



## Navigating Methodological Ambiguity in SDG Research: A Critical Comparison of Halliday, van Dijk, and Fairclough

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### Abstract

Discourse Analysis (DA) has emerged as a critical instrument in social sciences to uncover power dynamics and social realities, particularly within the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, researchers often encounter methodological ambiguity when selecting the most appropriate framework among diverse linguistic traditions. This study conducts a critical comparative analysis of three dominant paradigms: M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach, and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis as discussed in (Fairclough et al., 2021). Using a qualitative library research method, this study deconstructs the epistemological foundations and analytical tools of each approach. The findings indicate that Halliday's framework offers a microscopic lens on textual texture and register, van Dijk's approach bridges text and society through cognitive mental models, while Fairclough's model examines the dialectical relationship between language and institutional power. The study concludes with a comparative matrix, providing a methodological roadmap for researchers to align these frameworks with specific social inquiries, such as education, inequality, or policy analysis.

**Keywords:** *Discourse Analysis; Social Research Methodology; Linguistics.*

**Abstrak:** Analisis Wacana (DA) telah menjadi instrumen krusial dalam ilmu sosial untuk mengungkap dinamika kekuasaan dan realitas sosial, khususnya dalam konteks Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan (SDGs). Namun, peneliti sering kali menghadapi ambiguitas metodologis saat memilih kerangka kerja yang paling tepat di antara berbagai tradisi linguistik. Studi ini melakukan analisis komparatif kritis terhadap tiga paradigma dominan: Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik M.A.K. Halliday, Pendekatan Sosio-Kognitif Teun A. van Dijk, dan Analisis Wacana Kritis Norman Fairclough. Menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif kepustakaan, studi ini mendekonstruksi landasan epistemologis dan perangkat analisis dari setiap pendekatan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kerangka kerja Halliday menawarkan lensa mikroskopis pada tekstur dan register teks, pendekatan van Dijk menjembatani teks dan masyarakat melalui model mental kognitif, sedangkan model Fairclough menelaah hubungan dialektis antara bahasa dan kekuasaan institusional. Studi ini menyimpulkan sebuah matriks perbandingan yang berfungsi sebagai peta jalan metodologis bagi peneliti untuk menyelaraskan kerangka kerja tersebut dengan investigasi sosial yang spesifik, seperti pendidikan, ketimpangan, atau analisis kebijakan.

**Kata Kunci:** *Analisis Wacana; Metodologi Penelitian Sosial; Linguistik*



## INTRODUCTION

A systematic review of 78 empirical studies confirms that SFL linguistic features, particularly Transitivity and Mood, are the most productive tools for CDA practitioners to uncover social inequalities (Alameda-Hernández & Jiménez-Briones, 2025). This trend is evident in political discourse studies, where (Zhou, 2024) employed Hallidayan SFL to deconstruct hegemonic ideologies in President Biden's inaugural speech through transitivity and modality analysis. Complementing this view, (Darong & Canggung, 2022) emphasizes that a granular analysis of clause systems is indispensable for decoding how public speakers construct interpersonal meaning and authority through language. Similarly, (Suwandi et al., 2021) combined Fairclough's framework with SFL to compare political ideologies in presidential debates, highlighting how material and mental processes reflect national priorities. In the digital realm, (Santi et al., 2024) applied a systemic functional approach to analyze netizen discourse regarding the 2024 election, demonstrating how thematic structures reflect public aspirations for ideal leadership.

This selection of frameworks is empirically grounded; a recent bibliometric study by (Mustafa et al., 2025) confirms that in the landscape of linguistic research in Indonesia (specifically in Sinta 1-4 journals), Fairclough's and van Dijk's approaches remain the most dominant frameworks used to dissect critical discourse, particularly in news and educational texts. Thus, comparing their epistemological roots is crucial for advancing local scholarship.

While these studies successfully apply SFL and CDA integratively, most current research remains focused on the practical application of these theories to singular objects rather than conducting a comparative evaluation of the frameworks themselves. For instance, (Rachmanayni et al., 2024) utilized Fairclough and Halliday to analyze student essays on environmental issues, yet the focus remained limited to gender representation and identity rather than evaluating the framework's efficacy in dissecting sustainable development issues. Consequently, there is a scarcity of integrative studies that directly compare the epistemological strengths of Halliday, van Dijk, and Fairclough to assist researchers in aligning their methodological choices with specific development goals.

The primary problem addressed in this study is the methodological ambiguity experienced by scholars when navigating the diverse spectrum of discourse analysis. While the works of major figures such as M.A.K. Halliday, Teun A. van Dijk, and Norman Fairclough are widely cited, they are frequently treated in isolation or conflated without a clear understanding of their distinct ontological and epistemological foundations. Existing literature often focuses heavily on the theoretical intricacies of each model, leaving a gap in practical guidance for applied social research. There is a scarcity of integrative studies that directly compare these frameworks to assist researchers in aligning their

methodological choices with their specific research objectives, whether they are linguistic, cognitive, or socio-political.

This article aims to bridge this gap by conducting a critical comparative analysis of three dominant paradigms: Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Textual), van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach, and Fairclough's Dialectical-Relational Approach. This study clarifies the position of these frameworks within the broader landscape of social research, delineating their specific strengths and limitations. By dissecting their definitions of discourse, theoretical pillars, and analytical tools, this research seeks to answer the following question: How can social researchers determine the most suitable discourse analysis framework to effectively address their specific research problems?

The novelty of this paper lies in its functional synthesis of these three approaches into a comparative matrix designed specifically for social inquiry. Unlike traditional linguistic reviews, this study evaluates these theories based on their utility in uncovering social realities relevant to contemporary developmental issues. The anticipated result is a clear methodological roadmap that empowers researchers in sociology, education, and communication to employ discourse analysis with greater rigor and precision, ultimately contributing to more robust findings in social sciences and humanities scholarship.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research method. This approach is selected to provide a comprehensive and critical understanding of the theoretical frameworks under review without manipulating the subjects of the study. The primary objective is to deconstruct and compare the epistemological foundations of three distinct discourse analysis traditions. This comparative approach aligns with the methodological pluralism advocated by (Wodak & Meyer, 2015), who argue that Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) should not be treated as a monolithic theory but as a cluster of diverse approaches analyzing linguistic and social phenomena.

**Data Sources** The data for this study are classified into primary and secondary sources. The primary data are drawn directly from the seminal works of the three key figures:

1. M.A.K. Halliday: Works related to *Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)* and *Cohesion in English*.
2. Teun A. van Dijk: Works focusing on *Macro-structures, News Analysis, and Ideology*.
3. Norman Fairclough: Works concerning *Language and Power* and *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*.

Secondary data were obtained from reputable academic journals, critical commentaries, and relevant case studies that apply or critique these theories in the context of social sciences and humanities.

**Data Collection and Analysis** Data were collected using a documentation technique. The procedure involved identifying key texts, classifying the concepts based on specific parameters (definition of discourse, scope of analysis, and analytical tools), and synthesizing the information. The analysis was conducted using a descriptive-comparative approach. This involved three stages: (1) Description, where each theory was analyzed individually to understand its internal logic; (2) Juxtaposition, where the theories were placed side-by-side to identify convergences and divergences; and (3) Synthesis, where the findings were integrated to form a comparative matrix suitable for social research application.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section delineates the core findings of the comparative analysis regarding the three prominent frameworks in discourse studies. Each approach is dissected based on its definition of discourse, theoretical architecture, and its specific contribution to understanding social phenomena. Discourse Analysis (DA) has emerged as a critical instrument in social sciences. Language is not merely a medium of communication but a fundamental instrument in constructing, maintaining, and challenging social realities. In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in addressing issues such as quality education, gender equality, and social justice, discourse plays a critical role in shaping public perception and policy implementation. Discourse Analysis (DA) serves as more than a pivotal methodological tool; it represents an ethical imperative. As O'Regan (2021) argues, the practice of Critical Discourse Analysis is never neutral but is rooted in a moral obligation to side with 'the losers' of globalization. In the context of the SDGs, this means that uncovering power dynamics is not merely an academic exercise, but a necessary act to challenge the neoliberal structures and systemic inequalities that impede sustainable development. Thus, for social researchers, the choice of analytical framework is not just a technical decision, but a political one. In recent years, the integration of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has become a dominant approach in dissecting socio-political texts.

### **The Textual Dimension: M.A.K. Halliday and Systemic Functional Linguistics**

The first major approach is rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), pioneered by M.A.K. Halliday and Hasan. In this framework, discourse is defined not merely as a suprasentential unit, but as a unit of meaning or

"texture." A text is considered a discourse only if it possesses texture, which distinguishes it from a random collection of sentences.

The fundamental premise of Halliday's approach is that language is functional and inseparable from its social context. This relationship is operationalized through the Context of Situation (Register), which consists of three variables:

- Field: The nature of the social action or the topic being discussed.
- Tenor: The status and role relationships among the participants (e.g., hierarchical or equal).
- Mode: The channel and rhetorical function of the language (e.g., written, spoken, persuasive).

To analyze how meaning is constructed internally, (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) introduce the concept of Cohesion. Unlike structural grammar, Cohesion refers to the non-structural resources that allow a text to hang together through specific 'Cohesive Ties' namely Reference, Substitution, Ellipsis, and Conjunction. For social researchers, tracing these ties is critical. In the context of SDG 4 (Quality Education), for instance, the 'learnability' of a textbook often depends on the explicit use of Conjunctions (logical continuity) and unambiguous Reference (participant tracking). If these cohesive ties are absent or ambiguous, the semantic chain breaks, and the pedagogical transfer of knowledge fails. For social researchers, this approach is particularly useful for micro-analysis. For instance, analyzing the "Tenor" in a classroom transcript can reveal the power distance between a teacher and students, while analyzing "Lexical Cohesion" in a political speech can uncover the speaker's emphasis on specific agendas.

This adaptability is evident in recent studies; for instance, (Santi et al., 2024) demonstrated the robustness of Halliday's framework in the digital realm by analyzing ideational meanings in netizen discourse regarding the 2024 Election, illustrating how lexicogrammar effectively unveils public aspirations in social media.

Furthermore, the application of Halliday's SFL proves effective in dissecting the self-representation of political actors on social media, as demonstrated by (Nur & Widodo, 2022), who utilized Transitivity analysis to uncover the communication patterns of President Jokowi.

### **The Socio-Cognitive Dimension: Teun A. van Dijk and the Mental Model**

While Halliday focuses on the text itself, Teun A. (T. A. van. Dijk, 2008) expands the scope by introducing a 'cognitive interface' effectively acting as a bridge between social structure and discourse. Van Dijk argues that social factors (such as class, gender, or power) do not influence text directly. Instead, they are filtered through 'Context Models'. As established in his earlier principles of critical analysis, (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993) asserts that elites control public discourse not merely through force, but by restricting access to mental

models that define the communicative situation. Furthermore, these models are the locus where shared social representations—or ideologies—are reproduced. According to (T. A. van. Dijk, 2000), ideology functions as the foundational social cognition that organizes the specific attitudes of groups (such as racists or neoliberals), which then influence the text indirectly. For social researchers, this concept is crucial: it proves that context is not a fixed external reality, but a subjective construct. Thus, analysis must focus on how the author's bias *defines* the situation to legitimize their discourse. And are manifested in text through three structural layers:

- Macro-structure: The thematic core or global meaning of the discourse (e.g., the headline of a news report).
- Super-structure: The schematic organization or the conventional form of the text (e.g., the lead, main event, and background in news).
- Micro-structure: The semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and rhetorical details.

For example, in analyzing news about labor strikes, a researcher might find that the *Macro-structure* frames the workers as "disruptors" rather than "victims." At the *Micro-structure* level, the choice of active vs. passive voice (syntax) might be used to emphasize the violence of the protesters while hiding the provocations by the police. Van Dijk's approach allows researchers to trace these textual choices back to the journalist's mental model, revealing the hidden cognitive bias.

The robustness of van Dijk's approach in dissecting mental strategies and discourse structures is evident in the study by (Edel et al., 2025), which maps how superstructures and macro-rules are employed to construct political imagery in presidential campaigns.

### **The Dialectical-Relational Dimension: Norman Fairclough and Critical Discourse Analysis**

The third approach, developed by Norman Fairclough, represents the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) tradition in its most dialectical form. Fairclough defines discourse as a Social Practice, positing a two-way relationship: language is shaped by society (socially conditioned) but also acts to shape society (socially constitutive).

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993) is highly relevant for studies focusing on power relations, hegemony, and institutional change.

The model requires the analyst to work through three stages:

1. Text (Description): Similar to Halliday's analysis, examining vocabulary and grammar.
2. Discourse Practice (Interpretation): Analyzing the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption. This includes questions of *Intertextuality* (how texts draw upon other texts).

3. **Social Practice (Explanation):** The widest level of analysis, connecting the text to the broader social, cultural, and political context.

For instance, an analysis of a whitening cosmetic advertisement would not only look at the persuasive adjectives (Text) but also how the ad is distributed by influencers (Discourse Practice) and how it reinforces post-colonial beauty standards where "white" is equated with "beautiful" (Social Practice).

This connection between text and institutional power is particularly critical in educational contexts. (Mahrudin et al., 2023) expanded the use of CDA to deconstruct hidden moral values in EFL textbooks, affirming Fairclough's stance that educational texts are never neutral from institutional ideology. Furthermore, in the pedagogical sphere, Fairclough's framework proves instrumental in enhancing teachers' critical literacy skills, as demonstrated by (Sari et al., 2024), who linked text analysis with discursive practices in the classroom.

This dialectical relationship is fundamental to understanding social inequality. (Puspitasari & Utami, 2022) reaffirm the basic premise of CDA that language variation correlates directly with social stratification, a concept that lies at the heart of Fairclough's dialectical approach.

### **Comparative Analysis: A Guide for Social Researchers**

To address the methodological confusion often faced by researchers, the distinctions between these three approaches are synthesized in the table below. This matrix serves as a guide for selecting the appropriate framework based on the research objective.

Table 1: Comparative Matrix of Discourse Analysis Frameworks

<b>Feature</b>	<b>M.A.K. Halliday (SFL)</b>	<b>Teun A. van Dijk (Socio-Cognitive)</b>	<b>Norman Fairclough (CDA)</b>
<b>Primary Focus</b>	<b>Text-Internal:</b> How grammar and vocabulary create meaning.	<b>Cognition:</b> How the mind/mental models produce and comprehend text.	<b>Power &amp; Ideology:</b> How text maintains or challenges power structures.
<b>Definition of Discourse</b>	A unit of language with "texture" (meaningful unity).	A communicative event: Text + Cognition + Context.	A social practice that is both constitutive and conditioned.
<b>Key Framework</b>	Context of Situation (Field, Tenor, Mode) & Cohesion.	The Triangle: Discourse Structure, Social Cognition, Social Context.	Three-Dimensional Model: Text, Discourse Practice, Social Practice.

<b>Central Question</b>	"How do these sentences cohere to form meaning?"	"What is in the author's mind (bias/ideology) when writing this?"	"Whose interest/power is being served by this text?"
<b>Ideal for Research on</b>	Literacy, classroom interaction, translation studies.	Media bias, racism, stereotyping, psychological perception.	Political propaganda, social inequality, institutional hegemony.

### Critical Synthesis of the Methodological Matrix

The matrix presented in Table 1 is not merely a classification tool but a reflection of the fundamental epistemological debates among these scholars regarding the locus of meaning. The divergent paths outlined above stem from Halliday's foundational argument that text is a "semantic unit" rather than a structural one. (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) contends that social reality is construed semiotically; therefore, the primary task of the analyst is to rigorously describe the linguistic choices (lexicogrammar) that realize this reality. Without this "microscopic" evidence, Halliday argues that social analysis remains speculative.

However, Norman Fairclough challenges this text-centric view by arguing that linguistic analysis alone is insufficient to explain social change. (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993) posits that discourse is a form of "social practice" that is dialectically related to social structures. He critiques purely linguistic approaches for failing to account for how institutional power struggles (hegemony) shape and constrain the production of texts. For Fairclough, the "so what?" question cannot be answered by grammar, but by analyzing the interdiscursive struggle between competing orders of discourse.

Conversely, Teun A. van Dijk critiques both Halliday and Fairclough for ignoring the "cognitive interface." (T. A. van. Dijk, 2008) argues that there is no direct link between text and society; social structures cannot influence text production unless they are first translated into mental representations (Context Models) by the individual. Van Dijk insists that researchers who jump directly from "text" to "society" commit a methodological fallacy of determinism. Therefore, his framework requires the analyst to map the cognitive strategies (such as the Ideological Square) that mediate between social bias and linguistic expression.

Consequently, the selection of a framework from Table 1 implies a specific ontological commitment. Researchers focusing on *how* knowledge is structurally packed should align with Halliday. Those investigating *why* authors frame issues in biased ways must adopt van Dijk's cognitive lens. Meanwhile, scholars examining *whose* interests are served by policy shifts are best supported by Fairclough's dialectical model.

Interestingly, the boundaries between these frameworks are becoming increasingly fluid. (Askurny et al., 2023) successfully integrated Fairclough's three-dimensional model with Halliday's micro-linguistic tools (Transitivity) to dissect the structure of fraud in SMS Phishing, proving that the sharpness of social analysis requires a strong textual foundation.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study concludes that overcoming methodological ambiguity in social research requires a precise alignment between the object of inquiry and the epistemological focus of the analytical framework. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the choice of framework is not arbitrary but must be dictated by the specific dimensions of the social problem being investigated. M.A.K. Halliday's framework is definitively the most suitable for inquiries necessitating a microscopic forensic analysis of textual evidence and pedagogical transmission. In contrast, Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is indispensable for studies investigating the mental models and biases underlying discrimination, while Norman Fairclough's dialectical model offers the necessary tools for deconstructing institutional hegemony and policy shifts. By utilizing the methodological matrix developed in this study, social researchers can move beyond theoretical conflation, ensuring that their discourse analysis effectively unveils the power dynamics inherent in the Sustainable Development Goals.

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