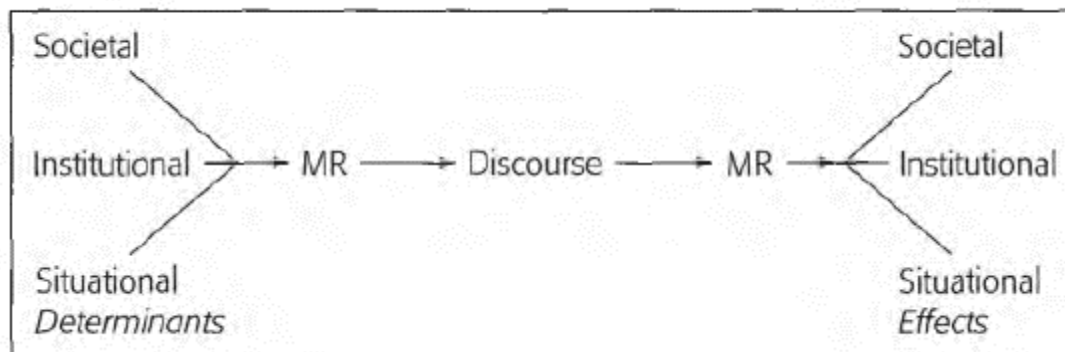
All communication is shaped by power structures (societal and institutional) and contributes to social struggles, even harmonious discourse reinforces these structures.

Social struggles aren't always about outward conflict. Even seemingly balanced conversations can reflect and reinforce existing power structures. Even a discourse in which participants apparently arrive at (virtually) the same interpretations of the situation, and draw upon the same MR (interpretative procedures) and discourse types, can be seen as an effect of power relations and as a contribution to social struggle. Example: unequal conversation between spouses (patriarchal social relations) shows how everyday interactions, lacking open conflict, can still contribute to larger social issues like gender inequality.

There are different ways of seeing the same discourse according to whether we are focusing upon it as situational, institutional, or societal practice. We are not necessarily or even normally looking at different features of the discourse at these different levels; rather, we are often looking at the same features from different perspectives. It has been noticed, for example, that in perfectly ordinary domestic conversation between women and men, women react more to what men say and show more involvement, understanding and appreciation (with markers like mmhm, yeah, no, really, oh) than men do when women are speaking. This feature can be seen firstly in situational terms as showing the 'supportive' position of particular women in particular domestic

relationships; but it can also be seen in institutional and societal terms as one of a number of features which show a tendency for women to be cast as supporting players in interactions, while men get the star parts. communication can influence the social structures that shape it in two ways:

1. Communication can simply reinforce existing social structures and the underlying mental resources (MR) people use to understand the world. This happens when producers (those communicating) rely on established patterns without innovation.

2. When producers use MR creatively, combining them in new ways, communication can contribute to changes in social structures and MR over time. If these creative uses become widespread, they can lead to lasting social change.

In clear and familiar situations (normative relations), people rely on established MR (norms, discourse types) to understand and respond easily. MR acts like a rulebook to follow. When a situation is unclear or unfamiliar (creative situation), existing MR doesn't provide clear guidance. People need to be creative and combine their MR in new ways to navigate the situation. These situations can be times of crisis or social struggle, forcing a reevaluation of existing social structures and the MR that reflect them.

Analyzing how social structures (institutions and society) influence communication (discourse) can involve deep sociological exploration. However, there are practical limitations: For large research projects, collaboration with a sociologist might be necessary. In smaller projects, a general understanding of the social structures within the institution or society is often sufficient.

mental resources (MR) function as ideologies, shaped by power relations and influencing social struggles.

To summarize:

1. Social determinants: what power relations at situational, institutional and societal levels help shape this discourse?

2. Ideologies: what elements of MR which are drawn upon have an ideological character?

3. Effects: how is this discourse positioned in relation to struggles at the situational, institutional and societal levels? Are these struggles overt or covert? Is the discourse normative with respect to MR or creative? Does

it contribute to sustaining existing power relations, or transforming them?

Conclusion: Position of analyst

The discourse processes of production and interpretation take place in people's heads, and it is therefore not possible to observe them as one might observe processes in the physical world. The only access is by relying on their own understanding of discourse processes (MR) to understand how participants use theirs. The analysts must draw upon their own MR (interpretative procedures) in order to explain how participants draw upon theirs. The analysis of discourse processes is necessarily an 'insider's' or a 'member's' task - the resources drawn upon by both participant and analyst members 'members' resources' (MR).

But if analysts are drawing upon their own MR to explicate how those of participants operate in discourse, then it is important that they must be aware of their own biases. This self-awareness is what separates the analyst interpreting the discourse from the participant simply using it. Although The position of the analyst in explanation is more easily distinguishable from that of the participant in that the 'resources' the analyst draws upon here are derived from a social theory, self awareness is crucial to avoid bias and bridge the gap between analyst and participant.