**INTRODUCTION SHAPING THE WORLD THROUGH LANGUAGE**

# WHY CARRY OUT DETAILED ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE?

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a set of tools for analysing texts and spoken language. Such tools have been shown to be highly useful to scholars working across a range of academic fields. This has been particularly so in media and communications studies, but also in health communication, business studies, marketing, political communication, legal studies and others. The tools provided by CDA can be used to reveal aspects of instances of talk or writing that would be less apparent to the casual observer. In other words, they allow us to look beneath the surface level of language and to point to the evidence in a text that reveals what is ‘really’ being communicated. But what does that mean, what is really being communicated? Consider the following sentence:

The global economy is flourishing.

At one level, this sentence seems clear enough. But, in CDA we would want to ask what assumptions are buried beneath the surface of such a sentence. Here, the word ‘flourishing’ suggests something positive. It is a metaphor and a term usually used to refer to plants or an animal species when they thrive. Here the global economy, therefore, is described like a plant or species that is healthy and thriving in habitats around the planet. In this sentence it is also assumed that there is something that can be simply identified as ‘the global economy’ which everyone would agree upon and regard as positive. But we might ask if this would mean the same thing to a stock market trader in London, an unemployed former factory worker in the United States or to a peasant sweat shop worker in a South American country, to where production has been shifted?

We are also told that it is flourishing. So is it doing this by itself? The global economy, unlike plants or animals, is not something that acts alone. It requires an agent, in other words someone, to drive it, to make it flourish. This formulation does not include such an agent. And in CDA we might want to know why there is such an absence. What we do know is that global trade involves struggle and competition over resources. And the idea that there is and should be a global economy with unrestricted free trade is based on very specific forms of policymaking and agreements stemming in particular from US strategies in the 1980s. It is embodied in entities such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). All of these have been highly criticised for the way they favour countries that are already wealthy and powerful.

What we mean by the real meaning buried in language, therefore, can be captured in the sense that the speaker, or writer, seeks to foreground not the complexity, the tensions, nor the political nature of the notion of a global economy, but that it is a natural, inevitable and even desirable thing.

Scholars who use CDA see value in carrying out more thorough and systematic analysis of language and texts than is permitted through content analysis-type approaches or the more ‘close reading’ type of interpretation found in fields such as Literary Studies or Cultural Studies. Guided by linguistic expertise, such detailed CDA analysis can allow us to reveal more precisely how speakers and authors use language and grammatical features to create meaning, to persuade people to think about events in a particular way. Sometimes they may seek to manipulate them, while at the same time concealing their communicative intentions. Although the language they use may rely on broader ideas about the world which have become taken for granted in a society, such as there is a thing that can easily be represented as a global economy, a natural and good thing.

CDA allows us to look closely at routine everyday language use in conversations, in social media, school books, or in documents and instructions, to observe and understand how people present their arguments and what kinds of assumptions, logic and causalities they rely upon. Even instances of communication which are presented as having the aim, in the first place, to inform or entertain can on close analysis of the language choices reveal very selective views on the world.

# REPRESENTING AND EVALUATING EVENTS THROUGH LANGUAGE

Underpinning this close attention to language is the assumption that it is entwined with power, ideology and control over how we create our societies. This is not necessarily power or control exercised through force. Rather, it relates to the power how we define the nature and meaning of everyday processes and events. As we do so, there will be people, processes and things, represented as good or bad, desirable or undesirable. There may be things that are omitted, ignored or misrepresented. As each of us speaks and writes, we will choose terms that positively or negatively evaluate things, people, processes and places. This will be the case when a friend or member of our family gives their view on the nature of an event related to immigration or crime. It will be where someone on a social media platform makes a particular interpretation about something rather mundane, such as keeping fit, eating ethical food, or parenting skills. Or it may be found in an official political statement making a case for setting up a certain form of social or economic organisation.

In each of these cases, there will be evaluations of different kinds, as we saw in the example above about the global economy. A speaker or organisation will use language strategies, some quite subtle and buried in grammar, to legitimise the position that they take and to make it sound more reasonable and compelling. In each case they will have their own intentions and motivations for making that particular case. CDA allows us to examine this language use to reveal these motivations which can often be less obvious to the casual observer.

In one sense, CDA helps us to reveal what a text is really saying and also, crucially, how it does so. And by doing so, it helps to do something very important. It allows us to ask what kind of state of affairs is being presented to us. We can also ask what situations might be continued, or come about if we follow the ideas and logic communicated in instances of motivated language use. On the basis of such ideas, say about parenting, immigration or economics, how will we go on to plan and organise things if a particular version of how to do them continues to dominate or goes on to become widely shared and accepted? Or if this version comes to appear natural and not simply a motivated interpretation? In other words, the kind of societies we create is deeply entwined with language use.

Let us give a very simple example here in order to illustrate from a research paper by Breazu and Machin (2018). Here is a sentence from an online news site, published in Romania. It is from a news article reporting on the eviction of Roma people from camps in France. At the time, many Roma had travelled from Romania as economic migrants, once Romanian citizens had been permitted to travel across borders within the EU. In Romania, many Roma live in cycles of social marginalisation, with no schooling, job opportunities or access to health care; they also experience extensive discrimination and violence (Breazu & Machin, 2022). So, during this time many travelled around Europe, hoping to improve their lives. But, of course, they took with them their lack of formal qualifications, low levels of formal education and social exclusion. From 2012 to the time of writing this book, France was forcefully evicting the Roma from their camps and repatriating them to Romania. Here is how the article reported on the camp evictions.

A series of operations of freeing some illegally occupied land have already taken place.

What is it that we can observe here in the language that is important? In CDA, one thing we can ask to help us in our analysis is how does the language used differ from the nature of actual events themselves. From the beginning of these repatriations, there were extensive and detailed reports by human rights organisations (Amnesty, 2012a, 2012b). They gave eye witness accounts by NGOs, of families, including women, some pregnant, children and the elderly being forcefully displaced, by private contractors using bulldozers to tear apart dwellings, and using dogs to chase people off sites. They also referred to loss of personal documents and loss of schooling for children. In sum, they reported on further social upheaval for people already highly marginalised and disconnected from wider society and its support structures.

If we look at how these events are accounted for in language in the extract above, we find something different than the account given by human rights organisations. The word ‘operations’ is used instead of ‘eviction’ or ‘repatriation’. The act of chasing families, including children, off the site using bulldozers, aggression and dogs, is described as ‘freeing’ land. The words ‘scheduled to happen’ also help to make it sound somehow well organised, part of procedure, routine even, since is one of ‘a series’. This serves to diminish, or even silence, the violence, chaos and upheaval experienced by the families. In this extract, and the text as a whole, Breazu and Machin (2018) show that it is not even clear who is carrying out the act of ‘freeing’ up land. Those responsible for this action are completely missing from the text.

The terms used in the account given of these events, such as ‘scheduled’, ‘a series of operations’ and ‘freeing some illegally occupied land’ are not terms the evicted Roma would themselves be likely to use. Unlike in the NGO reports, the point of view of the Roma is absent from this newspaper report. In fact, given the language used here, we clearly have the viewpoint of the authorities, for whom this is almost a bureaucratic perspective. In texts we can always ask whose point of view is included and whose is excluded. And we can ask where they are included how are they shaped and evaluated.

In fact, the language used here makes something, which would be terrifying for the people involved, sound very civilised, almost a technical process. The wider issue here, acknowledged for many years by European institutions (FRA, 2014), is how we take responsibility for, and improve, a situation where many millions of people from a particular ethnic minority, the Roma, live in abject poverty and at the margins of society, experiencing extreme prejudice and rejection wherever they go. It has been clearly argued that news reports of this nature, which either demonise the Roma or naturalise violence against them, certainly do not contribute to any solution in this task (McGarry, 2017).

This is just a superficial look at one small instance of language use, but it provides a useful introduction to where the focus of CDA lies. How is language used to represent the world, events and people? As we see in this short extract, events are represented in a particular way. In the news report as a whole, the actual participants, the families and the private contractors, are, in fact, absent from the account. Language, therefore, can be deployed in speech and writing both to reveal things or erase them, in part by foregrounding other things and qualities. As we move through this book, we will introduce tools that allow us to show how language can be used to do these things in often very subtle ways.

In this account of the representation of the Roma, we also begin to get a sense of how CDA can be used to contribute to wider scholarship. While studies might show the problematic nature of a particular issue such as camp evictions, CDA can be used to show how such an issue is communicated and how its actual nature may be glossed over and be presented as something legitimate through language use.

# LANGUAGE AND MOTIVATION

In CDA, we would also want to ask whose interest certain accounts of events, such as the ones involving the Roma, might serve. Why would the violence against a group of people who are already highly vulnerable and marginalised by society be accounted for in this kind of language? In France at the time, when there was an economic downturn, it was argued that right-wing politicians were using migrants as a scapegoat for a series of cuts in government spending (Themelis, 2016). In such cases, governments may draw attention, not to how the economy is being managed and what is being prioritised, but by pointing to the burden put on the system by migrants such as the Roma, also suggesting that these bring crime and a threat to social order (Breazu & Machin, 2022). Such scapegoating of migrants was characteristic of many countries at the time, across Europe and in the United States (Wodak, 2015). In particular, it has been suggested that in Romania the Roma have been used by governments to distract from their own shortcomings, failed policies, and social and economic problems (Nacu, 2012).

The aim of this book is to present a set of tools used by critical discourse analysts to show how these can be used to analyse instances of language use in research projects. These tools, as we will show, can help us to look deeper into the kinds of language such as from the news text about the Roma above. These are tools which are very helpful for looking beyond the surface meanings of texts. They can guide us to account for how language is used to shape and define a set of events. But, as we show, these tools can also alert us to how people seek to influence and manipulate in even the most mundane settings. Conducting a CDA is, as we see, a kind of ‘detective work’, looking at the details of language to reveal what is actually being said.

# THE BROADER IDEAS AND VALUES BURIED IN LANGUAGE

Along with the motivations of those producing or influencing language production, CDA seeks to bring to light the underlying ideas and values which these support. The aim of analysis in CDA is to lay them bare, by pointing to the evidence in the text in the first instance. Consider the following example. Here two teachers introduce the same class:

Today the topic is lexical analysis of advertisements. This is followed by the introduction of a new concept: discourse.

Hi everyone, are you ready for the next class? We will look at how we can do some interesting lexical analysis of advertisements. And we begin with a new, really helpful, fascinating concept too, known as discourse.

Both authors of this book have worked in many different countries where teaching styles differ greatly and where some might typically resemble the first or second of these two class introductions. But this is not just about style. Embedded in language can be evaluations of what is taking place and also information about types of identity and social relations, in other words, what kinds of role participants are to take, how people should react to one another and who has power. Looking closer at the language in this case can give us a clue to how both teaching, knowledge and learning are considered. It can reveal ideas and values about what these should involve and how they should take place and what kinds of identities are involved. Of course, we might think this should be obvious: it is about teaching and learning and it involves a teacher and students. But looking a little deeper, we find it is more than just this.

In the first of these two examples, the information is laid out in quite bare fashion: ‘Today the topic is lexical analysis of advertisements’. The second, on the other hand, has additions. It starts with a question to the class: ‘are you ready?’ This suggests it is more open to dialogue and more considerate of the needs of the students. In contrast, the first example comes across as much more ‘closed’. While the first presents information, the second addresses ‘you’, making it more personal, and includes also reference to ‘we’. So this is presented as something that the students and the teacher will do together. This is very different from just stating information with no mention of either ‘we’ or ‘you’. The second example is in a sense more openly persuasive, almost ‘selling’ the class, that its contents is ‘interesting’ and ‘helpful’. And it is also more expressive in how it conveys a sense of enthusiasm, as in ‘we begin with a new, really helpful, fascinating concept too’.

So, what do these observations tell us? The first statement shows no need to persuade or to show enthusiasm by selling the class to ‘you’. Nor does it try to put the teacher on a level with the students by referring to ‘we’. There is the assumption, therefore, that what takes place needs no qualification, no ‘dressing up’. And there is a sense of authority of the teacher and the knowledge that is presented as taken for granted.

In the second case, there is less a sense of the authority and power of the teacher, but rather of the teacher helping the students and communicating to them why the content is worth their attention. We could explain these differences in terms of more ‘student centred’ learning versus a more traditional teaching and learning style. In the first example, the professor feels no need to please or to reassure the students, nor to signal equality between teacher and student by referring to ‘we’.

The second example can also be explained through the shifts in how students are now seen as much as ‘clients’ as they are learners, as schools and universities in many parts of the world have become run more as businesses. Many school and university systems are now organised by policymakers with no teaching experience, with teachers being excluded from the process (Gustafsson & Erickson, 2013), but required to compete in national and international league tables to achieve excellence (Hopman, 2008).

Research tells us that in this new situation teachers interact with students in the fashion of serving customers, in other words, keeping them happy, mindful of consumer rights to receive a good service (Ball, 2003). This may also mean they will avoid overly challenging them, as part of creating happy ‘customers’. Unhappy customers might submit bad reviews in course satisfaction surveys. Such evaluations will go on to be presented in national league tables as evidence of levels of quality. And teachers themselves must demonstrate professionalism, not so much through more subtle ways of communicating knowledge and understanding individual student and group needs, but through overt symbolic demonstrations of professional dedication, such as demonstrating alignment with the students through representing themselves as ‘we’ (Parding et al., 2012).

This is part of what scholars have described as a marketised model of education (Ledin & Machin, 2020; Mayr, 2008). Buried in these simple statements above are wider issues and discourses about teaching, learning and knowledge. This model of education is one which has moved, it is argued, from education as related to citizenship and personal development, to where knowledge becomes simply a commodity sold to customers, who must at the same time be kept happy (Ledin & Machin, 2021). Teaching itself becomes more aligned with outcomes and tests rather than knowledge as an objective in itself (Ball, 2012).

Consider this mission statement from a primary school in Europe. Here we can see how language carries very specific ideas and values about the meaning of teaching and learning:

We believe that a happy child is a successful one. We are committed to providing a positive, safe and stimulating environment for children to learn, where all are valued.

It is interesting how ‘happiness’ and ‘success’ are seen as the same thing here. It is taken for granted that being successful is something easy to define and agree upon. And this is the case even for very small children. So, pre-school children must already be thought of in terms of being successful. We can also ask here why might it be necessary to state that a school provides a ‘safe’ environment? Would we not assume that schools should be safe? And why is it necessary to say that ‘all are valued’? Would we assume that otherwise some children would not be valued? We might argue that here a similar kind of ‘performance’ of adding market value is involved, as seen above, where the teacher aims to keep students happy.

Also of note here, again, is the use of ‘we’, where the ‘we’ is ‘committed’. Professionalism is communicated through the overt expression of ‘commitment’ not by a varied staff, each with their own specific ways of teaching, but a unified and singular ‘we’.

In Sweden, where one of the authors has worked for many years, pre-schools and primary schools have become increasingly privatised and run for profit (Lundahl et al., 2013). His own children attended school in this environment. The aim is to attract middle-class parents, which in turn will help these schools to perform well in league tables even though they carry out many cost-cutting exercises, such as using less qualified staff to lower running costs (Wilborg, 2014). The mission statement above sounds rather like advertising a product, where customers are all ‘valued’ and children will be both successful and happy. At the heart of this is the idea of education as a product or a commodity to be sold and consumed.

Returning to the second of the class introductions above, we can say that language, as well as signalling intentions and interests in the context of the classroom, also echoes broader ideas, processes and shifts in wider society. This is an important observation for CDA where it is assumed that there is a close relationship between language and the societies we create. For this reason, what is at stake is not just what people say in a given moment or what is written in particular text. This is also about wider ideas and values that shape how we do things and account for why we do them. Here, specifically, it is about how we run our schools and the nature of teaching and learning. In the case of the Roma eviction extract above, it is about how we deal with deep socio-economic inequalities in our societies. Such ideas can become almost invisible as they are routinely inscribed into everyday communication and become simply how things are talked about.

As we move through the book, we will be looking much more closely at such instances of language use. In each chapter we will introduce tools which can help us to describe and analyse, more systematically and accurately, what is taking place and link this to broader ideas and processes in society. We show how these tools can be used on very different kinds of texts and instances of communication. This includes news texts, political speeches, advertisements, webpages, performance management documents, product packaging, branding, video-clips, social media posts, everyday conversations and many others.

# BEING CRITICAL

The word ‘critical’ has been central to CDA and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). CDA points to a departure from the more descriptive goals of linguistics and discourse analysis, where the focus has been more on describing and detailing linguistic features than about why and how these features are produced and what possible goals they might serve for those producing them. Therefore, we would ask what goals might a school mission statement serve by foregrounding how all children will be happy, successful and valued. We might ask what goals the representation of the Roma camp eviction might serve, where administrative processes conceal upheaval and aggression against Roma people. The term ‘critical’ therefore does not so much mean ‘criticising’ than ‘denaturalising’ the language used in order to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts. In this way we can draw out the power interests buried in these texts.

Fairclough (1989: 5) sums up the idea of ‘critical’ language study as the processes of analysing linguistic elements in order to reveal connections between language, power and ideology that are often hidden from people. When a researcher draws on CDA for the first time, what they will realise is that it is often in the smallest linguistic details that power relations and political ideology can be found. In texts we may be aware of what the speaker or author is doing, but not so much how they are doing this.

Here, we can look at a simple example to think more about what ‘critical’ means. In Swedish news websites it has been shown that there are regular articles which report positively on the activities of Swedish transnational corporations, such as the clothing manufacturer H&M and the furniture producer IKEA, in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Cotal & Machin, 2021). Both companies, however, have been criticised for causing environmental damage and providing poor working conditions in countries where they manufacture their products. Costs are low because of cheap labour, weak regulation of working conditions and because of irregular waste disposal (Smith, 2016). Working conditions are often dangerous and the majority of employees can be women and children working long hours for little money (Newell, 2018). Studies show that we must understand this as a fundamental part of how global supply chains now operate across many manufacturing industries, such as fashion, technology, or furniture, meaning that factories must operate at the lowest possible costs in order to be competitive (Parenti, 2011; Smith, 2016). Otherwise the transnational corporations will move elsewhere (Ross, 2004).

Many of the fashion, furniture and other brands pre-empt criticisms and negative publicity by setting up PR programmes (Newell, 2018). Given the very nature of this type of production and the supply chains involved, corporations may operate small and temporary pockets of ethical practice, but it is virtually impossible for a company to regulate what takes place (ILO, 2014; O’Keefe & Narin, 2013). What Cotal and Machin (2021) show is that the Swedish corporations, despite clear evidence presented by NGOs around the world, are represented in the national news media as helping these countries and not to blame for the situation. Here are some extracts from their data:

For decades, development researchers have discussed Africa. Now a light can be seen—when foreign companies find it.

Swedish clothing giants like Kappahl and H&M are looking for production opportunities in Africa.

The report is about Swedish companies moving production to Africa, where formerly they have used suppliers in Asia and South America. As we see in the first line, the entry into Africa is represented a kind of solution to a problem long discussed by ‘development researchers’. But we do not know who these researchers are. Are they economists, geographers, or NGOs? There is a sense that they have been stumped about how Africa can be developed, given that we are told that now ‘a light can be seen’. In the second line we see that this light relates to companies now looking for ‘production opportunities’, a term which has positive connotations. And the Swedish companies are represented as ‘looking’ for opportunities as part of this light.

Being critical in the context of this text means that we ask how such a representation relates to an actual situation. This means that we have to engage with research which helps us to understand that situation. So, put simply, research tells us that transnational companies will enter new markets where there are favourable conditions for lower production costs, in other words, even cheaper labour and weaker regulation and control (Smith, 2016). In fact, research also tells us that many corporations have shifted to Africa, where countries have been placed into Structural Adjustment Programmes by the IMF and the World Bank, when they were having problems repaying debts (Paczynska, 2006; Parenti, 2011; Peet, 2009). Structural Adjustment Programmes force national governments to sell off public services, such as water and electricity, to foreign companies. This also entails opening up the country to corporations, thereby creating the favourable conditions just mentioned (Belamy Foster et al., 2011).

The process of foreign corporations taking over public services and setting up new systems of manufacturing has been shown to have devastating effects across these societies. Schools and health systems deteriorate, costs increase greatly and poverty deepens (Paczynska, 2006). Yet, in the above news report this is represented in terms of a ‘light’ being seen, but only ‘when foreign companies find it’. So African countries need this ‘development’ as a kind of ‘light’ for them. And the complex nature of Structural Adjustment Programmes is substituted by terms such as ‘production opportunities’.

Being critical here, as we see, involves looking at how actual participants, actions, intentions and processes are represented in texts. A very brief look at this extract shows that there is, arguably, some divergence between the existing body of research on the activities of transnational corporations at sites of production and their representation in the news media. The sense of being critical does not mean being ‘negative’, but rather looking at the details of language use with a view of what kinds of motivations, processes and causalities are being justified and served (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017).

LANGUAGE AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION  
We never find language in isolation. On a product package language is embedded in designs with graphic shapes, colours and icons. In a YouTube video the language is accompanied by a sequence of scenes. Even where we encounter language as print on a page, its meaning can be influenced by the kind of font used, or the kind of paper. Websites carry photographs and infographics. An understanding of what is communicated through language in each of these instances cannot ignore these other elements and features which, of course, play an important role in what is communicated. Over the past few decades there has been a growing acceptance among linguists whose tools and knowledge underpin CDA that our analyses of communication cannot focus on language alone. Therefore in this book we also present a set of tools that we can use to carry out a more systematic analysis of visual communication.

For scholars working in fields such as Media and Communications, Film Studies and many other disciplines, it may seem rather obvious that communication always involves more than only language. But this shift in linguistics is important, as it also has led to attempts to provide more systematic tools to document how meaning is created in visual communication, drawing on some of the descriptive power of existing linguistic models and tools. Scholars in linguistics have referred to this as ‘multimodal’ analysis, where language is seen as one ‘mode’. Not all of this work has adopted the kind of critical approach used in CDA with its aim to reveal more buried ideas, motivations and vested interests. As with linguistics in general, the aim has often rather been one of description, of documenting patterns in visual communication. The aim of much of linguistics has, after all, been to explain the nature of languages. But this multimodal analysis can also offer us tools to help us look more closely at instances of communication in a similar kind of systematic fashion as we might apply to language analysis in CDA. Here, for convenience, we call this Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA).

Let us give a simple example of how this might work practically. In Figure 1.1, we see a photograph which accompanied the report on the Roma camp evictions we considered above, taken from a research paper by Breazu and Machin (2018). Given the topic of the report, we would assume it shows two Roma men manually moving their caravan along a street. We also see one police officer in the foreground. To the left are a group of people, who appear uninvolved in the ongoing process, perhaps local people.

Above, where we look at the language used to represent the evictions, we considered how people, actions, settings and processes were represented. In MCDA, we would ask the same kinds of questions of such a photograph. We want to ask what kinds of people are represented, what kinds of actions are shown and what kinds of settings do we find visually represented (Figure 1.1).



Figure : Roma escorted by Police, Jurnalul National, 9 August 2012

As with the analysis of the language, we would be concerned with how the actual events are represented. Is there anything that is foregrounded, backgrounded or even left out? In the language we found that the following participants were left out: families, children, elderly people and contractors. It was not clear who was actually doing the ‘freeing up’ of land. And the actual upheaval and violence of the evictions was accounted for in highly euphemistic language. In the photograph, however, we do find participants. But we find very few, given what was described in NGO reports. We see three Roma and only one police officer, with perhaps another to the right. And we see no children, pregnant women, nor elderly people. Looking at the activities taking place, we see that the two Roma men are pulling the caravan and smiling. They do not appear to be fearful or in danger of having possessions destroyed. The police officer in the foreground appears very relaxed and informal. There is no sense of coercion or even of disruption. The Roma man even appears to be smiling at the police officer. The local people seem to be casually onlooking, bearing witness to what is taking place, which perhaps suggests that nothing here is being concealed. This is being done in plain public view, where people appear as if nothing out of the ordinary is taking place.

What was clear from the linguistic analysis was that the point of view presented through the language was not that of the Roma, but that of the authorities, who offered a sanitised and bureaucratised view of events. Now we can ask about the point of view with regard to the photograph. As we see, the perspective we are given is from behind the police officer, so that we more or less get his point of view of the scene. It is as if we stood beside or behind him. We could imagine a different photograph where we see the scene from the point of view of the Roma, so us looking at the police who are giving directions, instructions or commands. In this case, what kind of expression would we see on the police officer’s face? Are there more police officers standing there, with cars, vans or dogs?

In fact, this particular photograph is a stock image bought from a commercial archive and represents a different set of events involving Roma (Breazu & Machin, 2018). This is not acknowledged in the report. It is now quite usual in (online) news reports to find photographs taken from commercial photographic agencies. Of course, there are practical reasons for this, since they are cheap, quickly accessible and searchable. But we must still ask why this particular photograph was selected. Many scholars have pointed to the stereotypical ways that Roma are represented in the news media, not in a positive light, associated with productive activities, but in terms of a social problem and threat to social order or a burden on the state (Richardson & O’Neill, 2012). So we might ask in what ways this image might align with such representations of a generic Roma type. From the point of view of MCDA, we would pay attention to the representation of participants, actions, reactions and the settings in both the language used and the images that sit alongside it.

There are two points to bear in mind here. One, it is through the photograph and the language together that this instance of communication conveys meaning. Two, we must nevertheless pay attention to what is different between the two. It may be the case, as here, that the two are different. In language the act of aggressively evicting and repatriating a community, including women, children and the elderly, is here presented as something official, unproblematic and procedural. In the photograph, we see what looks like a pleasant interaction between a small group of Roma adults and a single police officer, which may even involve some joking. The text does not say ‘it was a pleasant interaction between the Roma and a single police officer who shared jokes with them’; however, the photograph allows this meaning to be communicated in less concrete terms.

In MCDA, we are interested in all kinds of visual communication, as we see in still and moving images, such as film clips, flowcharts, infographics, or in social media posts, etc. In this book, we deal with many of these. But the focus always foregrounds the role of language in these contexts.

# LANGUAGE IN IMAGES, DIAGRAMS, TABLES AND CHARTS

The multimodal aspect of MCDA is important, since much of the linguistic information we come across is not only accompanied by images, but is integrated into them. It can be presented in bullet lists, placed into tables, infographics or charts. It is also found on food packaging, instructions leaflets and social media posts. This means that the language we find is often not necessarily in running sentences, but comes in small chunks of text and isolated words.

Here is an example of what we mean by this. The United Nations’ ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ lays out 17 Sustainable Development Goals to address a range of global issues related to the future of the planet and human well-being. It is taken up by member states and by the European Union as its own strategy. At the time of writing ‘sustainability’ was a major buzzword for governments, public institutions and corporations. Organisations were to demonstrate how they are working towards the goals to bring about a better world. This diagram became somewhat iconic and was widely found on websites, events and entrance halls of buildings within UN countries. The diagram is, in a sense, the entry point for the Agenda. It presents how sustainability is to be visualised. Each box leads to a sequence of documents and summaries for that particular goal which includes a specific set of performance measures. Here we want to look briefly at how the goals are represented through this integrated language (Figure 1.2).

A picture containing logo

Description automatically generated

Figure 2: UN sustainability goals, https://sdgs.un.org/goals

Looking at the diagram, we see that it takes a kind of building block form. These are the building blocks of sustainable development through which we are to ‘transform’ our world. We can see that the building blocks each carry what we can think of simply as chunks of language along with an icon representing that goal and a particular colour. With regard to language, we find expressions such as ‘no poverty’, ‘quality education’, ‘good health and well-being’, ‘reduced inequalities’, ‘life on land’, ‘industry innovation and infrastructure’, ‘decent work and economic growth’. In short, under the umbrella of ‘sustainable development’ we find a lot of things to consider.

In fact, the UN goals have been heavily criticised for containing too many items. As a concept, ‘sustainability’ itself lacks clear meaning and has, over the years, become overburdened with a proliferation of objectives, goals and weakly defined buzzwords (Lindsey, 2011). It is not clear if one means a trade-off against others (Aguirre, 2010), or how they all form a coherent whole (Risku-Norja & Muukka, 2013). For example, one central criticism of the Agenda is that it presents a view that sustainability is not only compatible with economic growth, but that it is to be achieved primarily through market forces and development (Rayner et al., 2017). So goal 8 is ‘economic growth’ and goal 13 is ‘climate action’. There is never an indication that the two may be contradictory (Næss & Høyer, 2009). Goal 10 refers to ‘equality’ and goal 1 to ‘poverty’. And built into the UN Agenda is the fundamental assumption that these issues can be resolved by increased productivity and resource consumption around the world (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017).

Relevant for MCDA here is that this ubiquitous diagram communicates through chunks of language used in a way that is integrated with colour, graphic shapes and icons, which are placed in relation to each other. This plays an important part in glossing over how a range of very different and even clashing issues can sit together as one ‘strategy’.

In the first place in the diagram we find a lot of positive sounding language, such as ‘no poverty’, ‘zero hunger’, ‘good health and well-being’, ‘peace, justice and strong institutions’. In fact, it has been shown that these goals are full of buzzwords and weakly defined concepts, such as ‘equality’, ‘justice’, ‘redistribution’ and ‘poverty’, which becomes clear once we search for clear meanings within the documents for each (Díaz-Martínez & Gibbons, 2014). But, of course, having these goals pasted onto a website, the walls of an entrance hall, or even adorning the facades of buildings carries a moral message of ‘caring’ and of ethical actions to save the planet and humanity. They also look very positive and up-beat with their bright design and the simple icons used.

In MCDA, we are interested in exploring how things, identities, relationships and causalities are represented in such diagrams. We can illustrate what we mean by this by making a few simple observations about the diagram. To begin with, we can ask what such a diagram includes and what it excludes. We find words such as poverty, economic development, climate action, equality, responsible consumption. But what critics argue is that they exclude the forces that bring about the problems we face. The Agenda excludes geopolitical competition for resources, the power of transnational corporations across all of the major industries, global financial markets, as well as regional political relations and conflicts (Weber, 2017; Zhou et al., 2020). There is also no mention of the current global production system we referred to above, which causes pollution and creates social inequalities. All these problems, these authors show, are missing from the Agenda.

We can also then go on to ask how the goals are represented. The diagram represents the different goals as if they are of the same order. Each is contained in a same-sized box. Both the font and the icons are the same for each. And while each has a different colour, they share the same colour qualities in terms of saturation. We can ask how the diagram encourages us to see the relationships between the different goals. We see that each has its own box, separated from others with a narrow white border. So things like economic development and climate action are represented as two separate components. The borders between the boxes are nevertheless not too wide, suggesting that they can easily be closely stacked up.

At one level this seems obvious. But in MCDA we analyse which things are fore- or backgrounded and how and where causalities and relationships become unclear or abstracted. While the language here provides buzzwords and vague notions, it is the visual choices which place them in relation to each other.

What we might argue is absent from this diagram are the inter-relationships between the elements. Another diagram might have arrows connecting different elements. For example, an arrow might link economic development and climate action. But this diagram represents no such causalities. Other diagrams might represent elements as overlapping, which would symbolise a relationship between poverty, industry and innovation and climate action.

This suppression of causalities and what has been argued to be a fragmentation of poverty from its actual causes has been one of the major criticism of the UN Agenda. In language we are not told that ‘we can treat and measure poverty, economic development and climate action in ways where we ignore their fundamental interrelationship’. But the diagram, through the boxing, border, colours and icons, communicates that this is indeed possible and the case.

What this diagram does is that it claims to simplify quite complex and inter-related issues, which makes it attractive. Each is easily captured in a cute icon. All world poverty, in its different forms, takes the form of a family holding hands. Many of the actual forces which pose a threat to the planet and human well-being, such as rampant capitalism and environmental destruction, are simply side-stepped. The underlying ideology of the UN diagram, as some have argued, is one which favours a view that we should not only continue with economic development around the world, but do more of it (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015; Mediavilla & Garcia-Arias, 2019). Yet at the same time as we open up new markets and pursue ‘opportunities’ for development in Africa this can be presented as part of ‘sustainable’ action. As critics have pointed out, the UN goals for sustainability are overtly aligned with the free trade agenda of the WTO (Merry, 2011).

In MCDA, we focus on how identities, issues, processes and relationships are represented in texts. In the case of this diagram, clearly we cannot carry out a meaningful analysis without considering how language is integrated into such a design. As with our critical analysis of the activities of Swedish clothing companies in Africa, we can ask how such representations relate to actual processes and events in the world.

The problem with the UN Agenda, therefore, is that from the outset it presents a rather abstracted view of what is going on in the world and what problems we as a species might face. However, while the sustainability goals are problematic, are built on vague and contradictory buzzwords and have no clear causalities, there is nevertheless a requirement for institutions, organisations and companies to show how they are working towards each goal. We can quickly look at two examples of a university showing that it aligns with the goals. Again, language is used integrated into designs.

In Figure 1.3, we see how a university in Sweden addresses staff, stating: ‘All teaching staff are affected by the transition to a sustainable community’. Below the diagram it says, ‘The transition demands a whole new way of teaching’. At the university, all teachers were called to show how they were addressing the sustainability goals in their courses and classes. The idea of the goals is that each comes with performance indicators, so that government institutions and organisations can be evaluated in regard to their work.

A picture containing text

Description automatically generated

Figure 3: Sustainable teaching at a university, https://www.oru.se/english/about-us/sustainable-development

Given what we have learned so far in this Introduction, we can think about this language here, supported by the UN diagram. It tells us that there is ‘a transition to a sustainable community’. But given the huge range of issues, each carrying tensions found presented in the diagram, what exactly is this to mean for the teachers themselves, say in a class on computer programming or on music? The use of the term ‘transition’ suggests that it is clear we move from one thing to another. Yet, given the vague notions and buzzwords and hidden causalities in the goals, this is far from clear. And the very notion of a ‘sustainable community’ would appear to be one where there is a range of contradictory things taking place.

In the second place, it is never specified what the ‘whole new way of teaching’ actually would comprise. What exactly is a teacher of computer programming or mathematics to set aside and what new elements must be taken up? Of particular note here is that ‘transition’ is treated as a thing or a noun, rather than a process involving a verb. So we are told about ‘the transition’. This itself becomes a kind of buzzword without any need to specify what exactly we are transitioning from and to. ‘Transition’ in itself, of course, suggests an active process of something significant taking place. Yet integrated with the diagram, with its morality, simplicity and bright colours such worlds become naturalised and hard to challenge. These statements involve a kind of performativity through which institutions basically waste time and resources in their attempts to demonstrate they are working towards such goals, at the same time as their staff teach and carry out research (Jary, 2002). In other words, these take the place of actual meaningful and useful action (Schick, 2001).



Figure 4: Webpage photograph where university shows alignment to sustainable markers, https://www.oru.se/globalassets/oru-sv/om-universitetet/hallbarhet/hallbar\_divequ\_webb.jpg

As a more outward facing gesture aligning with UN goals, the university also showed the photograph seen in Figure 1.4 to communicate its commitment to diversity and equality. This provides yet another example of why we need to analyse language as we find it integrated into different kinds of designs. Here we find individual words or chunks of texts rather than full phrases. In this case, we find two words in a handwritten font, pinned onto weathered pieces of painted wood, perhaps a wall or door.

Terms such as ‘diversity’ and ‘equality’ are also things that the university must work towards, because of national government requirements and because they form part of the UN goals for sustainable development. In fact, there has been criticism of the concept of diversity as a buzzword and its bureaucratisation (Ahmed, 2007), as well as of the UN use of the term ‘equality’ in a vague, broad and rather ethno-centric way (Díaz-Martínez & Gibbons, 2014).

The basic criticism of these notions of diversity and equality is that a school, university or company will have a diversity policy, but this exists more as a bureaucratic process than as anything that can bring about genuine change. An institution may have a diversity officer or even a diversity team and there may be diversity training for staff. Job advertisements may welcome applicants from under-represented ethnic minorities. Diversity will be signalled on web pages through photographs where there is always a range of ethnic groups (see Figure 5.1, Chapter 5, p. 119). And we will find photographs as seen in Figure 1.4.

Yet in such cases, these things do little to change the actual population of an institution, nor do they address the actual inequalities which lead to the under-representation of certain groups of people in the university. In the city where this very university is located, there is one area where all the immigrant groups live, which is characterised by poverty, crime and poor schools. These people are not well-represented at the university. Some of the poorer outlying areas of the city also house many marginalised young people with poor education and job prospects who also will have very little chance of ever attending the university, even if diversity policies ‘welcome’ them.

Returning to the photograph, there is also the question as to whether ‘diversity’ and ‘equality’ can sit alongside each other so easily. If the university could have perfect ethnic representation across all levels of the institution, such as professors, administrators and cleaners, would this also mean equality? By equality, is the university signalling its alignment to societal redistribution of wealth, with which the UN goals are also rather vaguely aligned?

The point here is certainly not to criticise this university. But, as with the other concepts presented as part of sustainability, these are, even if desirable, highly complex issues presented as mere buzzwords. And in this case visual representation is again important. We are not told who is equal to whom and in what terms, nor what ‘diversity’ means, nor whom it involves. As we saw in the building block diagram above, there is a sense that the two terms are both the same and different, although this is symbolised rather than explained. The two words are written in the same handwriting on the same size pieces of craft paper, which have the same texture. So to some extent they are classified as the same. The handwritten style suggests something personal, a human touch, which would have been different had it been in a printed font. Yet the paper is a different colour, so they are slightly different. And they are written on different cards, which also suggests they are somehow not the same. The point is that how they are the same and different is only symbolised.

The old wooden door/wall with peeling paint, to which they are pinned, also adds to the meaning. We can imagine the difference if this was simply a bare white wall. Here there is the suggestion, as with the handwritten font of something more personal and perhaps authentic. Certainly the whole design, with the use of the pins and the colour scheme looks very chic. Acting in this moral way in regard to diversity and equality is stylish and tasteful.

As critics argue, inequalities in the world and threats to the environment are complex and unique in different places. They are interwoven with the economic and political organisations of and between societies. They relate to global systems of trade competition and different kinds of conflicts. We have considered some of these, even in this Introduction. From the point of view of MCDA, the aim is to look at texts which represent the social inequalities and injustices where these very real forces are in operation in very specific contexts. A set of buzzwords distracts us from actually attending to very real problems in the world. These may be the impact of global production on domestic patterns of labour, they may be how we represent the aggressive treatment of vulnerable members of our societies, such as the Roma. And it may be how we represent the marketisation of education as being related to ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’.

Here we start to see how MCDA can help us to understand how this takes place in concrete instances of communication. Linking with wider research literature, we can begin to understand what kinds of interest these representations might actually serve. The following chapters provide another set of tools to explore these texts in different ways. This allows us to explore what the diversity/equality photograph is really saying, but also to show what it is not saying, what is excluded, glossed over or misrepresented.

# CONCLUSION

In this Introduction, we have shown why we want to look in such detail at language. Language use brings some aspects of the world into view and obscures others. It shapes how events and processes appear to us. And the views which are created tend to represent the interests of those who produce them. We have also begun to show what conducting a CDA and MCDA analysis looks like in terms of a ‘detective work’, where we look at the details of representations through word choices and visual features. CDA and MCDA are about how something is communicated. Looking at this in detail can help us find what we may have otherwise missed. In the remainder of this book, we therefore look specifically at more concepts and tools to do so.

Descriptions of Images and Figures

The 17 UN sustainability goals are shown. Goal 1 is no poverty depicted as an image of a family of 6. Goal 2 is zero hunger shown with a steaming bowl of food. Goal 3 is good health and well-being with the image of a heartbeat. Goal 4 is quality education with an image of a notebook and pen. Goal 5 is gender equality with the cojoined symbols for men and women. Goal 6 is clean water and sanitation with the image of a water purifier. Goal 7 is affordable and clean energy with the image of a start button within the sun. Goal 8 is decent work and economic growth shown by an upward trending arrow. Goal 9 is industry, innovation and infrastructure shown by three 3D cubes placed in a triangle. Goal 10 is reduced inequalities shown by an equals to sign within four arrow heads pointing outwards on four sides. Goal 11 is sustainable cities and communities shown as a group of buildings. Goal 12 is responsible consumption and production with the image of an arrow curving into an infinity symbol. Goal 13 is climate action as planet Earth within an eye. Goal 14 is life below water as a fish within the ocean. Goal 15 is life on land as a tree, birds, and a fence. Goal 16 is peace, justice, and strong institutions as a dove with an olive branch in its beak holding on to a gavel with its talons. Goal 17 is partnerships for the goals as 5 interconnecting circles.