

## Exploring Hegemonic Practices in Research Supervision: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Interactional Patterns

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### Abstract

Power dominance leading to injustice, unequal relational patterns and various issues, which Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) repels against and analyzes, obtains in the tertiary education system across the globe. The extent to which it obtains varies among tertiary institutions. This paper examines hegemony in research supervision through the lens of CDA. Relying on secondary data, it demonstrates that the hegemony in research supervision can be understood better through CDA. It concludes that language is the instrument through which the hegemony in the education system as a whole and research supervision in particular is made manifest. Stakeholders in the tertiary education system are charged to review the institutionalized hegemonic practices and ideologies affecting supervisees and academic research. Both students and tutors/lecturers are enjoined to familiarize themselves with CDA and master how to use it to solve problems in different situations.

**Keywords:** Hegemony, Research supervision, Critical Discourse Analysis, Unequal interactional patterns

### Introduction

Research supervision is characterized by a lot of contending issues. Of specific interest to this paper is the dominance of the supervisor over the supervisee, such that the latter is made subservient and the former retains unquestioned superiority, power, orders and supervision rights. Many times, the matters arising from the suzerainty in the relational pattern between supervisors and supervisees generate complex issues that lead to delays in research execution as well as graduation or poor grade. The situation is such that some supervisees are given orders that contradict what the department or university has in place, because of the subjective tendencies and dispositions of the supervisors. Then, when the research work gets out of the supervisors' desk to the research team, for instance, during defense, such supervisees are confronted with harsh criticisms from the team superior to the supervisor. Unfortunately, supervisees are left drowned at that point, with the supervisor pouring out blames on them and equally making untrue claims against them.

It is against the above backdrop that this study rises to examine the hegemony in research supervision through critical discourse analysis, as an analytical linguistic mechanism for understanding language and supervisor-supervisee interactional patterns. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is interestingly concerned with studying the way in which social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political contexts (Bukhari & Xiaoyang, 2013). It aims at revealing the connections between discourse and practices that a layman can understand. CDA specifically focuses on:

- Social problems and political issues rather than on current paradigms and fashions.
- The ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimise, duplicate/challenge relations of power and dominance in society.

The foregoing highlights the insights CDA offers to trends in linguistics and language education, including language and interactional pattern in research supervision. This study argues that CDA offers valuable insights to understanding, exposing and resisting inequalities observable in research supervisions.

### The Emergence of CDA

CDA sprang from Critical Linguistics (CL) in the late 1970s. A group of linguists and literary theorists at the University of East Anglia played a pivotal role in developing critical linguistics (Kress & Hodges, 1979). CL was based on Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Trew, a CL practitioner, began "isolating ideology in discourse", and exhibiting "how ideology and ideological processes are manifested as system of linguistic characteristics and process". This aim led to the development of CL's analytical tools based on SFL

(Fowler et. al., 1979; Fowler, 1991). CL practitioners following Halliday believe that language performs three functions; ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

The ideational function refers to the experience of the speakers of the world and its phenomena, whereas the interpersonal function embodies the insertion of speakers' own attitudes and evaluation about the phenomena in question, and establishing a relationship between speakers and listeners. Instrumental to these two functions is the textual function. The textual function of language enables speakers to produce texts that are comprehensible by listeners. Indeed, textual function enables discourse to be connected to the co-text and con-text in which it happens (Fairclough, 1995).

There are two schools of thought for CDA. These are the traditional and modern. The Traditional School sees the role of language as being descriptive, while the Modern School of Social Constructionists suggests that discourses have the capability to construct and reconstruct social realities (Jorkinen et al., 1993; Fairclough, 2005; Bukhari & Xiaoyang, 2013). For Fairclough (2005), the pioneer in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis in organizational studies, social phenomena are socially constructed (Bukhari & Xiaoyang, 2013). CDA critically evaluates how discursive sources are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political, and historical contexts (van Dijk, 1998). As Fairclough (2003) notes, CDA is a discourse analysis that aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and process. It explores these in order to investigate how such practices, events, and texts arise out of contexts and are ideologically shaped by the relations of power and struggles over power.

From this perspective, CDA equally examines how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society itself is considered a factor in securing power and hegemony. From the above brief underpinnings of CDA and its emergence, it is understood that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a field that is used to analyze the written and spoken texts in order to explore the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias. Hence, it follows that the socio-educational constructs in the education system, which obtain, manifest or are replicated in research endeavors in the school contexts, have to be reexamined through the instrumentality of CDA and be reconstructed.

### **Hegemony in Educational Domains**

Hegemony obtains in the education setting. The field of education, according to Blommaert (2006), is largely idealized, as it is sensitive to picking large social changes. In education, new governments make a heavy mark, which teachers instantly pick as they are supposed to make modifications in curriculum and content. This could be because in education, culture becomes evident in discourses of teachers and other academic staff, which according to Bourdieu (1998) is a "heteronomic" process. This is owing to the fact that changes take place in education in structured norms, which guide corporate management in matters of efficiency and performance. In this process, rules and criteria are transferred from one field to another, resulting in new forms of conflicts, as described by heteronomy. It could be assumed that there is no homogeneity in education. Teachers behave differently when in the classroom, differently when in staff room, and differently when they move towards ideological centres. Sometimes they are themselves the centres, sometimes the principal, sometimes colleagues. Education is regarded as an institution that creates or reproduces power structures, and does it in such a way that millions of people are not even aware of it (Bourdieu, 1998). For this paper, being aware of it, requires CDA, among other mechanisms. There is no doubt that prejudices characterize the education system. In classrooms, deep messages about the workings of the world, the workings of culture, society and language are put across in overt and covert ways. CDA is particularly interested in the register that provides cues to participants to make the ideologies get transferred from micro to macro levels reciprocally, through discourses.

In linguistic effects, such as accents, dialects, and the use of lexical, grammatical and pragmatic forms often index a person's level of education, sophistication or refinement. This paper argues that larger social practices and processes are transferred at a micro level in the classroom. This argument is affirmed by many studies in the literature. Several of them are engaged with hereafter for scholarly evidence and justification of the foregoing argument. Accordingly, Banda and Mafofo (2016) show how the universities have recontextualized the experiences and discourses of liberation struggle, which led to universities reconstructing their distinct and recognizable identities.

It follows that through the lens of CDA, the experiences and the discourses prompted the reconstruction for context specificity. Talib and Fitzgerald (2015), which was based upon a collection of policy texts from 2002 to 2012, the metaphor of diversity in policy texts provides ways for systemic discrimination within the education system and this inequality is given legitimacy as necessary through various moral discourses. Similarly, Herbert and

Tienari(2013) analyzed the texts produced by university strategists, and interviews with staff affected by the system. They explored how notions of academic freedom are (re)constructed when tenure is transplanted into a new context. The study investigated into the aspects of tenure and how it became a tool for revealing senior management's strategies in universities and how it affects academics' understandings of freedoms.

Through foregoing arguments, this study attempts to make a CDA analysis of the relational pattern of supervisors and supervisees in tertiary institutions, with a view to showing how discourses and language ideologies are at play in these institutions of power. This proved to be a very valuable area of study as it brought forth latent and covert ideologies of the academic staff, students and all the personnel of the institutional machinery. Basically, research supervision in the education system is characterized by hegemony because the supervisor has the final say over what the supervisee has put up. That is because the power dominance of the supervisor and the trend of relegating the supervisee have been legitimated both orally and written forms by different institutions of higher learning. Moje (2010) shows how attempts to establish rapport and work collaboratively in teaching and research can result in struggles over authority, power, and goals. Particularly, researchers focused on affiliation or institutional power positions. The study asked about the relation between discursive and embodied relations, and its meanings in terms of power. It also inquired into the implications of discursive and embodied relations for all types of research relations. Since power is seen most obviously in such powerful institutions as education, Fairclough(1995) describes what he terms "the technologization of discourse" in such institutions. This is defined as "calculated intervention to shift discursive practices as part of the engineering of social change" (p. 3). Fairclough argues that discourse is a tool used by dominant social and political forces (e.g. educational institutions along with supervisors) to maintain hegemonic relations, since "hegemony of a class or group... is in part a matter of its capacity to shape discursive practices and orders of discourse" (p. 95).

Woolard (1992) has explained the contribution of language ideologies as it bridges linguistic and social theory by relating micro-culture of economic and social power and social inequality, posing macro-social constraints on language behaviour. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have described the educational process as one in which a new relation to language and culture is transmitted in institutional setting that reproduces and legitimizes the social order. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have explained that in the educational processes the relation between language and culture is formed in institutions which are responsible for endorsing social make-up.

Sociolinguists and anthropologists working in classroom settings have frequently found the use of language in the classroom to be a powerful orienting social practice (Collins, 1989; Anyon, 1981). It is important to understand language ideologies in education so as to realize how they been impacting on teaching and learning situations in various contexts. Sociolinguists and anthropologists also endorse the classroom use of English to continue as a powerful medium of inculcating and representing social practices. Classrooms enact social power and order in the strongest way, as classroom messages send forth deep social order, ways of enactment of language ideology in institutions of power. In this way, larger social view and order are relayed in the communication that is at the level of classrooms. In educational research, the use of language indexes a person as educated or uneducated. This use of language is better understood through the lens of CDA.

### **Hegemony in Research Supervision: Supervisor's Ideologically Institutionalized Power**

Research supervision is a very important function of higher education. Research supervision generally involves a discursive relationship between the supervisor and supervisee, as they are participants who are continually processing meanings, and negotiating aspects of power and identity in their texts (Ivanic, 1998; Lea, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Studies have explained how meanings are negotiated differently between students and their supervisors in institutions (Lea & Street, 1998). The variance in the interpretation of the writing task between them has also been examined by some studies (Cohen, 1993; Lea, 1994; Street, 1995; Stierer, 1997). In addition, there is now a growing trend towards new dialogic approach in research supervision (Vehviläinen & Löffström, 2016).

There is an element of power involved in supervisor's practices of reacting to students' writing (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Studies have explored students' and supervisors' misunderstandings and beliefs about the nature of feedback, issues of relationships between students and supervisors and identities of both the partners (Tuck, 2010). Another relevant study by Clughen and Connell (2012) looks at the contestation of power and control between students and their supervisors in the supervisors' support provided to students in writing. Teaching and learning practices and processes have effects on learners (Street, 2000).

CDA looks at literacy as situated practices in education. Some of the major researchers in the field are Cope & Kalantzis (2000). Boehe's study (2016) on contingency framework can bring useful guidance for supervisors and research students in identifying appropriate supervisory styles under varying circumstances, and suggests that no single supervisory style is effective in all the situations. Another important research theme is the building of

students' relationship with the supervisors on the nature and content of feedback. The theme of student identities is also of utmost importance. These insights proved to be valuable for the researcher in understanding supervision as a socio-academic practice.

Devos, et al., (2015) recommend Basic Needs Theory (BNT), which is part of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), with its relevance for Doctoral supervision. SDT is a theory of motivation. Vansteenkiste et al., (2010) present these aspects as "five mini-theories", among which the basic needs theory concerns the present study. According to this theory, there are three basic needs of the individuals. These are sources of positive motivational, emotional and behavioural outcomes. SDT explains three types of motivations from very controlled aspect, regulated by external factors to autonomous motivations that is intrinsic regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). The scholars claim that autonomous motivations are sources of positive outcomes, like wellbeing, learning, persistence, and then the controlled motivations. The intrinsic motivations are related to the need for competence in one's field, "to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231).

Second motivation is related to the need for affiliation, to get connected with the others, to give and take love and care and "to seek attachments and experience feelings of security, belongingness, and intimacy with others" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 252). Third, there is the need for autonomy to "the organismic desire to self-organize experience and behaviour and to have activity concordant with one's integrated sense of self" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). Autonomy in SDT is related to "the experience of integration and freedom, and it is an essential aspect of healthy human functioning" (p. 231). There have been three aspects of environment that effect people, and are specifically related to research supervision. These are autonomy support (rather than control or coercion), structure (rather than chaos) and interpersonal support/involvement (rather than cold, neglect or rejection) (Stroet et al., 2013; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010).

Autonomy support refers to the extent of freedom one is given to determine one's own behaviour (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Autonomy creates opportunities for students to take initiatives, lends choices to students; it allows time for students to learn on their own pace and facilitates the congruence between the proposed activities and the students' autonomous sources of motivation (Jang et al., 2010; Reeve, 2009; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Second, there is a reliance on non-controlling informational language, as the people can communicate information through their messages, which is flexible and informative and is based on competence. (Jang et al., 2010; Vansteenkiste, et al., 2010). Most importantly, the third dimension is to understand and acknowledge students' perspectives and feelings.

### **Interactional Patterns in Supervision**

An important aspect of supervisory practices concerns trust between the supervisors and supervisees. Trust had positive outcomes and less suspicious views of others (Weibel & Six, 2013). A mutual trust between the supervisor and supervisee encourages more social exchanges, risk taking and citizenship behaviours (Colquitt et al., 2007). Trust enables supervisors to provide autonomy, structure and involvement to their supervisees (Devos et al, 2015). CDA's analysis provides the researcher with the tool to study these issues in supervision practices. The current study looks at students and their supervisors as participants who are continually processing meanings and negotiating aspects of power and identity in their discourses. The study is supported by other studies in the field, which explain how meanings are negotiated differently between students and their supervisors in institutions (Lea and Street, 1998), and variance in the interpretation of the writing task between them (Cohen, 1993; Lea, 1994; Street, 1995; Stierer, 1997).

Tuck's work (2015) shows supervisors' meaningful engagement with the students. The relationship between the supervisor and students depended largely on the kind of feedback given to the students. It is important to note the points on power play of the supervisor. Studies in education and academic literacies explore students' and supervisors' misunderstanding and beliefs about the nature of feedback, issues of relationships between students and supervisors, and identities of both partners. These insights guided the study to examine literary events as well as literary practices, and how students at local and international societal levels understand literacy practices (Street, 2000).

Van der Boom et al. (2013) explores interpersonal aspects of coaching and (implicit) assumptions on skills and competences of a PhD. The study shows that both supervisors and supervisees considered the role of personality, knowledge, skills, communication and coaching as the major attributes of supervision, with a good match between both parties. However, according to van der Boom et al., (2013) this relationship is unequal and is hierarchical because the supervisees are highly dependent upon the supervisors for the important decisions regarding

manuscripts, and their organization or submission. Individual supervisor's skills, such as empathy, communication and coaching skills, are highly important for matching or mismatching with a PhD candidate.

Van der Boom et al., (2013) reports in the context of PhD supervision that the supervisees value the personality features of their supervisors as an important variable for their motivation and encouragement. These traits included flexibility, honesty, being a good listener, and being empathic in order to be encouraged in their work, taking an interest in the candidate, being open, and being responsive. Conversely, lacking these characteristics had a negative effect on their motivation. Supervisees also valued nonjudgmental and constructivist feedbacks. The relation between the supervisor and supervisee is that of power (van der Boom et al., 2013) relations, and supervisees as well as supervisors are aware of asymmetrical power imbalance. Thus, adverse relations result in poor results in research work. CDA's critical stance on literacy brought invaluable insights in terms of theory and approach to this study by analyzing the discourses of power and hegemony in research consultation meetings. It could make visible the structures of dominance and control by the powerful counterparts, and suggested ways to eliminate power and hegemony in supervision.

This study is particularly interested in the supervisee's voice, which is being silenced and the supervisee made subservient. Supervisors' over-powering disposition, role and status in institutions of power such as universities can make student voices subservient and submissive. This aspect is of great concern for the researchers and they built the study to explore the dominant language ideologies and students' voices in supervision practices. As an advocacy model, CDA attempts to understand various historical, educational and socio-cultural factors that explain the plight of the students, with the spirit of benevolence, and with a surge to change the status quo between the supervisors and the supervisees.

Bell-Ellison and Dedrick (2008) found that the ideal supervisor's most valued features were to believe in the postgraduate students and to value them as persons, to facilitate in keeping their focus on research, and to treat them as mature adults. Conversely, power and control in research supervision concern controlling behaviour of the supervisors, which "pressure students to think, feel, or behave in a specific way" (Reeve, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Reeve (2009) suggests that the controlling behaviour of the supervisors begins from "the prioritization of the teacher's perspective" (p.161) which negates or discourages student's perspective.

## Conclusion

Given the exposition made so far, it is realized that the institutionalized hegemony obtained in the education system is replicated in research supervision. The relational pattern between supervisors and supervisees is characterized by hegemony. The grave implications of the hegemony are the burdens of the supervisees, as students who barely have any say in the decisions on the entirety of their research works, because of structural imbalance and systemic injustice. These justify the stance of this study that CDA is a tool for understanding hegemony in research supervision as regards language and supervisor-supervisee interactional patterns.

As such the novelty of the study is its examination of the dominance, inequality and social power abuse enacted in the education system and reproduced in academic research contexts. The study calls on stakeholders in the tertiary education system to reconsider and revise the current situations that make supervisees subservient and allow for impositions and excesses from supervisors. Both students and lecturers are charged to familiarize with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) so as to use it for a critical analysis of different situations for the attainment of betterment in educational and social spheres of life.

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