

The relationship between the social and the linguistic in Critical Discourse Analysis: A case study of Thai political science texts

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Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views discourse and text as social practice. It examines how language is used to produce, maintain, resist or challenge power relations in society. This paper argues that CDA benefits from an account of the historical and socio-political context as well as a detailed linguistic analysis of the texts. Both perspectives are important because of the way in which the social context and language enable and constrain a rhetorical space within which texts are produced. Three Thai political science texts written shortly after the 2006 coup in Thailand were analysed. An understanding of the historical and socio-political context in Thailand at this time sheds light on the specific rhetorical context in which the writers were operating. At the same time, the tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) allow us to interrogate the texts, for example through transitivity structures, to identify the particular ideological positions of the writers of the texts and the rhetorical strategies they use to legitimise or challenge the discourse of the coup and the coup makers.

Introduction

Times of conflict generate a great amount of political, media and academic debate that may support, reproduce or challenge the existing status quo. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explores how language is used in such situations to support and perpetuate unequal relations of power in society or to otherwise resist or challenge these relations. Understanding the rhetoric through which language is used to do this demands an interdisciplinary approach, including an assessment of the socio-political context in which language and texts are produced and a theory of language that is socially oriented. This paper presents a brief overview of CDA and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a theory of language ideally suited to research in CDA before illustrating a case in which the social context from above and language from below have shaped a rhetorical space within which three Thai political science texts on the 2006 *coup* in Thailand were produced.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) investigates social problems or inequality in society as they are manifested through language. To this end, CDA explores not just the use of language, but how language is used to maintain, support or challenge relations of power in society (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 271). CDA is not a single method or approach *per se*. Rather, it is described as a “research programme” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 4) in which researchers draw on a number of theories and methods to reveal hidden power relations in society. There is thus a dialectical relationship between language and social context, in which the interaction between the two is “mediated” (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 140-141; Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 21). Texts in CDA are viewed as sites of struggle, for example, for political legitimacy. Crucial to understanding CDA are a number of key concepts: “ideology”, “discourse” and the notion of a “critical approach”. These terms are complex and have been defined differently by different schools of thought. Working definitions are provided below.

Ideology refers to “representations of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9). Systems of representations are defined by Hall (1996, p. 23) as “the systems of meaning through which we represent the world to ourselves and one another”. A key feature of ideology is that practices become normalised and are not perceived by actors as ideological behaviour (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 261).

Discourse refers to the way ideology is represented in written or spoken language. Fairclough & Wodak (1997, p. 258) define discourse as “language use... as a form of social practice”. It also involves “ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the mental world... and the social world” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124). Discourses both shape and are shaped by culture, institutions and the social contexts in which they occur. They are ideological in the sense that they “produce and reproduce unequal power relations between... social classes... through the ways in which they represent things and position people”(Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

A critical approach to the study of discourse requires three steps: the linguistic description of texts, the interpretation of texts as discursive practice, and an explanation of the relationship between discursive practice and social practices (Fairclough, 1989). A critical approach also considers the underpinning interests and historical context in which discursive acts take place (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 261). A critical approach, moreover, seeks to justify these interpretations and explanations (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88).

CDA researchers have adopted a number of theoretical approaches. The approach proposed by Fairclough (e.g. 1989, 1992, 1995, 2003) combines textual analysis based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (e.g. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) with an account of the social structures and discourses within which texts are produced. Fairclough (1992) sees discourse as the use of language in social or cultural contexts where this use of language is ideological. He adopts SFL to analyse how discourse is “shaped and constrained” (p.64) by social structure and how discourse can be appropriated by individuals, groups or institutions to reproduce and transform the social context (p.65). Discourse can also be used to resist traditional power structures in society. Fairclough & Kress (1993, as cited in Wodak, 2002, p. 12) argue that not only can the various methods in use in CDA expose implicit ideologies and structures of dominance in society, they can also be used to analyse resistance to conventional power structures.

The Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (e.g. Wodak, 2002; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) stresses the importance of an historical perspective in CDA. The approach works from the premise that all discourses occur in a particular time and place, a product of their social, political and historical context. The greater the understanding of contextual configurations that shape particular practices and discourses, the better these discourses can be controlled or resisted. Thus DHA calls for an interdisciplinary approach, combining sociological theory, an analysis of the historical context and an analysis of discursive strategies in the text (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). This paper argues that an understanding of the historical and socio-political context in which the 2006 *coup* in Thailand occurred and the prevailing discourses of the time can shed light on the nature of the texts themselves, and conversely, the linguistic and textual features can provide clues to the writers’ positions *vis-à-vis* the *coup* and their responses to the dominant political discourses prevalent in Thai society.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

The approach to CDA outlined above anticipates the need for a theory of language that is socially oriented. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is such a theory as it offers a model of language in context. Proponents of SFL regard language or text and social structure as inextricably linked. As Halliday (1978, p. 89) argues, “language is controlled by the social structure, and the social structure is maintained and transmitted through language”. It is easy to see why SFL has been adopted as a method in CDA. SFL theorists propose a stratified model of language in which the meanings present in social contexts are realised in the form of language or text, and in which language or the texts produced by speakers/writers construe the context. The notion of context in this model refers to the “context of culture” and the “context of situation” (Halliday, 1978). The context of culture represents all the possible meanings, or “meaning potential”, that exist in a particular culture. The context of situation refers to the particular environment within the context of culture in which a text occurs. Speakers/writers have a set of resources or meaning potential to draw on. The meaning potential of a given context of situation is shaped by three variables: the field or type of social action; the tenor or role relationships and the mode or organisational structure of the text. These three variables taken together determine the register of a text (Halliday, 1978). This stratified model of language can be represented as follows:

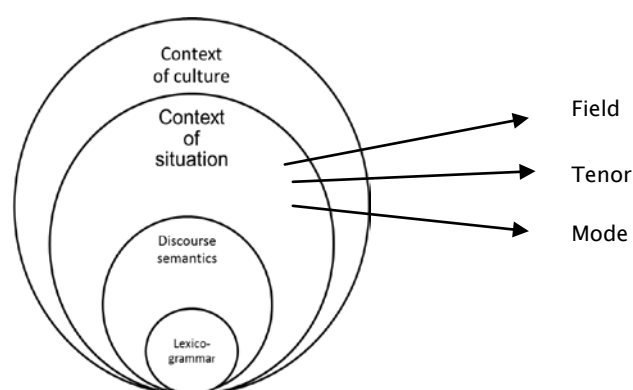


Figure 1. A stratified model of language

Adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.25

It is argued that an analysis of the lexicogrammatical system, in this case features of the system of transitivity in Thai as used in these texts, can reveal how the writer of the text construes the context. At the same time, an understanding of the field is necessary to interpret the significance of transitivity choices in the texts about the *coup*. Using Halliday and Matthiessen’s diagram above as a model, this paper conceives of the interplay between context and language as follows, where the context or the field of discourse from above and the linguistic choices from below enabled and constrained a rhetorical space within which the texts were produced:

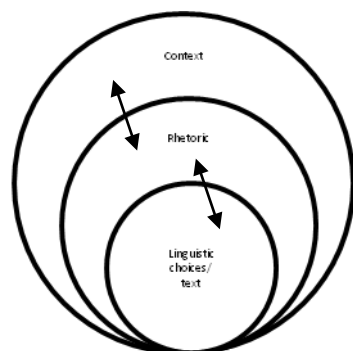


Figure 2. The interplay between context and language

The following sections outline some features of the socio-political context and the various discourses prevalent in Thailand at the time of the 2006 *coup* when the three political science texts were written. Looking from above we get a picture of events and social actors that shaped the context in which the three writers were working. Using the tools of SFL, namely a focus on transitivity choices within the experiential meanings found in the texts, we can explore how the language from below construes the role of these social actors embroiled in the events surrounding the *coup*. These writers attribute grammatical agency to social actors as a means to convey their position on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the *coup*, and this attribution (and, likewise, non-attribution) of grammatical agency reveals the particular ideological positions of these writers. The texts and social context in this study are mutually constitutive. That is, the texts are a product of the particular historical and socio-political context in which the *coup* occurred, and at the same time they represent an attempt by the writers to preserve or challenge significant elements of the context through their use of language. The following section introduces the writers and their texts.

The writers and their texts

The three texts used in this study were all written shortly after the *coup*. “The right to stage the *coup*” by Khien Theeravit was published online on 13 October 2006 by the Thai World Affairs Centre, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University. Khien is a retired, conservative, political scientist formerly of Chulalongkorn University who has been a loyal supporter of the royalist and conservative forces in Thailand for many years. His paper supports the actions of the *coup* leaders and condemns those of the Thaksin government. Chaiwat Satha-Anan’s “Aristotle and the 19 September *coup*” was originally presented as the keynote speech to the Annual Meeting of Political Science and Administration at Ramkhamhaeng University on 29 November, 2006. It was subsequently published in the journal, *Faa Diaw Kan* [Same Sky], (2007, special *coup* edition). Chaiwat is a US-trained political philosopher specialising in Peace Studies from Thammasat University. Chaiwat’s position is that, while he understood people’s felt need to overthrow the Thaksin government, *coups* are morally reprehensible. The third article, “The *coup* of 19 September turned citizens into *phrai*” by Pitch Pongsawat, was published in the same *coup* edition of the journal *Faa Diaw Kan*, (2007). Pitch is a younger, Marxist political scientist from Chulalongkorn University, trained in England and the United States. Pitch opposes the *coup* and the actions of the *coup* leaders. Due to the length of the texts and the intensive nature of the analysis, only selected sections from each of them have been analysed. The following sections illustrate how the texts construe aspects of the context, how the context bears upon the texts and the way in which they engage or not with various political and royalist discourses in Thai society.

Rhetorical context

Various state ideologies have shaped what people say or are able to say about actors and events. The rhetorical context in which these events occurred is characterised by a dominant conservative, royalist/state ideology and a harsh defamation law that maintains and preserves the status quo in what Streckfuss (2011, p. 24) has called a “defamation regime”. A pervasive feature of the Thai socio-political landscape is the draconian *lèse majesté* law, Article 112 of the criminal code, which dictates that any defamation of or insult directed at the king, the queen or the crown prince is punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Since 2001, the law has been used as a tool to silence political dissent and as a result, since around 2005, prosecutions have risen exponentially by over 1500% (Streckfuss, 2011, p. 205). This law means that any claim or belief propagated by the monarchy is unlikely to be contested. Royalist commentators and intellectuals have free rein to champion the royalist agenda while any open discussion of the monarchy or royal affairs is constrained. Indeed, in the three texts of this study, there is little or no overt reference to the king.

Discourses in support of the monarchy are often presented in terms of a dichotomy. For example, the king or the elite in the royalist discourses are juxtaposed with corrupt politicians on the one hand and the rural masses and the poor on the other. The king is depicted as moral and ethical; he is “the moral authority “above” – on top of, higher than, superior to – the normal political institutions that are considered extremely corrupt” (Thongchai, 2008, p.24). This notion has fed into a discourse of “clean politics” which has influenced how people view politics in Thailand. Thongchai (2008) identifies four ideas that constitute this discourse of clean politics: “politicians are extremely corrupt”, “politicians come to power by vote-buying”; “an election does not equal democracy”; “democracy means a moral, ethical rule” (p. 25).

Another key group in the discourse of clean politics is the rural masses who, it is claimed, prop up corrupt politicians because they are too ignorant or naive to know better. Because of the supposed pervasiveness of vote-buying, politicians are not regarded as legitimate. In this way the legitimacy of the whole electoral process has been questioned (Thongchai, 2008, p.27).

These discourses have contributed to the debate on political legitimacy in Thailand. Askew (2010) argues that the current political crisis that began in 2005 represents the “manipulation of potent symbols of nation and monarchy to resist and limit change towards a fuller democracy” (p.7). Dressel (2010) makes an important connection in his discussion on the crisis of political legitimacy in Thailand with the role that agency plays in the construction of legitimacy and argues that “a focus on social actors clarifies the critical relationship between legitimacy and struggles over political power” (p.464).

These struggles between the opposing social forces are taken up in the rhetorical strategies used by various commentators or intellectuals to try to position their listeners or readers. Thus insights on this issue may be gained by an analysis of how the linguistic potential of Thai can be used to serve and promote the interests of these divergent positions. The following section will look at how the *coup* and key actors/institutions such as the Thaksin government, the military and “the people” are represented in the three political science texts. It is argued that the construal of social actors, for example as agents, as affected by events, or as carriers of certain attributes, reflects the writers’ positions on the legitimacy of the *coup*.

The 2006 Thai *coup*

On 19th September, 2006, conservative interests loyal to the Thai monarchy and led by royalist factions within the military staged a *coup* that overthrew the popularly elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra. The *coup* makers annulled the 1997 “People’s Constitution”, restricted media and imposed martial law. The conflict

signalled a critical stage in a struggle between competing elite forces. It also triggered a conflict between conservative elites and a broader, society-based oppositional movement in Thailand. This struggle has polarised the country and the legitimacy or otherwise of the actions of those competing forces has been widely debated.

The *coup* is realised in the three texts in significantly different ways. For example, it is realised in the grammar by Khien as something that merely occurred or as a carrier of certain attributes, with agent unstated or invisible, for example:

rátthaprahään [[thîi kèət khûn nay prathêet thay mûa wan thîi 19 kanyaayon 2006]] ca prasòp khwaamsămrèt

The coup [[that occurred in Thailand on 19 September 2006]] was successful.

kaan tham rátthaprahään ?àat ca nâakliàt

The staging of the coup may be ugly.

Pitch on the other hand represents the *coup* as something to be considered. The second example here also suggests an external agent through a passive construction:

... thátsaná? nay sǎŋkhom || thîi wâa kaanrátthaprahään nán pen sîŋ campen

... the view in society || that the coup is a necessary thing

kaantham rátthaprahään mûa 19 kanyaa [[thîi phaan maa]] nán mây săamâat ?athîbaay

The staging of the coup on 19 September [[that has past]] can't be explained

Chaiwat, however, construes the *coup* itself as agent, as something to instruct us:

saphâap chên nîi tham hây khâaphacâw tòk yùu nay pomprisanăa thaay sînlatham

This situation makes me fall into a moral enigma.

phró? Ø dâi tham hây sǎŋkhom thay læ? nákrátthasàat tŋ phachəən kàp pŋtsanăa thaay sînlatham

because (the *coup*) made Thai society and political scientists confront a moral enigma

Even from these few examples we can see a divergence in the writers' representations of the *coup* that hints at how they construe the context. An analysis of the representation of various social actors also reveals further contrasts between the writers.

The Thaksin government

Thaksin's rule in Thailand was complex. He rose to power in Thailand in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian economic crisis, uniting disparate social forces and interests behind his pursuit of a neoliberal economic agenda aimed at restoring Thai business and introducing various social welfare programmes targeting the poor (Hewison, 2008; Pye & Schaffar, 2008). After the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) election victory in 2001, Thaksin faced two challenges: how to restructure business and counter the dominant, conservative state ideology that perpetuated the idea of a moral,

righteous monarchy and hierarchical notions of rule and subservience. With an electoral mandate in his favour, Thaksin and TRT proceeded to reshape the state, giving more power to professional and business classes in the governing of the country and taking power away from traditional sources, namely the monarchy, the military and the bureaucrats (Connors & Hewison, 2008, p.66). As the Thaksin government proceeded to implement new social welfare policies, Thaksin's popularity increased with the working class and the farmers. The support enjoyed by Thaksin and the TRT party from formerly politically excluded sections of Thai society ensured their resounding victory in the 2005 election. However, as Thaksin's electoral mandate was increased at this election, his authoritarianism grew (Hewison, 2008, p.201). His rule became characterised by a number of contradictions in policy that contributed to the mass protests against him in 2005-6 and his eventual downfall in the *coup* of 19 September (Pye & Schaffar, 2008).

The Thaksin government features prominently as agent in the article by Khien. In addition, Khien couples this agentive role with negative appraisal choices, for example, by using words with strong negative connotations such as "murder" and "violate", or even equating the Thaksin government with Adolf Hitler, effectively demonising it. In this way, Khien taps into the discourse of the corrupt politician:

Ø dâi tham kaankhâa tàttɔɔn prachaachon phûu bɔ́rísùt maa lææw læay khrán
Ø (Thaksin government) murdered and censored innocent people many times.

rátthabaan Tháksìn dâi lámêət sǎnyaa prachaakhom sám lææw sám lâw
Thaksin government repeatedly violated the social contract.

Chaiwat on the other hand explicitly acknowledges the legitimacy of the government in an identifying clause:

phrɔ́? rátthabaan [[thîi thùuk lóm pay]] pen rátthabaan [[səŋ mii thîi maa yàan
chɔ́ɔpθam phaaytâi rátthathammanuun...]]
because the government [[that was toppled]] was a government [[that had legitimacy
under the constitution...]].

Interestingly, Pitch does not explicitly mention Thaksin. The implication is that, unlike Khien, he does not see Thaksin as the main issue in claims for the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the *coup*.

The people

Thaksin's rule saw an increasing participation in Thai politics by more sectors of Thai society as people from the working class and rural masses became more aware of the empowerment brought about by their active citizenship. This contrasts with a number of discourses of "the Thai people" who must bear the responsibility for the failure of Thai democracy, as perpetuated by the elite. "The people" are an anonymous category which Thai urban classes think of as simple, close to the land, and preserving 'culture' from Western corruption. At the same time, 'the people' have caused democracy to fail through vote-selling" (Streckfuss, 2011, p. 207).

Pitch alludes to the empowerment of the rural and working classes in his article. He argues that the *coup* represented an attempt by conservative forces to arrest this groundswell of participatory politics, effectively turning these citizens into "modern *phrai*", a term historically used to refer to a "bonded commoner", dependent on a hierarchical master and colloquially used as an insult to depict a vile, base, uneducated person. His representation of "the people" as affected by events and

possessing no agency illustrates how this group was disenfranchised by the Thai elites:

Ø t̄ŋ thùuk khûapkhum dooy phûupòkkhr̄ɔŋ
 (*Phrai*) must be controlled by governors

rát ʔeeŋ ... tham hây phonlam̄æŋ pen phr̄ây
 the state itself ... turned citizens into *phrai*

“The people” figure prominently in Khien’s article as an amorphous mass, like-minded, following the rule of law, and rising up as one against a corrupt, authoritarian government:

thúk khon ca t̄ŋ tham taam kòtm̄ây læʔ rátthammanuun
 Everyone must follow the law and constitution

During the crisis in 2005-6, the opposition countered Thaksin’s claims of an electoral mandate with their discourse of “clean politics”. Since the *coup*, there have been calls to reform Thai democracy to ensure that political decision-making remains in the hands of the monarchy and the elite who know what is best for the country. A Western-style democracy, it is claimed, would not suit Thailand and could lead to a “tyranny of the majority” (Phasuk & Baker, 2008, p.78, citing de Tocqueville). Khien promotes this view:

...rátthãathípàt [[th̄i tham tua n̄æ kòtm̄ây dooy ʔaas̄y khon camnuan m̄ak]] nán pen “th̄ɔrar̄at kh̄ɔŋ khon kh̄æŋ m̄ak”

...the government [[that puts itself above the law by depending on a majority of people]] is a “tyranny of the majority”

Adolf Hitler... k̄ɔ d̄âyrap̄ khánææn siãŋ sanàpsan̄n càak kaanl̄ækt̄âŋ maa yàŋ th̄uamthón m̄y ph̄ææ kh̄ɔŋ rátthabaan Thák̄s̄in

Adolf Hitler... also received overwhelming electoral support like the Thaksin government

It is clear here that the two writers’ positions are vastly different. Khien’s rhetorical stance aligns with the voices of the monarchy and the elite whereas Pitch, by representing the people as *phrai* and as affected participants with no grammatical agency, takes up the voice of the people.

The military

Many scholars see the *coup* fundamentally as a move by the monarchy and its supporters to regain control over the hearts and minds of the Thai population (Hewison, 2008; Thongchai, 2008; Ukrist, 2008). The empowerment of the rural masses through Thaksin’s popular policies was a concern for the monarchy that found it had to compete for the loyalty of the people (Hewison, 2008, p.207).

Royalist factions within the military were intent on protecting a “monarchy in danger” (Askew, 2010, p.14) from the anti-monarchy and anti-democratic Thaksin government. The military group that toppled Thaksin and the TRT party legitimated their actions through this anti-Thaksin royalist sentiment.

Each of the articles refers to the military and their role in the 2006 *coup*. But the contrast between Pitch’s and Khien’s representations is stark. For Khien, the military in this latest coup is construed as an unwilling participant with no agency but ultimately being forced into a position where they had to act against an amoral and antagonistic enemy.

Ø ca tŋ thũk tət sít khân phũnthãan nay thaaj kaanmœaŋ pay dũay

Ø(military) must be cut off from their political rights

“phũuráy [[thũ mii ʔitthĩphon” læʔ mii ʔamnãat thaaj kaanmœaŋ]] tŋkaan dœŋ phũak khãw khãw pay sanàpsanũn Ø nay kaantòsũu kàp fàay troŋkhãam nán

Influential offenders with political power pull them (military) in to support (offenders) in a fight with the opposition

thahãan yŋom ʔətʔatcay mãak

The military are likely very frustrated.

nay thũi sùt klũm thahãan....kô dũy tãtsĩncay tham rátthaprahãan

Finally, the military group... decided to stage the *coup*.

For Pitch, on the other hand, the military are depicted as agents working to keep “the people” in their place.

nææwkhít rœaŋ kaanpen thahãan ʔaachĩp nán yĩŋ tham hãy thahãan yũŋ kiaw kàp kaanmœaŋ mãak khũn

The idea of military professionalism causes the military even more to interfere in politics

thahãan sãaŋ khwaamchõptham nay kaan khãw sææksææŋ thaaj kaanmœaŋ dooy troŋ

The military build legitimacy for direct political intervention

Conclusion

The few examples presented here of how different social actors are construed in the three texts illustrate the link between the socio-political context the linguistic choices. Forces and ideologies within the social context have shaped the way writers have discussed the 2006 *coup*. For example, the way in which the writers construe agency in their texts reveals their particular ideological stance, and their attempt to legitimise or delegitimise the discourse of the *coup*. Khien champions the royalist agenda and legitimises the actions of the military in staging the *coup*. Pitch highlights how the struggle for political legitimacy has excluded a large part of the population. Chaiwat cites the legitimacy of the Thaksin government and suggests that academics must question the *coup*. Further analysis of these texts is warranted to gain a clearer picture of how the context and language has shaped this rhetorical space.

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