

# Interview with Bernhard Forchtner

Eva Lehečková

**Bernhard Forchtner** is a researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences at the Humboldt-University of Berlin. After his Master's studies of sociology and political science at Humboldt-University, he received his Ph.D. from sociology and linguistics/discourse studies in 2011 at Lancaster University. His Ph.D. was supervised by Andrew Sayer (sociology) and Ruth Wodak whose Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) he adopted in his own work. He is interested in the discursive construction of (national) identities and memories as well as, more recently, discourses of far-right parties. He is furthermore interested in the sociological underpinnings of (critical) discourse analysis and co-organises a research group on *Memory, Civil Society and Diversity* at the Humboldt-University. Since 2013, he is a Marie Curie Research Fellow, conducting a project on *Understanding the Role and Function Played by Discourses on Ecology in Far-Right Groups* (project number 327595), which investigates the narratives and topoi employed by the far-right in discourses on environmental issues.



## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS:

FORCHTNER, Bernhard (2014): Rhetorics of judge-penitence: claiming moral superiority through admissions of past wrongdoing. *Memory Studies*, 7(4), s. 409–424.

FORCHTNER, Bernhard — WODAK, Ruth (2013): The semiotics of far-right populism: negotiating audiences in the Austrian Freedom Party's The Blue Planet. In: Fabian Virchow (ed.), *Visual Politics of the Far Right*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

FORCHTNER, Bernhard — TOMINC, Ana (2012): Critique and argumentation: on the relation between the discourse-historical approach and pragma-dialectics. *Journal for Language and Politics*, 11(1), pp. 31–50.

WODAK, Ruth — KRZYŻANOWSKI, Michał — FORCHTNER, Bernhard (2012): The interplay of language ideologies and contextual cues in multilingual interactions: language choice and code-switching in European Union organizations. *Language in Society*, 41(2), pp. 157–186.

FORCHTNER, Bernhard (2012): Critical Discourse Analysis. In: Carol A. Chapelle (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

FORCHTNER, Bernhard (2011): Critique, the discourse-historical approach and the Frankfurt School. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 8(1), pp. 1–14.

A complete list of Bernhard Forchtner's publications is available at WWW: <<http://www.sowi.hu-berlin.de/lehrbereiche-en/struktur-en/mitarbeiter-en/forchtner-en>>.

**EL: Given that you passed your Master's studies in sociology and political science, it is reasonable to open our interview with the question of how and when you discovered linguistics and especially discourse analysis; and what made you realise that there would be something that could be useful for your own research?**

BF: I can remember that. At the end of my Master's studies at the Humboldt-University in Berlin, when I started to think about the topic of my Master's thesis, I attended a seminar in which we read a book chapter on how Austria has dealt with its national-socialist past since 1945. I think it was a chapter from *Die Sprachen der Vergangenheit*. The topic was interesting but even more, the piece analysed actual language-use in detail; and as I knew that my MA-thesis would be based on qualitative analysis, I was therefore looking for a systematic set of categories. Thus, I started to read more. However, there was no one at my institute who did discourse analysis (or at least I wasn't aware of anybody). It worked nevertheless and I subsequently thought about applying for a Ph.D. position in the United Kingdom. I got accepted, I think, both at the history department and at the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University where, of course, Ruth Wodak is still working. So, the decision was not too difficult to make.

**EL: What do you appreciate most about your stay in Lancaster? What do you now consider to be the strongest impression and the most important experience?**

BF: First, I hope I learnt how to approach discourses, how Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is supposed to be applied. That was of course the major thing but furthermore, Ruth Wodak is very inspirational. Indeed, in Lancaster in particular, the situation is brilliant because so many "CDA people", staff as well as students, are around. Ruth Wodak is there, Paul Chilton is there, Norman Fairclough is still around. Michał Krzyżanowski was there, Christoffer Hart has just joined the department. As there is such a big group of CDA practitioners employed and working there, you are simply never on your own, you're always able to discuss things. There is, for example, a weekly research group, the *Language, Ideology and Power* group,<sup>1</sup> where people from Lancaster, but also across the UK as well as outside the UK present their research. Furthermore, and regarding the issue of interdisciplinarity: as a sociologist I had no linguistic background but there were always also people present from other disciplines such as from politics, sociology, media studies, etc. A lot of different people coming together; the whole setting is great.

**EL: There have been more than thirty years of steady development of CDA as an independent field of research now. Throughout the existence of CDA, there were some critical remarks raised against CDA which initiated thorough discussions especially about methodological issues. What in your opinion are the current desiderata in the theory and methodology of CDA? What needs to be done at the moment?**

---

1 See: <<http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/lip/>>.

BF: I fully agree that the programme was institutionalised at a specific moment and this phase is now completed (Billig (2003) has commented critically on what this might mean for CDA). Now you may encounter courses on CDA or on discourse analysis which take on board CDA at many universities. We have journals, conferences; but what is the next step? In all likelihood, the following has to do with my particular perspective as being a trained sociologist coming to linguistics and now being back in sociology — but probably others might see it in a similar way. That is, the next step, what is happening right now, is to make CDA, which originated in linguistics, to make it even more accessible or attractive to disciplines outside linguistics. Or rather, to link it to other theories and disciplines; I know many people in sociology, political sciences, etc. who do CDA (or are at least interested in it) but still view it as a “too linguistic thing”. But I think we’re increasingly taking on board things from the outside (which is not new, CDA has always done this — but maybe there is now another wave of including things). For example, Michał Krzyżanowski and I are organising a panel at the CADAAD conference 2014 in Budapest which will address new trends, new synergies and syntheses, etc.<sup>2</sup> So: looking again at the relationship between narratology and CDA or the notion of critique and ideology, these are fundamental concepts, which are not necessarily linguistic topics. This includes discourse theory, Foucaultian analysis, etc. Of course, a lot of work already exists and we don’t need to reinvent the wheel, but we need to build bridges to other disciplines or approaches and research which are already conducted in CDA. Michał Krzyżanowski, for example, is working on conceptual history within the framework of CDA; conceptual history is, of course, not being invented by him — but he integrates it to the core of CDA, elaborating difficulties and overlaps.

**EL: CDA is sometimes perceived ambivalently as a rather eclectic discipline, which is being evaluated more positively by its followers than by its critics. What perspective on this issue do you personally adopt and on what basis?**

BF: Well, “interdisciplinary” is maybe the more positive term and you will find an emphasis on CDA as defining itself as a necessarily interdisciplinary project. As such, being open-minded, building bridges is there right from the beginning. Interdisciplinarity is regularly discussed in CDA because CDA is problem-oriented (with a particular focus on the dimension of meaning-making) and as such, it cannot approach the respective issue from one perspective only. Just think about studying the discursive construction of national identity from, for example, a purely linguistic perspective. Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak (2003) discuss this issue in some detail when referring to Helga Nowotny’s outline of pluridisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

**EL: If we turn to the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), what do you think are its most valuable aspects in comparison to other accounts that have been developed in CDA up to now?**

---

<sup>2</sup> CADAAD (Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines) is the main CDA conference; cf. <[http://www.cadaad.net/cadaad\\_2014](http://www.cadaad.net/cadaad_2014)>.

BF: What is striking is that it is very open in terms of theoretical sources, the analytical categories it proposes as well as the topics which can be studied. So, it's easy to find inspiration for your topic because various topics have already been studied. While if you work on capitalism or neo-liberalism, of course Fairclough has written much more than, for example, Ruth Wodak. In such a case, you would probably look at his work. In contrast, however, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) in CDA has covered a range of topics including ethnic prejudice, racism, anti-semitism, the construction of the past, the European public sphere, (European) organizations, identity politics, and so forth. It is obviously helpful to have this range of studies. With regard to theories, DHA is interesting as it draws on different sources and, and this is my personal preference, it has this strong link to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas in particular.

Finally and probably most importantly, I have to emphasize the set of analytical categories. These categories guide your analysis by operationalizing your research questions; they translate the latter into analytical language and help to perform the analysis in a systematic way. That is, they offer a systematic taxonomy to organize your data. I'm not saying that there are no categories in other approaches, of course they have their categories; but from my point of view, the way it's done in the Discourse-Historical Approach is most convincing, most systematic. In particular, the notion of discourse strategy (the macrostrategies of nomination, predication, argumentation, intensification/mitigation, and perspectivization) is relevant for analysing a wide range of problems and can be applied to a wide range of issues. So, the categories are the skeleton of the project.

**EL: However, there have been some substantial objections raised against CDA during its development. Among these, Widdowson's critique in the 1990s has probably gained the most attention. Hence, several shortcomings have been attributed to DHA, and it is still worth reflecting and discussing these issues. For instance, it was pointed that an analyst brings in his subjectively selected and interpreted set of relevant socio-political and historical contextual factors and this act situates him, so to speak, beyond the analysed discourse as the wise one who has got a privileged access to knowledge and comprehension. How do you deal with this risk in your work?**

BF: There are a couple of steps to minimize that risk; however, every social science has as the object of its analysis something the analyst is part of. The social sciences are always drawing on social knowledge, on schemes in order to analyse, interpret society. We can never step outside completely; but this does not mean that we should not work in a systematic, verifiable and reproducible way. Therefore we have clearly defined steps in our analysis, and we have clearly defined categories in DHA. If you do your analysis and follow the steps, and you are applying the categories according to the way they are defined, then you will identify similar phenomena in a transparent way (for example, if analysts apply the concept of discursive strategy in their analysis, they should identify similar nominations, predications, etc.). You can ask a colleague (or write articles together) and double code the data. Anyway, it is in the

subsequent interpretation of the data that differences necessarily emerge according to your focus, your theories, etc.; but that's not specific to CDA or DHA.

Now there is of course a broader issue when it comes to, for example, this accusation by Widdowson or other people that the analyst pretends to know. Of course, if you "only" describe newspaper articles, you might get a limited picture (whether or not this is indeed the case and/or a problem depends on your research questions). But at least if you are doing a bigger project; and you have the time, you have the resources, then you can do focus groups, interviews, ethnographic work, etc., in order to see how other people, the public, the audience perceive and receive texts and create meaning, etc. (data and method triangulation). And this is something DHA has done already in the 1990s (cf. the study on Austrian national identity (1998/2009) or on anti-semitism in the late 1980s / early 1990s which draws on different data-sources).

**EL: In this respect, do you think that the number of quantitative studies within CDA increases to such extent that we can call it a current trend?**

BF: With regard to corpus linguists doing CDA (or qualitative researchers now including corpus tools), there is indeed an impressive output now; it is definitely accepted now as you will find it in handbooks, etc. — unlike maybe in the late 1990s / early 2000s. People working with CDA outside linguistics have probably for quite a while combined quantitative methods such as content analysis with qualitative CDA. A recent case I have found particularly fascinating is Roberto Franzosi's quantitative narrative analysis. This is really a quantitative approach but in his recent work (Franzosi — De Fazio — Vicari, 2012) he says that while the quantitative dimension is paramount (what are the broad narratives with regard to this and that issue?), we also have to look at how these narratives are performed. That is where he turns to CDA. Inside linguistics, CDA has, definitely since the 2000s, been linked to corpus linguistics (cf. Baker et al., 2008, or Mautner, 2009; but cf. already Hardt-Mautner, 1995). There is now a lot of research going on by people like, for example, Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos, Gerlinde Mautner, Tony McEnery and many more.

**EL: As regards your own contributions to the field, one of your interests is the investigation into foundations of CDA and DHA where, in general, you put a particular stress on the fact that in order to be considered as a solid and reliable theory, CDA has to state clearly how it is related to its philosophical underpinnings. My first question in this respect might seem banal, and yet I think it is valuable to ask when and how did you realize that it might be useful to investigate Habermas' concept of critique with respect to CDA/DHA?**

BF: Partly, I am interested in this issue because of my academic background, coming from a sociology department and being interested in theory. My professor at the Humboldt-University, Klaus Eder, worked with Habermas, and at German universities, the Frankfurt School is still something you encounter. Interestingly, there are not that many courses but, again and again, references to these writings are made. When I came to Lancaster and had very little knowledge about linguistics,

thinking about social theory was nice. Of course, it was particularly interesting to read *Discourse and Discrimination* (Reisigl — Wodak, 2001) which repeatedly draws on social theory but is still not primarily a book on the socio-theoretical foundations of the DHA/CDA. Theory is one dimension but it's not the only one. There is of course another book, *Discourse in Late Modernity* (Chouliaraki — Fairclough, 1999) which is entirely devoted to CDA and social theory. However, it is not dealing with DHA in particular and maybe attempts to bring too many different theorists together. Of course there are many related, very interesting books, such as the one by Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2003), which are however not on CDA.

**EL: What would you stress as the main points that link Habermas' theory to current CDA?**

BF: In general, working on a theoretical grounding of central notions in CDA such as critique and ideology will make the respective approach more transparent. Of course, it is fine (and important) to be open about your position on this or that topic. CDA has certainly been transparent concerning its agenda but in addition, it is important to discuss and clarify these theoretical notions, differences in relation to other approaches, etc. Especially because there is always the danger of confusing terms; you should not simply combine, for example, Foucault and Habermas without discussing fundamental differences.

Now with regard to Habermas in particular: there are many approaches drawing on Foucault. Fine; but it is always good to have different approaches available and this is true for CDA as well. What I think is quite useful when it comes to Habermas, first of all, is his fundamental interest in language use, his (abstract) interest in argumentation. Furthermore, Habermas provides a notion of critique which is theoretically grounded but not drawing on metaphysics. It's post-metaphysical. That is, the idea of human intersubjectivity and the raising of the so called "validity claims" (of truth, rightness and truthfulness), accepting these claims or rejecting them, and, in this process, being caught up in an argument (Habermas, 1984). This is one of the most common and natural things human beings do; of course, we do other things as well but communicative action is relevant. What Habermas does is to, by drawing on, for example, the late Wittgenstein, he reconstructs presuppositions which underlie the relations between individuals, taking this as a foundation for social critique. This is not providing the analyst with a superior standpoint from which s/he can simply claim "to know the truth" (and can therefore criticise particular claims and their content). Rather, these presuppositions are "naïvely" taken for granted when, for example, you might talk to your child or to your husband over dinner. In such situations, you will usually assume that your husband says what he is actually thinking (though what he claims to be, say, true might actually be incorrect; and he might even lie...). Sometimes, you will challenge him on this or that point and you will start arguing about it. In this process of finding a new common ground, you are making presuppositions such as the relative absence of external constraints, existence of freedom to agree or disagree, and of truthfulness in order to make this renegotiation of shared meaning possible, indeed meaningful, in the first place.

So, these presuppositions are not substantial, they do not tell you that this or that statement is correct or right — but they provide a basis for a procedural notion of critique and justify attempts for working towards the realisation of such conditions. Thus, Habermas points to the tension between power-inequalities on the one hand and, on the other, the potential for critique and what he calls “undistorted communication” (not that this would ever be fully realised) inherent as presupposition in intersubjective relations. This approach comes very close to the intentions of, as well as important concepts in, DHA/CDA; for example notions such as critique, power, ideology and so on which could all be (re-)defined in a Habermasian way, thereby creating a coherent body of concepts.

**EL: Why is there this preference for Habermas to Michel Foucault’s thinking in DHA? For Norman Fairclough, obviously, Foucault was more important...**

BF: ... and Marxism. When Ruth Wodak started her academic career, Habermas was very influential in the German-speaking world, a publically well-known figure; and I know that for her, his *Erkenntnis und Interesse* was particularly important.<sup>3</sup> Martin Reisigl too is very interested in Habermas and has discussed him in his doctoral dissertation. From these perspectives, what makes Foucault difficult is his “crypto-normativism” (Habermas). Foucault is of course also criticising racism, certain inequalities, etc. — the “normalisation” of certain conditions; but due to his notion of discourse (power/knowledge), he does not provide a grounded notion of emancipatory critique.

**EL: CDA may give an impression that it is to a large extent a “European theory”, developed in Europe and applied mainly to European issues and in this context it seems reasonable to ask whether it is a theory that could be transferred to any social and cultural settings and applied to any issues all over the world or not.**

BF: I know that there is a discussion on CDA’s potential Euro-centrism. I agree of course that we need to be sensitive about the implications of our concepts; we should not view them as “innocent” tools (this much we should have learnt from feminist discussions of the public/private distinction). I would thus ask in particular: what are *our* analytical categories and where might this Euro-centrism be located? The DHA is all about its particular notion of discourse, its notions of context, intertextuality and interdiscursivity, recontextualization, and so on. I don’t see why these concepts should be perceived as Euro-centric (of course, their application might well be...). Is language use in for example China better understood if we neglect context (DHA’s very specific, four-dimensional notion of context)? Of course, the pragmatics of linguistic exchange, of meaning-making, will differ, no doubt about that, but I don’t see that this is a fundamental problem for CDA as such. Again, I would look at the categories and ask myself if the respective category is carrying Euro-centric baggage. For example, with regard to context, I don’t see that. With regard to the discourse strategies, I assume that the discursive construction of collective identities

---

<sup>3</sup> See: <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/255/561>>.

follows similar lines in other regions of the world. Again, the particular linguistic means through which these macrostrategies are realised will probably be different, but this doesn't challenge the strategies as such. With regard to the notion of critique, for example, that might be different. I know there is a discussion on the meaning of critique in the West and in China (cf. Zhang et al., 2011; Tian — Wodak, 2012). This debate is important, I agree. But also in China, coming back to Habermas, people probably raise validity claims when talking to each other, they will also mobilise these aforementioned presuppositions when arguing for/against this or that issue. It is realised differently and we might not understand all gestures, etc. simply because we are not familiar with this cultural and socio-political context; but I don't think that therefore you could not use CDA approaches defined as a critical perspective on complex phenomena (problems) in other regions. You have to adapt, you need people familiar with the background. But in principle I don't see why it couldn't be possible.

**EL: The last thing I wanted to ask about is your current research — as we already said you started working on environmental issues which is a slight shift from the focus on discrimination of ethnic groups to groups formed on the basis of certain cultural parameters, like style opinions different to majority, attitudes towards environmental topics included.**

BF: I am at the very beginning of my Marie Curie project on how extreme far-right actors as well as more “mainstream” far-right populist groups appropriate environmental issues; how they talk about, for example, forests or climate change. The idea is to map the discourse qualitatively and quantitatively and look for patterns because there is surprisingly little research to date. I have just completed what was initially planned as a pilot study — but which has become more conceptual. That is: how do nationalist and neo-nationalist discourses articulate nature and the environment, how do they grasp that issue. So, the idea is that whenever nationalists talk about nature, they will do so in a very peculiar way in the dimension of aesthetics (nature as being beautiful, something to be enjoyed, and so on), in the symbolic dimension (constructing boundaries, who belongs to this piece of soil, the traditions, etc.), and the material dimension (“the people” depend on “the land” and should have a right to draw on its resources vis-à-vis others). Autarchy becomes a key issue here, autarchy and the claim for sovereignty with regard to food but also energy, etc.

What the far-right does is to draw on the idea that nature is what is untouched and pure. Of course, this is not new but characterises the rise of nationalism in the 19th century (through their celebration of rural life vis-à-vis the city). In addition, there is the idea of a symbiotic relation between the people and “the land”, and the people who belong to “the land”, have a special right to enjoy this land. And, as the respective people have lived here for ages, they have also formed “the land” in a peculiar way (the Austrian, British, Danish, etc. landscape). Other ideologies such as liberalism also draw on these three dimensions but will presumably define them differently. Anyway, this is a more conceptual study and the mapping of how far-right actors deal with nature, perceive nature, etc., is still to come.

**EL: What is the structure of your data that you base this research on?**

BF: I focus primarily on party newspapers but also on materials by non-party actors (intellectual circles, etc.). Often, at least in party newspapers, nature is present in a very banal sense (cf. Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism) such as in descriptions of the "beauties" of the national landscape. But of course there are also the big issues, catastrophes like Fukushima or climate change. With regard to the latter, the major concern for the far-right is the weakening of "our" national sovereignty (sovereignty being of course at the core of the nationalist project) through the rise of international institutions and elites (those who do not defend "ordinary people" but are allegedly "in the pockets of" multinational companies and have bought into a "one-world globalist attitude" which is blind towards the particularities of nations and the land they populate). That is, climate change recognises no national borders but tackling the issue through international bodies would conflict with this idea of national sovereignty. In consequence, nationalist groups tend to deny or doubt climate change.

**EL: This correlation is also visible in Czech public discourse, for example in texts and talks by the former president Václav Klaus (cf. Reisigl — Wodak, 2009) which you brought up in one of your Prague talks...**

BF: ... yes. I would need to take a closer look at his text(s), the context, etc. — and I would not claim that Klaus is a far-right politician. However and on the basis of Reisigl and Wodak's analysis, I agree that there are parallels. It appears that he is mobilising what I have referred to as the symbolic dimension when articulating climate change. Indeed, this seems to be an interesting case concerning the degree to which uses of these three dimensions might also be found in mainstream centre-right (and maybe beyond) political interventions. It definitely sounds like an interesting case for comparing different (but nevertheless similar) positions.

**REFERENCES:**

- ÅKERSTRØM ANDERSEN, Niels (2003): *Discursive Analytical Strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- BAKER, Paul — GABRIELATOS, Costas — KHOSRAVINIK, Majid — KRZYŻANOWSKI, Michał — McENERY, Tony — WODAK, Ruth (2008): A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press. *Discourse and Society*, 19(3), pp. 273–305.
- BILLIG, Michael (1995): *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE Publications.
- BILLIG, Michael (2003): Critical Discourse Analysis and the rhetoric of critique. In: Gilbert Weiss — Ruth Wodak (eds.), *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35–46.
- CHOULIARAKI, Lilie — FAIRCLOUGH, Norman (1999): *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- FRANZOSI, Roberto — DE FAZIO, Gianluca — VICARI, Stefania (2012): Ways of measuring agency: an application of quantitative narrative analysis to lynchings in Georgia

- (1875–1930). *Sociological Methodology*, 42(1), pp. 1–42.
- HABERMAS, Jürgen (1984): *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. London: Heinemann.
- HARDT-MAUTNER, Gerlinde (1995): “Only Connect”: *Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics* [online]. Lancaster: University of Lancaster. Cit. 12. 11. 2013. Available at WWW: <<http://stig.lancs.ac.uk/papers/techpaper/vol6.pdf>>.
- MAUTNER, Gerlinde (2009): Checks and balances: how corpus linguistics can contribute to CDA. In: Ruth Wodak — Michael Meyer (eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications, pp. 122–143.
- REISIGL, Martin — WODAK, Ruth (2009): *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*. London: Routledge.
- TIAN, Hailong — WODAK, Ruth (2012): Reflections on discourse and critique in China and the West. In: Paul Chilton — Hailong Tian — Ruth Wodak (eds.), *Discourse and Socio-Political Transformations in Contemporary China*. Amsterdam — Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, pp. 1–18.
- WEISS, Gilbert — WODAK, Ruth (2003): Introduction: theory, interdisciplinarity and Critical Discourse Analysis. In: Gilbert Weiss — Ruth Wodak (eds.), *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–32.
- ZHANG, Hongyan — CHILTON, Paul — HE, Yadan — JING, Wen (2011): Critique across cultures: some questions for CDA. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 8(2), pp. 95–107.