POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND THE 'WAR ON TERROR' WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF CDA

Ioana Raicu
joanna_2807@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper aims to show how the CDA (critical discourse analysis) as a method of discourse analysis, proves its effectiveness in the analysis of particular types of speech such as political and, by extension, 'war on terror' speech derived from events triggered by the terrorist attacks of 11th September, 2001 in America. The author uses critical opinions of CDA's area in this approach, going directly to the analysis of speech, considering it to be the most effective in such an attempt to demonstrate the positive sides of a particular type of analysis, choosing one of the statements held a few days after the attacks by Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of Great Britain at the time.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, 'war on terror', 9/11, Tony Blair, language, political discourse, context.

The events of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath led to the much debated 'war on terror' but also to a discourse of the 'war on terror'. This type of discourse initiated primarily by political leaders and then taken over by a series of groups such as journalists and the whole range of the media staff, academics, political and social analysts, cultural figures, discourse analysts, and many others, is related to the attacks of 9/11 as a 'source' for the entire series of debates that followed the attacks, but it has connections and relations with many more issues involved in the context in which the attacks were produced such as: globalisation, market capitalism, religion, hegemony or hegemonical tendencies, media coverage and media interpretation of events, security legislation, international law, and the list could go on. The discourse of the 'war on terror' is so complex that it has given birth to many debates and writings on the subject that continue to this day.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

In this paper I will discuss the relationship that is being established between political discourse and the 'war on terror', as it is reflected in stances of political discourse, such as Great Britain's Prime Minister's speeches, Tony Blair. I will focus mainly on one of his speeches, the statement from September 14, 2001, held to the House of Commons three days after the attacks. The perspective is that of a critical discourse analysis, as I am accustomed by now to use its methodological tools in the analysis of discourse, particularly the type of discourse that involves social and political triggers. CDA theorists have, in fact, developed their research starting from social discourse (ethnic and racist mainly, and from that they went on analysing the discourse of different interactions like, for instance, those between patient and doctor, employer and employee, etc.). Critical discourse analysis has what language theorists call a 'noble goal' (see Kress 1996 and van Dijk 1997) which is to study the relations of power established at the level of discourse in order to detect how the more 'disadvantaged' groups of people are being pushed aside by the more 'advantaged' ones, the way discourse is sometimes used to manipulate, the way power in discourse can be traced back to power relations between people, the way 'social change' is a key element in the analysis of discourse (see Fairclough 1992), and so on.

> *"Critical studies of language, Critical Linguistics (CL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have from the beginning had a political project: broadly speaking that of altering inequitable distributions of economic, cultural and political goods in contemporary societies. The intention has been to bring a system of excessive inequalities of power into crisis by uncovering its workings and its effects through the analysis of potent cultural objects – texts – and thereby to help in achieving a more equitable social order. The issue has thus been one of transformation, unsettling the existing order, and transforming its elements into an arrangement less harmful to some, and perhaps more beneficial to all the members of a society." (Kress 1996: 15)*

CDA theorists see discourse and society closely linked together and they think the two cannot be analysed independently from one another:

> *"CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of 'social practice'. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive*

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

> *event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it. The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it." (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258)*

Context is essential in the analysis of discourse and CDA focuses on context as one of the main triggering factors of the particular type of discourse subject to analysis. For the discourse of the 'war on terror' this is particularly evident and impossible to leave aside. Hence, when looking at the discourse of the 'war on terror', one necessarily needs to look at the social and political context.

In the immediate aftermath of the events, Blair proved a controversial figure on the global political scene, in the sense that his reaction to the events was an immediate one and his decisions were prompt and categorical. He was the first political leader to state his pro-American position in the fight against terrorism, the first, after the American president at the time, George W. Bush, to declare 'war on terror', the first to join the United States in the war against international terrorism and to promise to stay 'shoulder to shoulder' [1] with America. The 'shoulder to shoulder' phrase which seems to have incited to controversial and different reactions at the time, was mostly discussed in relation to the 'special relationship' between America and Great Britain. Commented by Con Coughlin [2] in his book as a 'visceral response to the attacks', the phrase was seen as describing an 'inseparable link' to the United States in the war against international terrorism. (Coughlin 2006).

The three things to be taken forward urgently, according to Tony Blair in his speech, were: first, bringing to justice those responsible; second, the world should stand together against this outrage; and third, 'the action

[1] "This is not a battle between the United States of America and terrorism, but between the free and democratic world and terrorism. We, therefore, here in Britain stand shoulder to shoulder with our American friends in this hour of tragedy, and we, like them, will not rest until this evil is driven from our world.", September 11 attacks: Prime Minister's statement, 11 September 2001 - http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page1596.

[2] Con Coughlin, *American Ally: Tony Blair and the war on terror*, Ecco: New York, 2006.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

the world takes to combat terrorism' needs to be re-thought dramatically. Bringing those responsible to justice is a task yet unclear, in these first days after the attacks, and the way in which it will be undertaken is also uncertain. An immediate military response to the attacks is obviously an answer that the American administration was expected to possibly give. Con Coughlin observes in his study on Blair's alliance with America in the war on terror that, until he managed to get on the phone with Bush about the attacks, Blair was in fact wondering what the Americans' reaction would be and one of his ministers recalled that he was worried that Washington would launch an "immediate, inappropriate, and indiscriminate response"[3]. Once he underlines this decision to bring the responsible to justice, he also signals the fact that those states and regimes that harbour them will also be brought to account.

> *First, we must bring to justice those responsible. Rightly, President Bush and the US Government have proceeded with care. They did not lash out. They did not strike first and think afterwards. Their very deliberation is a measure of the seriousness of their intent.*
> *They, together with allies, will want to identify, with care, those responsible. This is a judgement that must and will be based on hard evidence.*
> *Once that judgement is made, the appropriate action can be taken. It will be determined, it will take time, it will continue over time until this menace is properly dealt with and its machinery of terror destroyed.*
> *But one thing should be very clear. By their acts, these terrorists and those behind them have made themselves the enemies of the civilised world.*
> *The objective will be to bring to account those who have organised, aided, abetted and incited this act of infamy; and those that harbour or help them have a choice: either to cease their protection of our enemies; or be treated as an enemy themselves. (Tony Blair, 14 September 2001)*

[3] Con Coughlin, *American Ally: Tony Blair and the war on terror*, Ecco: New York, 2006, p. 147.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

It is to be noted the point to which he identifies with the American nation as to call the terrorists 'our enemies'. It is true that as 'enemies of the civilised world', the ones responsible for the attacks are turned into the enemies of any country that calls itself civilised. Nevertheless, Tony Blair's tone is a much more personal one here, in the sense maybe that Great Britain is not just any civilised state, it is one of the leading nations of this world and he sees it as a duty, as an obligation, as he himself points it out, to do more than just sympathize and offer moral support to the American nation. Setting as an 'objective' to bring to account not just the terrorists and their networks, but also 'those that harbour or help them' is a way of expressing the intention regarding these states and a way of letting them know they will need to make a choice as far as the phenomenon of terrorism is concerned, or else, they should be prepared to deal with repercussions. We see in that a new tone in rhetoric and a new determination that, although Blair was known to manifest a certain clarity and specificity in speech, he did not however use to display; nor did he use to put forth a 'harsh' tone. Tact is something that would normally be present in his speeches; not that he is now lacking diplomacy in expressing facts, he is however speaking and dealing with events from a superior level, that of a leading country taking action, which might even be a way of dealing with what has happened in a first stage, as a 'hard' event asks for a 'hard' discourse. The Guardian newspaper, for instance, describes Tony Blair's statement to the House of Commons as "a good case in point. In particular, he laid out a tough and principled response to this week's outrages which recognised that, while much in the world has changed, other realities endure."[4]

Paul Chilton in his book *Analysing Political Discourse. Theory and Practice*, notes that "the meaning of a text is not 'contained' in the text itself'", but that the sense of the text is made by linking knowledge and expectations to a backstage knowledge which we can call 'context'. (Chilton 2006: 154) And as context is inherent to discourse analysis, and especially to critical discourse analysis, "then it (a) has no inherent limits and (b) is constituted not only by the knowledge but also by the interests and presumptions of the hearer/reader. And this applies to the analyst also."[5] As far as the 'contexts' of 9/11 are concerned, Chilton sees not just one, but

[4] 'Blair's benchmark statement', Leader, The Guardian, 15 September 2001 - http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/sep/15/september11.usa.

[5] Paul Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse. Theory and Practice*, Routledge: London and New York, 2006, p. 154.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

several contexts, according to the sides involved in the events. Thus he speaks of *Middle East context*, *less immediate context*, and *American context* in order to form a representation of what has happened.

> *The talk and text that followed these events was naturally aimed in many respects at expressing emotion, but also at explaining, understanding and formulating a policy reaction. Forming and negotiating a representation of what had happened was thus crucial. Explanation and understanding requires representing causation and agency, and this in turn requires the use of contextual information. Such contextual knowledge must mean historical knowledge – knowledge of recent and not so recent events presumed relevant to the present events. But there is considerable uncertainty and variation with respect to (a) access to historical representations stored either in personal memory or in archival memory and (b) what actually is presumed relevant. (Chilton 2006: 154-155)*

Context as 'representations of the world stored in the mind and accessed when presumed relevant' (Chilton 2006) is the one thing we need to be acquainted with when analysing political discourse. Going back to Foucault who spoke of the 'situational context' of the statement (see Foucault 1972), that is, of the social situation in which it occurs and the 'verbal context' of the statement, that is the relation to previous as well as ulterior statements, and how the relation between the two determines the interpretation of discourse, we can see how, in our particular type of discourse, the analysis of context is helpful. In Chilton's classification, the *Middle East context* refers to the Palestine authority and its uprisings against the Israeli authorities known as the first and the second *intifada* [6], and the way in which Israel and the US and their governmental relations were perceived by the inhabitants of the Palestine Authority, along with their representations of the American economic, political and military presence in the Middle East; the 'meta-representations' they held about Israeli and American motives and intentions; 'the representation of the physical and social components of the United States'; 'representations of the American economic system, the American military institutions and other elements of

[6] Arabic word which literally means "shaking off", but it is usually translated into English as "rebellion" or "uprising".

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

perceived American culture'. Then he speaks of the *less immediate context*, and here he goes back to 1945 and the meeting between President Roosevelt and King Abdel-Aziz ibn Saud when the American president agreed to protect the Saudi dynasty in return for indefinite access to Saudi oil reserves; to the fundamentalist Islamic revolution in Iran and the Operation Desert Storm [7]. In this context, Chilton observes, "the attacking of buildings metonimically associated with complex representations and attitudinal stances, becomes 'relevant'". And finally, the *American context* is 'relevant to American minds': strikes against American symbolic buildings such as the president's residence in1812 or the Pearl Harbour attack in 1941 or the Cuban missile crisis in 1961 represent 'a consciously shared memory of the penetration of America's security sphere'. Chilton concludes on the context-related issue that "The suggestion here is that analogical conflation of stored representations of events, consciously worked out through discourse or not, can play a role in the construction of mental context". (Chilton, 2006: 157) The role of this reading of Chilton's interpretation of 9/11 contexts was to offer an instance of discourse analysis from a contextual perspective and use it to make an analogous analysis of the British political and social context in which Blair's discourse is being related. What is interesting with Blair's speech is that he himself begins to do that, that is, to relate to context, thus making it easier for the analyst to relate to the events and to know where to look [8]. And we are referring here to Blair's going through the number of British casualties as a result of military or non-military conflicts during the last years [9]. The 'mental context' he himself may be trying to construct in

[7] Common denomination to designate the Persian Gulf War (2 August 1990 – 28 February 1991), a military conflict between Iraq and 34 nations having the United Nation authorization . The purpose was to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait after Iraq's occupation and annexation of Kuwait in August 1990.

[8] Although there still remains the possibility of 'diversion' in discourse, as we can never be critical enough.

[9] "To underline the scale of the loss we are talking about we can think back to some of the appalling tragedies this House has spoken of in the recent past. We can recall the grief aroused by the tragedy of Lockerbie, in which 270 people were killed, 44 of them British. In Omagh, the last terrorist incident to lead to a recall of parliament, 29 people lost their lives. Each life lost a tragedy. Each one of these events a nightmare for our country. But the death toll we are confronting here is of a different order. In the Falklands War 255 British Service men perished. During the Gulf War we lost 47. In this case, we are talking here about a tragedy of epoch making proportions.", Tony Blair, Statement to the House of Commons following the September 11 attacks, 14 September 2001, http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page1598.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

the hearer's/reader's mind is that of creating the image of a citizen of a civilised country which has known loss before and could hardly deal with it even then, and which considers itself as having attained such a high level of civilisation and democracy that it can no longer allow loss of this kind nor such 'acts of infamy' to take place anywhere in the world. The mental context comprises 'access to historical representations' and facts that are presumed 'relevant' such as the British Parliament as the 'fount of our own democracy' and the fact that 'We', as a nation, 'believe in reason, democracy and tolerance'. The defence of Islam and of Muslims throughout the world may also be seen as part of the mental context [10], as people live under different representations of their beliefs and a distinction needs to be made when describing the enemy as part of a certain religious community but that does not characterize all the members of the respective community.

> *We do not yet know the exact origin of this evil. But, if, as appears likely, it is so-called Islamic fundamentalists, we know they do not speak or act for the vast majority of decent law-abiding Muslims throughout the world. I say to our Arab and Muslim friends: neither you nor Islam is responsible for this; on the contrary, we know you share our shock at this terrorism; as we ask you as friends to make common cause with us in defeating this barbarism that is totally foreign to the true spirit and teachings of Islam.*

In his book on *Language and Globalisation*, Norman Fairclough has a special chapter dedicated to 'Globalisation, war and terrorism' in which he discussed the discourse of the 'war on terror' in relationship to 'globalisation', 'war' and 'terrorism'. We will analyse Blair's arguments in this speech by the model offered by Norman Fairclough in his analysis of some of Bush's arguments in a speech from 20 September 2001 where Bush was arguing "from cause to effect: because of the nature of the 'act of war' (on American soil, in an urban centre, a surprise attack on civilians), there is now 'a different world'." (Fairclough, 2006: 145) "Yet the *argument* is *fallacious*", observed Fairclough who noted that "The attack was by its very nature a serious act of terrorism and a morally indefensible indiscriminate

[10] And a diplomatic strategy of Blair's part meant to express the fact that the response is not directed towards the Muslim community in any way. His position as Prime Minister and leader of one of the most powerful states in the world forces him to make that distinction.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

assault on innocent civilians. But nothing about the nature or circumstances of the attack make it inherently epoch-making or epoch-changing."[11] After going through the number of British casualties in Great Britain's last wars, Tony Blair reaches on the whole the same conclusion, that "In this case, we are talking here about a tragedy of epoch making proportions." As far as Bush is concerned, Fairclough sees it as an "important *legitimizing* move: if we are in a new era, 'a different world', if the 'wheel of history' has turned, then old truths and assumptions may no longer apply, we can expect things to be radically different, and this expectation can give politicians the latitude to make them radically different." I think it is safe to say that this observation could be applied in Blair's case as well: if the 'tragedy' is of 'epoch making proportions', then, regardless of the American answer to these attacks, 'we' [12] 'need to re-think dramatically the scale and nature of the action the world takes to combat terrorism'. Meaning, like Fairclough has put it, we can expect things to become radically different. Legitimizing or not, the arguments of the speeches seem to push towards the same aim for both leaders: preparing the country for radical changes. Blair's arguments appear however to be more subtly suggested and his speech to be more tactful. For instance, when saying that this is 'a tragedy of epoch making proportions', he makes a quick connection to the victims by relating to their families in an attempt to suggest he understands the grief and to ensure of practical support: "And as the scale of this calamity becomes clearer, I fear that there will be many a community in our country where heart-broken families are grieving the loss of a loved one. I have asked the Secretary of State to ensure that everything they need by way of practical support for them is being done." We have already mentioned his careful consideration to address the Islamic community and ensure it of his best interests as far as they are concerned. There are certain 'social orders' and 'practices' that need to be taken into consideration and kept to when delivering a certain type of discourse (in this case, political). The type of situation, the social 'space' in which a type of discourse is created is crucial for the interpretation and understanding of discourse. Fairclough explains it best: "We always experience the society and the various social institutions within which we operate as divided up and demarcated, *structured* into different

[11] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Globalization*, Routledge: London and New York, 2006, p. 145.
[12] Is it 'we', the British nation, or 'we', the civilised countries and nations of this world?

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

spheres of action, different types of situation, each of which has its associated type of practice. I will use the term *social order* to refer to such a structuring of a particular social 'space' into various domains associated with various types of practice. What I shall call an order of discourse is really a social order looked at from a specifically discoursal perspective – in terms of those types of practice into which a social space is structured which happen to be discourses types."[13]

The social trigger for Blair's type of discourse after 9/11 was undoubtedly the phenomenon of terrorism and the situations created by the phenomenon. Thus, when analysing his discourse one has to look at this phenomenon within the social context in which the attacks of September 11 took place. This means one has to deal with terrorism, but strictly within the limits imposed by the context implied by terrorist attacks against American symbols, on American soil, by groups belonging to a certain nation in which American interests are involved, and in the name of religion, but with the purpose of diminishing America's power over other nations. And to all these we add the context of the 'special relationship' between America and Great Britain. This is evidently oversimplified and we cannot even say that this is, in a nutshell, what happened. Things were presented in such a manner in order to point to the perspectives the (critical) analyst needs to take into account when analysing the type of discourse we are dealing with. The speeches and statements brought under analysis must all be subject to text analysis, but that text needs to be looked at as 'representations', as 'interactions', 'networks', 'connectivities' (Fairclough, 2006), 'relations', 'interconnections', between social practices and social orders, within the framework of a cultural background.

The discourse of the 'war on terror' is 'new' not by the words used, or the expressions, nor by syntax, nor even semantics, it is not new in the sense of 'never heard before' or in the sense of 'new rhetorics' or a new attitude towards the audience. The discourse of the 'war on terror' is new because of the context in which it was produced and because of the facts that triggered it, which is 9/11. We have already mentioned previously the several 'contexts of September 11' as seen by Paul Chilton. So, according to certain analysts we even have more contexts to look at, and not just one. This might seem a difficult task, but, in a paradoxical way, CDA makes it easier by its precise complexity. One only needs to take all aspects into

[13] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Longman, 2001, p. 24.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

account, as presented and set forth by a theory such as CDA, in order to try to make sense of an apparently 'new' type of discourse and one will see that by taking these aspects into account, all pieces start falling together and meaning makes itself reachable. No social discourse will ever be fully comprehended or unveiled of all meanings, and no discourse analyst will ever claim to have the perfect tools for analysis, but for a type of discourse such as the discourse of the 'war on terror' I stand with the CDA theory and theorists because it has proven most complex in analysing social discourse in general and political discourse in particular, because the CDA perspective is a critical perspective; the detachment, the study of the context, the taking into account of different opinions and responses to the discourse, all CDA features, can only help us in better understanding the particular type of discourse we analyse and discover the various interconnections that are being realised at the level of discourse. Concretely, the discourse of the 'war on terror' is as complex as the 'war on terror' itself. And one can only attempt to analyse it by attempting to enter the complexity of the context and of the triggering events themselves, and not even then will one be sure to reach a complete understanding of the core of discourse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BLAIR, Tony, 2001, 'Statement to the House of Commons following the September 11 attacks', 14 September 2001, http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page1598.

BLAIR, Tony, 2001, Prime Minister's statement, 11 September 2001, http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page1596.

CHILTON, Paul, 2006, *Analysing Political Discourse. Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge.

COUGHLIN, Con, 2006, *American Ally: Tony Blair and the war on terror*, New York: ECCO.

FAIRCLOUGH, N., 1992, *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

FAIRCLOUGH, N. & Wodak, R., 1997, 'Critical Discourse Analysis'. In T. A. van Dijk (ed.) *Discourse as Social Interaction. Introduction to Discourse Studies*: 258-284, London: Sage.

FAIRCLOUGH, Norman, 2001, *Language and Power*, London: Longman.

FAIRCLOUGH, Norman, 2006, *Language and Globalisation*, London and New York: Routledge.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)

FOUCAULT, Michel, 1972, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock Publications.

KRESS, G., 1996, 'Representational resources and the production of subjectivity: Questions for the theoretical development of Critical Discourse Analysis in a multicultural Society'. In Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard &Malcolm Coulthard (Eds.) *Texts and Practices. Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, London and new York: Routledge.

VAN DIJK, T. A., 1997, 'Discourse as Interaction in Society'. In T. A. van Dijk (ed.) *Discourse as Social Interaction. Introduction to Discourse Studies*: 1-38, London: Sage.

'Blair's benchmark statement', Leader, The Guardian, 15 September 2001 - http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/sep/15/september 11.usa.

BDD-A4080 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:41 UTC)