



# Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Discourse Analysis: In Conversation with Gerlinde Mautner and Alan Partington

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## Abstract

The essay contains an interview to Gerlinde Mautner (WU – Vienna University) and Alan Partington (University of Bologna) given during the 2016 Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines (CADAAD) International Conference. The aim of the contribution is to critically discuss contemporary issues linked to the qualitative and quantitative approaches divide in linguistic research. These two notions are strickly connected and related to the broader category of the social imaginary since they are both a construct but also help shape academic research. Therefore, the following interview will tackle these issues in linguistic research and raise several questions concerning what both Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis are but also about the nature of language analysis itself and, more specifically, the role of quantitative and qualitative analyses in linguistics.

## Keywords

Linguistics | Critical Discourse Analysis | Corpus Linguistics | Imaginary | Qualitative and quantitative approaches |

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## 1. Prologue

The idea of an essay containing an interview with Alan Partington and Gerlinde Mautner originated while having a nice walk around the Certosa di Pontignano, near Siena, after Gerlinde Mautner's plenary at the *Corpora and Discourse International Conference* (June 30–July 2, 2016). It was early evening, and we were enchanted by the atmosphere of the place swarmed with the soft lights of fireflies crowding the vineyards surrounding the Certosa.

One of the many discussions of the afternoon was about Fairclough's (1989) preface to the third edition of *Language and Power* where, in commenting on the role of Corpus Linguistics, he states that "[...] the widely-used term 'corpus linguistic analysis' is a misnomer: corpus linguistics is not analysis, it is a tool which can serve analysis" (Fairclough 1989: 20). This had raised several questions concerning what both Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis are but also about the nature of language analysis itself and, more specifically, the role of quantitative and qualitative analyses in linguistics. An entire universe of sense is constructed behind the quantitative and qualitative approaches divide: they both refer to an imaginary delineation of what science is. The *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines* (CADAAD) conference was approaching in Catania (Sicily, Italy) and gave us the opportunity to further discuss these issues with Gerlinde Mautner and Alan Partington.<sup>1</sup>

As Hart and Lukeš (2007) underline, the aim of this series of conferences is that of assessing the state of the art of Critical Discourse Studies and offering new directions in this field of investigation. Therefore, CADAAD conferences represent an invaluable opportunity thanks to which researchers coming from disparate disciplines can critically explore different aspects of society through various methodologies and approaches.

The group of scholars who work within the CADAAD network more specifically adopt Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995, 2001; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Fairclough, Wodak and Mulderrig 2011; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Weiss and Wodak 2003; Wodak 2014, 2015; Wodak and Meyer 2001) as their main framework of investigation.

As Weiss and Wodak (2003) argue, "[...] studies in CDA are multifarious, derived from quite different theoretical backgrounds and orientated toward very different data and methodologies" (Weiss and Wodak 2003: 12). However, Hart and Lukeš (2007)

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the sixth international conference *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines Conference* (CADAAD), hosted by the University of Catania (Italy), 5–7 September, 2016, can be found online at <http://www.cadaad2016.unict.it/> (Last accessed: May 24, 2017).



remark that, while being multifarious, researchers working within CDA tend to apply specific approaches, such as that developed by Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) and Wodak (2014, 2015), among others.

Critical Discourse Analysis draws its inspiration from “[...] the Marxist-influenced Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school, later followed by Habermas, and Foucault’s post-structuralist discourse analysis” (Hart and Lukeš 2007: ix). These approaches all share the same aim: the investigation of the relationship between language and power (Weiss and Wodak 2003) so as to uncover ideologies conveyed through discourse. In this sense, Fairclough, Wodak and Mulderrig (2011: 357) define Critical Discourse Analysis as:

[...] a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement, subsuming a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda. What unites them is a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society.

CDA is therefore politically-driven in highlighting power relations in discourse. In this sense, CDA thrives on the researchers’ intuition in drawing these power relations. However, as Partington (see this contribution) highlights, Critical Discourse Analysis seems to be in a state of crisis. This is mainly due to the fact that, given the body of literature on CDA approaches, the appliance of given methodologies within the field of research has made the exploration of new alleys difficult to integrate within this framework.

The crisis, however, should not be seen as a limitation but rather as an opportunity. When facing a moment of crisis, there are two possible options researchers may choose: embracing the crisis or building fences and, thus, creating inexpugnable ivory towers. Critical approaches should, therefore, embrace this crisis as their very same definition seems to indicate. Indeed, the terms ‘critical’ and ‘crisis’ share the very same Greek root, *κρίνω* (‘to separate, decide’; see Wodak 2014 for a more detailed discussion of the term ‘critical’). The notion of ‘critique’ in Western society has had a long tradition, dating back to ancient Greece, through the Enlightenment philosophers and, ultimately, to the modern day. The word is adopted to indicate the use of rational thinking to question arguments or prevailing ideas. Therefore, embracing the crisis means using the researchers’ intellect in order to discern from society those values on which ideologies feast.

However, the temptation of the building-fences option, of cocooning oneself in the soothing melody of the Sirens singing traditional songs, does not seem to diminish. This is particularly linked, for instance, to the ongoing debate between CDA and corpus-based approaches. CDA mainly sees itself as being strictly qualitative in its nature: the intuition and the decisions of the researchers are the sole guides in the selection and interpretation of the data they set out to investigate. The researchers’ biases are, thus, celebrated and purposefully adopted to highlight ideologies in



discourse. Corpus-based approaches, on the other hand, tend to combine evidence and intuition together, embracing both the researchers' bias towards the data and the check-and-balance approach (Mautner 2015) by using a collection of various texts to test the researchers' own intuition.<sup>2</sup>

The researchers' intuition, which has been at the centre of various debates (Fillmore 1992; McEnery and Wilson 1996; Partington 2008), brings our discussion to the topic of social imaginary. Indeed, while our intuition may provide the infinite possibilities that language users have at their own disposal in their language system, corpus-based analysis can show us recurrent patterns of use. This may seem quite simplistic, and the differentiation may lead us back to the dichotomy between quality and quantity. However, as large collections of data can be seen as the sum of a multitude of intuitions come together, the analysis of a corpus can be regarded as a possible way to look at all these intuitions at work, a possible way to reconstruct the interconnections among individuals in the creation of a collective social imaginary.<sup>3</sup> If language is nothing but the exemplification of how human beings perceive and look at the world, highlighting patterns in the way we create our reality may be a way to look at the collective contours of social imaginaries.

After this brief introduction, which explains the context and the main topics covered in our interview to our guests, we now leave the floor to Alan Partington and Gerlinde Mautner. Alan Partington is Associate Professor at the University of Bologna (Italy), where he teaches in the Political Science Department. He is also a member of the Challenge Panel of the Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) at

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview and critical discussion of the combination of Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis, see Taylor and Marchi (2018). More specifically, the authors in their edited book investigate dusty corners, blind spots, and pitfalls in combining Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis. The aim of this book is therefore to foster greater awareness of implications of methodological choices, provide improved toolkit for carrying out research combining Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis, and finally offer an exploration of neglected or under-researched areas.

<sup>3</sup> The combination of evidence and intuition should be highly advocated. Therefore, as a way of exemplifying this, Partington (2008) introduces the distinction, firstly proposed by Fillmore (1992), between the "armchair linguist" (i.e. intuition-based approaches; Partington 2008: 95) and the "one-dimensional, lazy-minded corpus linguist" (i.e. corpus-based approaches; Partington 2008: 95). Partington (2008) thus comments that the two approaches, when applied in isolation, must be used with caution (see McEnery and Wilson 1996: 5–13 for a more detailed discussion on corpus-based and intuition-based approaches). More importantly, Partington (2008) argues that "[g]ood corpus linguists [...] exploit the interaction of intuition and data, giving balanced attention to analysis, description, interpretation, explanation" (Partington 2008: 96). In this sense, corpus linguists should not avoid the combination of theory and observational data and, thus, after observing the empirical data, "the corpus linguist may well then retire to his or her armchair to reflect upon them" (Partington 2008: 96).



Lancaster University. His research interests focus on two main fields: Corpus Linguistics methodologies – through which he is most interested in analysing lexical grammar and semantic prosody – and Discourse Analysis. He coined an acronym for the combination of these two research fields, that is, Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS; Partington 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2015; Partington, Duguid and Taylor 2013), which advocates the various scientific benefits of the analysis of discourse through the use of Corpus Linguistics methodologies.

Gerlinde Mautner is Professor of English Business Communication at WU (Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria). She has also spent several extended research periods at the linguistic departments of British universities, including Birmingham, Lancaster, Cardiff and King's College London. From September 2012 until March 2013, she was a visiting fellow at the School of Business and Management of Queen Mary, University of London. In September 2014, she was appointed Honorary Visiting Professor at CASS Business School (Lancaster University). Her primary research interests lie at the interface of language and society and, more specifically, of language and business (see Mautner 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016). Moreover, her work also focuses on methodological issues on mixed methods research (combining, for example, Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics; Mautner 2015) and exploring the opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinary cooperation (for example, between Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Management Studies).

The following interview was recorded in the context of the sixth international conference *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines (CADAAD)*, hosted by the University of Catania (Italy), 5–7 September, 2016. The interview took place at the Monastero dei Benedettini on September 6, 2016.

## 2. In conversation with Gerlinde Mautner and Alan Partington

*CADAAD conferences represent a successful example of how fruitful dialogues across disciplines can be. In this context, how would you define CDA and what is the role of CDA in engendering discourse analyses across disciplines?*

**Gerlinde Mautner:** That is a tough question, because as you're all aware, whole book chapters have been written about how to define CDA, and what it is and what it isn't. I'll do my best. I would define CDA as an approach that examines the way in which discourse constitutes social reality and, in particular, in relation to unequal power relations. But that definition is probably only a start.

**Alan Partington:** I certainly agree that this present conference is very successful. So far, it's been very interesting. Really, far be it for me to attempt a definition of Critical



Discourse Analysis. But as a semi-outsider, it seems to me that it's in something of an identity crisis. But it's always been in an identity crisis. There are different strands which are in tension with each other. But this is precisely what makes it interesting. Being in an identity crisis, strangely, is a positive thing. It's when you get settled, when you think you know exactly what you are, that's when the problems arise.

Right from the start, the great article to read on internal tensions of CDA is Ruth Breeze (2011). She goes to the history where 'critical' at the beginning was a euphemism. Critical studies were begun by a set of German-speaking scholars who moved from fascist Europe to escape to America, but of course in America it was illegal to be Marxist, so they coined the term 'critical'. But immediately, of course, there were Marxists, and then there were post-Marxists, and then there were various strands within even those. That kind of definition, going way back, is very constraining. I think it would be a minority of people working in the field today who would say that they were 'strict' Marxists.

I think, as Gerlinde points out, most people would say, "Well, we are looking at the discourses, particularly discourses of power, and seeing the potential resistant readings to them, which can in some way take the pressure off of those who are the potential victims of powerful discourses". Now, that is a much less constraining position to hold, allows a lot more, which we see at conferences like this.

The question still to be answered... there are still, it seems to me, within the field, certain strands, and I'd even go as far as to use a CDA word, and say they are *hegemonic* strands: some of them require a certain amount of obedience to the kind of... I won't name names. We don't kiss and tell... But then, going ever less constrained, and therefore going ever wider in the possibilities of interaction with other disciplines, that raises questions like, "Are different kinds of CDA possible?"

In Italy, a fairly obvious question is, "Would it be possible to have a Catholic-inspired form of CDA? Would it be possible to have a more conservatively inspired CDA?". During a conversation about this with Tony McEnery, a student of his said he absolutely loved CDA, and wanted to do a CDA-type analysis of contemporary history of women's studies from an Islamic point of view.

So, all these questions... are all these things related? If the methodology used is defensible, are we going to include them as part of CDA or are we going to exclude them?

*In the book of abstracts of the conference CADAAD 2016, many of the contributions that we have received and accepted to the conference used Corpus Linguistics methodologies. This might seem as a first step towards acceptance, but according to you, what is the role of Corpus Linguistics in this context, in the context of CDA?*

**Alan Partington:** The role of Corpus Linguistics in the context of interaction with CDA... Well, strangely enough, Corpus Linguistics is also a discipline which is in a



perennial identity crisis. Always has been from the beginning. A very, very interesting article is in the ICAME Journal, by an ex-colleague of mine, Charlotte Taylor (2008), who went through all the Corpus Linguistics literature, and listed the descriptions which practitioners have used for it, and some said, "It's a tool"; others, "It's a method"; others, "It's a methodology"; or "is it a methodological approach?". Now, there are those who say it's a separate discipline, others say it's a new language theory, or a new theoretical approach, or that big word: a new paradigm-methodological approach. Of course, it's a bit of both, it's a bit of all of these things: it depends upon the research question, and the way in which the researchers are going to use it.

But I think the bottom line is that Corpus Linguistics has been introduced into discourse studies. One of the most fundamental epistemological contributions of Corpus Linguistics was the revelation of the uncertainty and the unreliability of introspection.

We always had doubts about introspection, and we always knew that, as Bacon says, the intellect left by itself always has to be treated with suspicion. But Corpus Linguistics opened the Pandora's box that showed that so much of what armchair linguists had said was biblical truth turns out to be completely different from the way language is used intuitively by speakers and writers. This, I think, is a message, a lesson, which has to go well beyond Corpus Linguistics or all Linguistics, and must have an effect on CDA too, and even in the whole of the human sciences, I would think.

**Gerlinde Mautner:** I think Corpus Linguistics helps drag the armchair critical discourse analysts out of their armchair, because under the heading of criticality a great deal of unsubstantiated intuition and intuitive stuff is hidden. That was the direct response to your comment, Alan. But when I have to explain to critical discourse analysts what Corpus Linguistics can do for them, I would say, simply more power to your elbow. I personally do think it is actually best seen as another set of tools in the toolbox. Obviously, there are theoretical underpinnings that inform it. But, at the end of the day, I think it's more of a hindrance than a help to elevate it into a paradigm, a theory of X, etc. Again, to use a word that Alan has introduced, I think that is unnecessarily constraining rather than liberating. That is what I would say about Corpus Linguistics. I also agree with your comment, Alan, that not to have an identity crisis at all is actually a rather worrying state to be in, because that's when more fences go up, more walls go up; if you really know who you are, then it becomes even easier to exclude others, 'the other', and so on.

*Given the increasing number of authors analysing data by using different CL approaches, can it still be regarded as a methodology per se? How can we define Corpus Linguistics? Given the number of people that are using Corpus Linguistics, is it still a methodology? Is it still something that needs a theoretical framework behind? Or is it a*



*theoretical framework, given the fact that we are seeing more and more university centres that specialise in Corpus Linguistics, and they do Corpus Linguistics in different ways than other centres?*

**Gerlinde Mautner:** That *per se* in your question, I noted. *Per se* is always suspicious. The reason why it's at least dangerous is, in practical terms, it often points to more seclusion. I don't think you can have any practical language analysis without an underlying theory. It may be unacknowledged. It's rather like when you're bringing up children: you will have an educational theory behind that, maybe unacknowledged, but what you do on a daily basis with your kids is informed by some form of pedagogy. Not acknowledging the underlying theory is actually more dangerous than not. That said, I think we ought to be very careful not to be too negative about Corpus Linguistics, sort of doing exactly the same. Because you used the words, "We use it for CDA", which I also do.

But I think that points to an important distinction: as CDA people using Corpus Linguistics, we do rely on colleagues from Corpus Linguistics to keep pushing the technological boundaries. All these things, all the software we use or the programs, the clever algorithms, they're not likely to be developed by CDA people, because we tend not to have those sorts of brains, let's face it. Although there is a school of thought that... well, I should maybe just speak for myself, and not speak for other people. But there is, of course, a school of thought that says that everybody who uses Corpus Linguistics software ought to write their own programs. I just don't think it's going to happen. First of all, because of three words: *life is short*. There's only so much you can do in one researcher's life. You have the pressure to publish, etc. The more likely scenario, for a long time to come, is that people doing the application, like CDA people, will rely on corpus linguists and then computer linguists to develop the goods, which we then use.

That said, when, as an applied person, you listen to some Corpus Linguistics stuff, or Computer Linguistics even, that often goes right over your head. Yes, so, we have other disciplinary boundaries to contend with as well.

**Alan Partington:** Just to pick up on what Gerlinde says... there is that really hard edge, those who argue that all corpus linguists have to learn to program. Whereas Gerlinde and I are both on the "softer" side, and say no, Corpus Linguistics tends to use certain methods and certain tools, but they're our servants. We're users, and we tell them what to do, and stuff.

I'd like to go back a little bit to the question, "... regarded as a methodology *per se*". Obviously, that would be very reductive, to call it a methodology. One thing that probably one needs to keep in mind, when using Corpus Linguistics methods and tools is, within the field, Corpus Linguistics also creates, and depends upon, in a sort of virtuous circle, certain theoretical views of language. Two, in particular, come to mind, the Sinclairian, bottom-up, lexical grammar, that again, a great contribution to the field



of linguistics, that words and meaning co-select, that meanings work together in packs. Before the early days of corpus linguists, you still had this vision of grammar as being the slot and the filler. That you went along, and speakers went along, bit by bit, and chose from a certain restricted set what they were about to say next. But Corpus Linguistics has shown, because it makes so much authentic data available to the analysts all at once, this is not a picture of what speakers do. Language is, of course, linear, but it jumps and uses language in chunks.

The second theoretical view, it's a fairly recent one, dates from around about the early 2000s, the psycholinguistic theory of lexical priming by Michael Hoey (2005), how we actually internalise language as young babies, as you mentioned. Learning the maternal language, and then learn to reproduce it. Corpus Linguistics has also had its theoretical projects, as well as its theoretical underpinnings.

*Given the rise of big data as a socio-cultural phenomenon, what are the critical implications in combining quantitative approaches with the traditional qualitative way of analysing language? Just focus on the way that the more we get, the more we will know about language. Is it really true, or is it just something that is focusing only on the amount of data we have?*

**Alan Partington:** I made a few notes. When you say, "... what are the critical implications?", given the fuzziness of the word 'critical', why not just say, "... what are the implications?"

**Gerlinde Mautner:** Never interview linguists: they're fussy about words.

**Alan Partington:** Sorry! It's an excellent question, because CL and CDA are going through a process of rethinking the relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches or information. If we take a step back, classically, in many human sciences like sociology, psychology, and so on, qualitative research comes first. You do an in-depth study of a particular family or a particular person, and you build up steadily a body of case studies. That would be a classic definition of what qualitative research would be - interviews, questionnaires, case studies, interaction with a person.

Then comes a stage in which you have a large number of case studies. And when you have a large body of case studies, then they're available to a more quantitative approach, so that you can have an overview, you can begin to make generalizations of what happened, what are known in sociology and psychology and so on as meta-analyses or meta-studies: combining lots of case studies and seeing what generalisations can be made. Sometimes, they're very wrong, especially if it's nutritional science. They're always wrong. [laughs]

In much Corpus Linguistics works, it is the other way round. You have masses of data, and you apply software programs, which can give you immediately an overview.



But given this overview, the question to ask is: is this statistical information also inherently functional and, therefore, qualitative? Even things like frequency word lists, keyword lists, the most typical kinds of quantitative information, they're obviously telling you something about the 'aboutness', something about the relationship between speakers, and so on. And then, of course, one of the most famous dicta is that then, from that overview, you can then funnel down.

The overview gives you some idea of what might be the most typical parts of your data, because that might be what's interesting to you, the most typical part; or, on the other hand, depending on your research question, what are the most atypical or unusual or most interesting from the point of view of your particular kind of research. But the point is that there is no strict distinction. You can't, either when you're going bottom-up in the classical sense, from qualitative to quantitative, or top-down from quantitative to qualitative, there's no cut-off point. And the two always, always are in a symbiotic relationship, interdependent.

**Gerlinde Mautner:** I'd actually like to go back to your question: if we have more data, do we automatically know more about language? I would like to answer that with a "yes, but...". Yes, if we have more data, we will know more about language. But that's not the same thing as saying we'll know everything about language.

If you gave a scientist a new telescope, a fantastic gadget, then yes, that fantastic new gadget will tell them more, they can actually see more through that new telescope. But it's still a telescope and not a microscope. And you can't blame the telescope for not giving you a microscopic rendering of cells. There's always a danger that we get so fascinated with a new toy, if you like, and in a way, big data is like a new toy, that we forget that it can only do what it says on the tin. I said many years ago, we wouldn't dream of blaming a screwdriver for not being terribly good at hammering in nails: they have different functions. That's why I would go for the "yes, but...".

The question about what big data is doing, it's giving us new vistas, absolutely. And, of course, big data itself, as a social phenomenon, raises all sorts of issues for Critical Discourse Analysis on a kind of meta-level, just the fact that it exists: what kind of authority do we give it in public discourse, and what are the surveillance and privacy issues? Checks and balances, both methodologically for applications in CL are important, but also socially. Checks and balances also don't save us, but checks and balances are safeguards against getting ahead of ourselves and not considering the consequences.

John Sinclair has been quoted, and again, I'd just like to reiterate that, one of his famous quotes is that sometimes a single instance of something can be more relevant than multiple instances. Coming from the researcher who gave us the idea that frequency is important, I think that is really very, very significant, and I would certainly subscribe to that and agree that the qualitative and quantitative approaches should always be symbiotic and work together, but that's easier said than done. It's a lot easier to claim that. Then, for an individual researcher to do both, particularly when



time is short, when your supervisor may be in one camp or the other... So, in practical terms, it's not as easy to deliver as it is to claim that.

*The Humanities have always been regarded as belonging to the 'soft' science, but we are increasingly witnessing a hybridisation of soft and hard methodologies in, for instance, linguistic researches. Is a demarcation between hard and soft disciplines still possible? How do you think this demarcation has worked and is working in the creation of a collective imaginary in labelling sciences?*

**Gerlinde Mautner:** It's been hugely influential and not in a good way. I mean, the soft vs. hard disciplines divide is something that has bothered me for a long time, because if you are a humanities person in a business school environment, where quantitative approaches are not the only ones but certainly are very strong, then I think you're constantly on the defensive, basically. In business research methods textbooks, qualitative is sometimes equated with imprecise, fuzzy, not reliable. In fact, one of the quotes that I didn't have time to discuss yesterday was precisely about that. So, *soft vs. hard* is a value judgment, I think that's the first thing to confront. It's not just a descriptive statement, but "hard is better than soft". I think that's what we have to say first of all. The delimitation or demarcation is, I think, possible but probably not very desirable.

The other thing that I thought I would say in response to this question is that I think ideally every researcher ought to be able to do both and move effortlessly between a hard, more quantitative empirical figures-based approach and something more qualitative. That's the ideal, but as I've said, in the real world... time being short, brains being different, and so on, that is not always realistic. The only thing that I would want to see happen is that the *real* reasons for choosing one or the other are given rather than fake reasons. So, if you work in a quantitative paradigm because you don't like the qualitative approach, then say so. Don't objectify the reasons. It's more common for the other thing to happen, for somebody to say, "Oh, the statistics would be irrelevant". If they have good scholarly reasons for not wanting to do statistics, that's absolutely fine, but please don't give that argument just because you don't understand statistics. So, I think an honest answer, and then perhaps enlisting the help of somebody who does know about those things. Teamwork is absolutely vital and very, very fruitful.

**Alan Partington:** A qualified, yes, I think it is possible to make some kind of demarcation, as long as it's a fuzzy line. Being a linguist, I don't like the terminology... hard and soft. I think I prefer the term "physical science" for the hard, in which we're looking at the behaviour and interaction of physical systems. It's quite clear when we're talking about physics or chemistry, and so on.



The humanities and soft sciences... well, let's call them "human sciences", where you're talking about the behaviour of people, especially in interaction, whether it's sociology, psychology again, or whether it's linguistics or whether it's discourse analysis. But you see it's really, really, really unfair to call it soft, because it makes it sound like a soft option, doesn't it? But there is nothing, nothing as complex and unpredictable as human behaviour.

Now, language... as linguists, we're in a particularly fortunate or difficult position. Language, of course, is both: it has one foot in the hard sciences, because you do study the interaction of complex systems, that's what language is, various levels from the grammar, semantics, phonology, and so on; but also quite clearly you can't ignore the human science aspect of it: it's what people do when they get together. In which case, it's obviously going to be pretty complex and unpredictable from that point of view. You can make laws in the hard sciences. You can't make strict laws in the human sciences. But it gets to the heart of what people like me and Gerlinde are trying to do with what I've termed... I hope Gerlinde doesn't mind me... [laughs]

**Gerlinde Mautner:** Certainly not.

**Alan Partington:** Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study, which envisages the analysis of language in both those guises. As Gerlinde said yesterday, I think it was commandment number four, "Know your linguistics" if you are a discourse analyst: it's essential because you never know when it might come in useful. The real synergy, to use a very fashionable word at the moment, is to be able to have an approach which can see language both as a complex physical system and a complex human interaction system. Demarcation is possible, but it doesn't mean that you can't work towards a discipline which synergises the two approaches.

*Objectivity has often been considered the main stronghold of 'hard' disciplines. Does the category of 'objectivity' exist or is it socially imagined? If so, can the criterion of objectivity of hard disciplines be truly applied to linguistic research?*

**Alan Partington:** I'm going to sound a real old grouch again. [laughs] Yes, objectivity. I don't think people working in the physical sciences talk about objectivity anymore. I think what they will talk about is the scientific method. A distinction which I would make because we're here, at a CDA Conference, is between unquestioned subjectivity ("it is this way because I feel it's this way") against subjectivity which in some way has been tested. Because even in the hard sciences, where do hypotheses come from? They come as often as not simply from nowhere, from people's intuitions. Then, the scientific method is there to put them to the test in some way.

In Corpus Linguistics, the main test is what we call 'temporary alienation'. There's all the subjective stuff, choice of the research question to begin with or choice of the hypotheses to be tested; the choice of methodologies, techniques, tools, and so on. But



there comes a stage, there comes a phase in which you've got to take a deep breath, summon up all your courage and let the machine have a go. The machine has no vested interests in what comes out. There's just this phase in which if you like, if you really want to use the word 'objectivity', in which at least the research of the analysts' subjectivity is no longer at play. Then the subjectivity returns when you begin to investigate your observations and findings. There you've got to be rigorous and you've got to be honest. Otherwise, the whole game is not worth the candle.

The second part of your question I'm going to leave to Gerlinde because it's much, much more... Gerlinde, is the scientific method socially imagined?

**Gerlinde Mautner:** I'm going to answer this in stages. I think I would argue that objectivity is a myth. Yes, it is socially imagined. But it's a very powerful myth. And even in very, very numerical, quantitative disciplines where you feel, "Gosh, they're really number crunchers!", and we've got a fair number of those in business schools as you can imagine... what I find so irritating is when these representatives from such groups say, "Well, we just have numbers. That's very objective". The problem is that even... what do you count? The decision as to what to count is a very, very ideological decision. You can't actually claim, though people do claim, but I think it's unjustified to claim that something can be totally objective.

But I'm going to sort of double back on myself and say even though it is a myth, even though complete objectivity is unattainable, it is an unattainable goal, but trying to reach it makes for better research. So, in all those principles that have evolved over the years, systematically working out your research design and validity and subjective and intersubjective reliability, etc., that's not nothing. And papers and arguments that ignore those things do so at their peril.

**Alan Partington:** Sorry to interject, but also a very important part of the scientific method is showing your results and your methodology to the community, which is the biggest test. There's this myth of the honest scientist, but scientists are no different from anybody else. Scientists are kept honest, in theory at least, by the community. Popper says "Scientists are such noble creatures. They don't publish their research before they've tested and tried to find all the holes in it". But the reason why they've tried to find the holes in their own research is because if they don't, the community will, and they will lose faith, maybe even their job.

**Gerlinde Mautner:** It's a public and a social image. That in itself is part of that checks and balances idea that I mentioned earlier. I wouldn't dig as deep on myths, even though critical schools always do, one really has to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. As I think I said yesterday, it's a good idea to tug at the rug you stand on, but don't do that completely because, you know... what is the alternative? We can't all create our own type of research. It's a social venture. We need other voices, other subjectivities to provide, hold up a mirror to what we're doing.



**Alan Partington:** So, objectivity is sort of when subjectivity has to dress up, go out in public and face the world.

*What is the role of the analyst's own intuition in highlighting given linguistic patterns? How can analyst's biases be reduced? Can biases be truly overcome the more data are collected?*

**Gerlinde Mautner:** OK, intuition. What's my intuitive answer? Intuition is a key resource for any researcher. Even in the natural sciences, intuition is a key resource. Intuition combined with imagination and creativity. In fact, the best scientists from the heart of so-called hard sciences are always ready to acknowledge that very quickly. You wouldn't know where to look unless you had a hunch. The hunch, the creativity and determination to follow that hunch, to accept when it turns out to be a dead end, to start again, pick up the pieces. These are all qualities that make for good research. So, intuition is a key resource.

It becomes problematic when it remains the driving force throughout a project, because then it is often in conflict with the idea of intersubjective sharing. All those principles and qualities have to be seen on a timeline in the research process. Different qualities, different approaches, different viewpoints become relevant at different points in the research process. So, from the initial idea to writing up the results and making your case, different things come to the fore and are important. I'm going to suppose – I don't know, I've never used that metaphor before, I'm not sure it works – if you asked an actor what makes for good acting, I'm sure they would have a long, long, long list. And then, if you take a Shakespearean play, a particular actor has to draw on different skills in different scenes. In the fencing scene, his fitness and what he learned in the fencing class is more important. And that is totally irrelevant in the sweet love scene in the following act. So, as individuals in whichever profession we're in, we need different skill sets and we draw on them at different moments in a particular activity, which is always composite and multi-layered.

The second half, or the second question was... can biases be avoided? It cannot be avoided, but it can be reduced, and again, as Alan said, making things public, laying on the table and explaining the limitations as well as the opportunities is a good option.

**Alan Partington:** I've almost nothing to add to that, but just say that, almost synonymous with "intuition", is the analyst's own *experience*, or in Hoeyan terms, their *primings*. Of course, they're going to be relevant throughout the research cycle. But, perhaps, the one area of the research cycle which has received the least attention in Corpus Linguistics, is the so-called explanation phase. A lot of Corpus Linguistics research doesn't need an explanation: it presents the observations and then the



explanations are either fairly clear or inherent in the linguistic theory that's been adopted; or they simply go to disprove or to corroborate the initial hypotheses. But CDA, instead, has a lengthy bibliography about the process of explanation. In fact, it had its own, I think, particular definition of explanation, which is placing the observations that you have within particular social, cultural, political relevance.

My only comment on that is that you should share your explanations with other people, talk about them to other people, and if possible, other people whose worldview is not necessarily the same as yours. Otherwise, it becomes a self-fulfilling exercise. Always be aware of... there may be more than one explanation for anything, and there are contributing factors to any phenomenon. So, bear that in mind. And, sometimes, you would just not know which is the most important of the relevant factors.

Here's a good example of this from my own research. We were looking into Modern Diachronic Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, just looking at, over time, the development of UK newspaper language. And as predicted by some researchers from outside Corpus Linguistics, the increasing informalization that Fairclough (1989, 1992) himself talked about. Fine, we observed that. We saw lots of examples of predictions coming true: contractions, different kinds of modals, more colloquial types of modals. The point is then attempting to explain this. The various potential explanations to this could be the influence of tabloid newspapers on the broadsheet newspapers; could be the overall colloquialization of language, even in business or other areas. Or it could simply be that newspapers change their stylebook. Or it could be that the British character has changed after the Diana moment, when the British lost their stiff upper lip. Because we found a lot more also emotive language too being used in the broadsheet perspective.

But what's "the explanation" for that? There are at least four different explanations. We just do not know which is the most relevant.

*And, well, we have also covered the question about the bias, if it is really a bad thing to bring your bias when you approach data. If CDA is explicit in the way that you approach the data in order to uncover the mystified given ideologies. So, you're biased towards data is clear. Is this something bad or is this something good?*

**Gerlinde Mautner:** I think we may have covered that. I think it's bad when it's unacknowledged, remains below the surface. I've often felt that a great deal of the criticism that CDA has attracted is simply due to the fact that, in CDA, these biases are discussed openly, whereas in supposedly neutral forms of linguistics, that simply isn't an issue. When you look at it more closely, at the hypothesis about the data, the explanations provided, there's as much bias there as elsewhere. It needs to be discussed.



**Alan Partington:** I might have a slight difference with Gerlinde on this one perhaps. But I'll take a step backwards, again. There are different kinds of analyst bias, the one which CDA tends to concentrate on its ideological bias. Again, as a linguist talking about the words, 'bias' in itself, I think, has a pretty bad connotation.

We probably need to choose a different word. 'Impulse', perhaps, might be a better word. There's also what's known as confirmation bias, the fact that you notice things which tend to agree with your personal intuition, your primings, your experience, and so on. The third one is drama bias: you published the findings, and you notice when you published the findings, which seem to be particularly dramatic and novel, because, indeed, as Gerlinde stressed, we need to be published, and we need to be invited to conferences... [laughter] Invited *back* to conferences... [laughter] So, we all want to make an impact. And the undramatic stuff, I think it's Baker (2010) that says, you put them in your bottom drawer. When I mentioned before the period of the research cycle of temporary alienation, that's where the machine can help cure you of a little bit of confirmation bias and drama bias.

**Gerlinde Mautner:** To interrupt very quickly, I think drama bias... that is clearly fascinating, and it ties in with the comment that a junior researcher made after a talk I gave in Vienna a while back. He said, "It's such a pity from a novice's point of view... it's such a pity that the dead-ends, the uninteresting results never see the light of day", because he made the point that it would be so much more helpful to hear from experienced researchers what wasn't a good result, what didn't have the drama. Because that, particularly, would help them much more if we didn't only publish the fascinating things.

**Alan Partington:** Yes, this is recognised as a big problem in medical research because the thought of... you have 10 experiments or 10 case studies, and then 9 of which come to the same results and are often the ones which get ignored, and the one which comes out with an unusual result is the one that gets published. But, then, that's the one everybody reads about and takes as the norm. But it's not, it's the exception.

But, sorry, just to finish about biases... I'm not sure that I agree that just declaring one's biases, whether in a publication or in front of your class, which is a bit of a CDA tradition, but I'm not sure it's a real answer. You wouldn't trust a politician any the more just because you knew which particular political area he or she represented. So, I mean, just because somebody comes and says, "I'm a revolutionary socialist", or "I'm an anarchist..." or "I belong to the national front", would you trust what they were teaching any the more? So, I'd just be a little bit dubious at the idea that declaring one's biases means it is no longer a problem...

**Gerlinde Mautner:** It's not a blanket, it's not a *carte blanche* for all sorts of other problems, absolutely. You wouldn't say, "I'm an anarchist and these are the rules."



*This is our very last question. It's about this idea of the role, the position of research and researching nowadays. When you said, Gerlinde, before that we have a timeline as researchers to go from one to another step. And I've always thought of researching as a sort of process, but academia pushes you towards product, and now all of these evaluating systems, and all the rating systems within the academia bounds are outside everywhere – hospitals, ranking the university. It's pushing an entire system of production of something which is, of course, a sign of neo-liberalism just spreading, let's say, everywhere. In this kind of context, also companies are increasingly using online services to analyse also linguistic trends on social media. We were just wondering, what may be the role of Linguistics in this, in just creating assist to companies and societies, and the product of also science?*

**Gerlinde Mautner:** I think it's a question of wearing different hats, and I would argue that it is possible to wear different hats without selling your soul completely. And, perhaps, to put it more provocatively, as far as business applications of linguistic knowledge are concerned, I wish more linguists had the problem of even having to confront the ethical implications. Very, very few linguists are actually good at selling their services to the business world. Ironically, I mean, language services – and I don't mean foreign language service, but language service in corporate wording and corporate communications – are in high demand, but psychologists, sociologists and sometimes even theologians [laughs] have stolen our thunder. If you look at who does language consulting for companies, who runs the seminars, who does neurolinguistic programming, it's hardly ever linguists.

So, as I said, it's a problem that... it would be a problem if more people had that problem. [laughs] So, given the position most linguists are in, I don't think we are in danger of being completely marketised just yet. But, if we were, yes, it's a problem of supping with the devil.

**Alan Partington:** I'm open to sponsorship. [laughs] I have nothing to add, except, a little point about the role of analysing linguistic trends from social media. Every summer, I go to Lancaster University, and I have a look at some of the research being done there by linguists, and by other people working with linguists. And there is a professor of Criminology, Paul Iganski, who's working with Tony McEnery and other linguists there.<sup>4</sup> They are running a research project on antisemitism on Twitter. They've written up their research, and they were invited to present it to the UK Parliamentary Committee, investigating antisemitism and the Parliamentary Committee gave them a special commendatory mention for the work that they've

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<sup>4</sup> More information on the research carried out by the ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) can be found online at <http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/> (Last accessed: May 30, 2017).



achieved. So, there *are* some ways, let's just hope, that Linguistics can make a difference.

### 3. Epilogue

How do qualitative and quantitative approaches to linguistics refer back to what we could term an imaginary about science and objectivity? The interview draws attention to how to tackle qualitative and quantitative approaches but does not attempt to draw any demarcation line or to offer any definitive answer, probably because there are no definitive answers to be given. What it does, though not directly, is to open up a link with categories dear to the social imaginary from a linguistic perspective. The relationship between image, imagination and imaginary has always been the subject of reflection from Plato's Parable of the Cave to Benjamin, Baudrillard, Durkheim and Zizek. Setting the term 'imaginary' free from the prison of the dichotomy that makes it the opposite of 'reality', allows us to link it to how it is related to issues such as 'objectivity' or 'scientific method', labels which in one way or another presuppose the existence of something not objective and/or un-scientific. Several studies have pinpointed the fact that the dichotomy real vs. imagined, even though useful for the order of discourse, works only when one of the two terms is given as certain, in this case, that of reality. It is true, though, that the social reality is always the construction whose effects are different in space and time, and the social implication of this relationship is also evident in the use of the language and how it develops. Each collective dimension is always organised following a principle of reality that is always related to an episteme that is socially and historically determined. The social stance of the imaginary is that it has the capacity of making invisible its fictional character, thus showing 'reality' as real.

As regards the matters explored in this interview, it is significant to see how language analysis is used in the framework of what is commonly defined as the 'social imaginary'. Several are the authors who have considered the imaginative dimension as the founding one of social reality (Durand 1996, Castoriadis 1987, Jameson 1979, Kearney 1984 and Carmagnola and Matera 2008 to quote just a few). Works on the imaginary stress the fact that the relationship between a dominant imaginary and 'reality' does not work as if the 'reality' creates an imaginary but, quite the opposite: our social reality and what constitutes it, is strongly created and formed by the imaginary and by the relationship created between what are termed institutions and the imaginary. Several social phenomena may find in the category of the social imaginary a crucial common articulated joint. In this context, language plays a leading role. Indeed, the language used, or sometimes produced, may be seen in social contexts as being part of that mechanism or, better, to frame the use of a particular type of language as the product of a dominant imaginary. And both Critical Discourse



Analysis and Corpus Linguistics have tried to decipher these dominant perspectives in terms of the language used in order to construct these social realities/expectations. Hence, one pivotal issue at stake is: can work on the imaginary help language analysis?

Linguistics is certainly a good place to reassess the state of the social imaginary and its political and linguistic implications.

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