

A systematic review of the cognitive linguistics approach to critical discourse studies

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Abstract: This systematic review synthesizes the literature on the combination of Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), also referred to as Cognitive Linguistic Critical Discourse Studies (CL-CDS). This review aims to map the theoretical rationales for this coupling, identify the general analytical frameworks used to combine CL and CDS, explore the main applications of CL-CDS, and trace its methodological history. Following the PRMA guidelines, we systematically searched Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for publications specifying a date range of January 2005 to June 2024. The included studies were analyzed using a narrative synthesis approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize overarching themes. The synthesis reveals that the fusion of CL and CDS offers an expansive and effective means of accounting for relations between language, cognition, and society. In this regard, CL presents a systematic, psychologically plausible toolbox for CDS researchers to analyze how ideologies are constructed, legitimized, and naturalized in discourse. Important CL concepts, including conceptual metaphor, framing, construal, and force dynamics, are applied consistently within a diverse range of socio-political topics, such as immigration, political protests, and national identity. The review also identifies important methodological advancements, such as the addition of multimodal analysis and the use of experimental research designs.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics (CL), Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), systematic review, PRISMA

Introduction

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the field of linguistics underwent a ‘cognitive turn’ (Oswald 2014) as a result of a dissatisfaction articulated in the works of George Lakoff, Ronald Langacker, and others against the dominant trend known as Generative

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Grammar (GG), pioneered by Noam Chomsky. Within GG, language is studied as a biologically autonomous faculty that is distinct from, and not reliant upon, other internal cognitive capacities or external environmental stimuli (Hart 2020a; Wang 2019). Language is also examined modularly, assuming the “existence of different components of language that are learned in different ways” (Ellis 1997, 71). With the advent of Cognitive Linguistics (CL), language came to be seen as entrenched in the overall cognitive competencies possessed by humans.

CL draws from many theoretical frameworks unified by a common goal of understanding meaning construction and conceptualization. Major contributions include Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991, 2002, 2008), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999), Force-Dynamics (Talmy 1988, 2000), Mental Spaces Theory (Fauconnier 1994, 1997), and Conceptual Blending Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Despite their varied concerns, CL theories share common commitments. For CL, language is an integral part of human cognitive ability, symbolic in nature, usage-based, and motivated by our embodied engagements with the world (Evans and Green 2006; Johnson 1987). This perspective considers language a “window to the mind,” providing insights into the mental mechanisms that shape our thoughts (Fauconnier 1999, 96).

The “Missing Link” in Critical Discourse Studies

Alongside the cognitive turn was the emergence of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). Scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak understood language not just as an object to be studied but as a social practice. The goal of CDS was to challenge how language is used to enact and legitimize social inequality and domination (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1993; Pešić 2024).

Although early CDS powerfully engaged in social critique, it faced a methodological issue. While adept at identifying ideological structures at the textual level, it lacked a sound theoretical account of the relationship between discourse and society (Gao 2025). Chilton (2005) indicated there was an important “missing link,” and he, along with Wodak (2006), bemoaned the “very evident absence of cognitive theories of meaning,” which impoverished the explanatory adequacy of CDS. The question of how linguistic structures shape cognitive processing and ideological understanding remained largely unanswered.

The argument for synergy: The emergence of CL-CDS

At the intersection of the cognitive-functional perspective of CL and the socio-political orientation of CDS, a new approach, CL-CDS, emerged. This theoretical blend has implications for the development of both fields. CL brings to CDS a rich and psychologically plausible toolkit to outline the cognitive pathway from text to ideology (Hart 2020b). Likewise, CDS brings to CL a critical, ethical purpose that compels it to consider not only how the mind makes meaning, but also for whose social benefit (Hart, Lukes, and O'Halloran 2007; Khir 2022).

This approach shifts the analytical focus from the text itself to the cognitive processes involved in interpreting and understanding discourse (Hart 2010; O'Halloran 2003). It recognizes that language actively shapes our conceptualizations of the world by activating and manipulating mental structures (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Langacker 2008). Crucially, CL-CDS acknowledges the embodied nature of cognition, where our understanding is grounded in physical experience, which is reflected in how we structure language (Johnson 1987).

Methodology

This systematic review aims to provide a comprehensive picture of this interdisciplinary field. The review seeks to answer the question: How has the intersection of CL and CDS developed the theory, methods, and applications of discourse analysis? The objective is to synthesize existing literature to map the theoretical foundations, analytical tools, primary fields of application, and recent methodological developments that define the field.

This review was conducted and reported according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.

Search strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for literature published between January 2005 and June 2024. The search string drew on key terms from both disciplines using Boolean operators: “cognitive linguistics” or “cognitive grammar” or “conceptual metaphor” or “frame semantics” or “construal” or “force dynamics”, and “critical discourse analysis” or “critical discourse studies” or “ideology” or “political discourse” or

“legitimation”. Search results were screened in two stages: first by title and abstract, then by full-text review.

Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they clearly applied or advocated for the integration of CL and CDS, theoretically or empirically. The review included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and monographs published in English between January 2005 and June 2024. Studies were excluded if they focused purely on one field, were published outside the specified period, were not scholarly publications, used cognitive concepts only tangentially, or were grey literature.

Data extraction

For each included study, the following information was extracted: bibliographic details, publication type, theoretical framework, domain of application, methodological approach, and key findings regarding the relationship between language, cognition, and ideology.

Data synthesis

A narrative content synthesis was employed to analyze the extracted data. Results were categorized thematically to provide a coherent summary, with major themes including theoretical convergence, analytical tools, application areas, and methodological development.

Results

A recurring theme in the literature is the mutual benefit of integrating the two fields. The merger provides CDS with sophisticated and cognitively plausible analytical tools from CL, allowing for a more thorough and replicable analysis of ideology in discourse (Gao 2025). In turn, CDS offers CL a social and political consciousness, prompting a critical examination of its cognitive models (Wang 2019). This integration is often mapped onto a “cognition-discourse-society” triadic model, which facilitates exploration of the interaction between consciousness, language, and social structures (Gao 2025; Khir 2022).

Conceptual metaphor and framing

The theorization of metaphor as a primary method of conceptualization is a central component of CL-CDS (Musolff 2012). Metaphors are viewed as cognitive processes that structure understanding with ideological implications (Koller 2005). For example, research demonstrates how fire metaphors in media can delegitimize political

dissent by framing it as a destructive force (Hart 2018b). Similarly, frame semantics is used to explore how language activates conceptual “frames” that ideologically shape an event, such as characterizing protests as a WAR (Hart 2024).

Construal, force dynamics, and perspective-taking

CL-CDS also utilizes a broader set of tools to analyze subtle aspects of ideological meaning-making (Hart 2011a). Langacker’s concept of “construal”—differing ways of conceptualizing a scene—allows analysts to identify systematic differences in how the same event is represented, revealing sites of ideological reproduction (Hart 2013, 2011c). Talmy’s theory of “Force Dynamics” has been applied to domains like immigration discourse to uncover hidden ideological conceptualizations (Hart 2011a).

Immigration discourse

A significant number of studies use the CL-CDS framework to investigate media and political discourses on immigration. These studies analyze linguistic constructions of motion, agency, and metaphor to understand how texts create ideologically motivated representations of migrants (Hart 2010, 2020a). Research has examined force-interactive patterns that frame immigrants as a threatening force and news media representations that reify migrants as non-agentive beings (Hart 2011a; Coschignano, Minnema, and Zanchi 2023).

Political protest and conflict

The framework is frequently employed to analyze media reporting of political protest and conflict. Research has illustrated how linguistic framing can influence an audience's assessment of blame and aggression (Hart 2013, 2016; Wong 2017). For instance, studies show how verb choices and information sequencing in news reports can shape how blame is distributed in protest situations (Hart 2016).

Multimodal analysis

Recognizing that communication is rarely purely verbal, CL-CDS has undergone a “multimodal turn,” integrating the analysis of other semiotic modes like visual images and gestures (Hart 2016, 2017, 2025). This approach is based on the premise that humans construct complex, multimodal mental representations.

Experimental methods

To move from qualitative analyses to empirically verified claims, scholars are increasingly using experimental methods (Hart 2020b). Experiments are designed to test the proposed ideological effects of specific linguistic constructions on readers (Hart 2011b). For example, studies have shown that changing verb constructions in reports about protests influences how audiences allocate blame and perceive aggression (Hart 2016).

Discussion

The amalgamation of CL and CDS has created a productive research paradigm that addresses challenges internal to each field. A major contribution is that CL provides CDS with a psychologically plausible and replicable account of the “missing link” between discourse and ideology. CL models offer systematic modes of analysis, increasing rigor and transparency (Hart 2011a).

Conversely, CDS provides CL with a necessary social and political consciousness, prompting inquiry into the power dynamics behind conceptual structures. It encourages a critical examination of who has the power to construct dominant metaphors like the “War on Terror” and urges a historical analysis of how such concepts have been used by particular ideologies over time. A critical perspective also points to discourse as a site of resistance, encouraging the investigation of counter-metaphors and alternative frames used by opposition groups.

The application of this integrated framework to various socio-political issues demonstrates its relevance. The emergence of multimodality and experimental methods represents a significant development, adding empirical weight to claims about the cognitive and attitudinal effects of discursive choices (Hart 2020b). However, challenges remain, including the need for clearer, unified frameworks that are accessible to researchers from different fields (Khir 2022; Zhao and Zhao 2024).

Conclusion

The intersection of CL and CDS has led to a rich and theoretically engaging area of study. This systematic review has established that the integrated CL-CDS approach provides impactful analytical frameworks for examining the complex relationships between society, cognition, and discourse. By systematically investigating the cognitive faculties involved in meaning production, researchers can provide

systematic evidence of the ideological properties of texts and their role in legitimizing social action. With methodological innovations in multimodality and experimentalism, CL-CDS is poised to remain at the forefront of critical language studies.

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