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ON CRITICAL THINKING AND MODERN LIMITS TO HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

We are currently living in a world literally flooded with all types of information, and people have ended up dealing with various kinds of limitations to how much they can or choose to know. We can, thus, identify modern limits to human knowledge falling under (at least) two large categories: either limitations imposed by others (such as authorities, mass media, bosses or leaders, etc), or what we may call self-imposed limitations, i.e. choosing to disregard some information or another, refusing to keep up to date with a state of facts, rejecting scientifically proved data, etc. We are actually talking about outer manipulation (in option A above), or inner manipulation, if we may call it as such, namely the protection of personal comfort even over irrefutable evidence (in option B above). “Ignorance is bliss” (*The Matrix*, 1999), right? At least for some people. Yet, in this intricate matrix of human knowledge some of us are plagued with an incurable disease: critical thinking. A genuine bogeyman of any authoritarian system or regime, critical thinking is responsible for many glitches in this matrix, always at war against any sort of limitations imposed on human knowledge and rationale. We need to keep critical thinking alive and encourage it, and, in this process, identify the decisive vectors capable of disseminating the concept and its value, as well as its applications in everyday life.

Keywords: critical thinking; manipulation; communication; conspiracy theories; limitations;

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no debate anymore over the fact that the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic has changed the world in so many ways, some of which we have not even begun realizing or investigating. The whole COVID-19 hysteria has permeated all levels of existence and has already imprinted on language itself and particularly on the ways we are now forced to resort to so as to manage to communicate. We are no longer only talking about an international health crisis, although this is at the core of all other ramifications of the problem and it is undoubtedly the main source of sorrow in the world, if we consider the deaths and the consequences of so many serious cases in COVID-19 patients.



Unfortunately, this is just the root of other issues, serious enough in themselves to shake the very foundations of the world as we used to know it and which we took for granted for so long, without appreciating it for what it really was. But, then again, that is human nature.

The economic repercussions are staggering, resulting in a high number of jobs lost and more families living in poverty, or in businesses closing down and causing a ripple effect not only affecting their employees, but their suppliers and customers, as well, or even in exaggerated demands imposed by some employers, since everybody is aware that, if you are lucky to still have a paid job, you will do anything to keep it in such troubled times.

The same problematic international context has also had social consequences, which we can easily identify in all sorts of restrictions applied to everything that has to do with socializing either at work, or at a personal level. Not being able to meet friends and family freely or interact with co-workers the way we used to has taken its toll on all of us, irrespective of our different personalities, psychological training or lack of it, temper, or any other individual characteristics that make us who we are.

Which only brings us to a deeper level of analysing what the pandemic has done to us so far: the psychological impact, both collective, and individual. Not being able to communicate our thoughts, our dreams, our fears, basically ourselves to the others, against the constant background of international panic fuelled by mass-media's focus on getting the highest ratings and feeding off the sensational, has resulted in an incredible rise in cases of depression, anxiety, and isolation. And mass-media's influence on our daily lives, combined with people's natural fear of the unknown (since we very well know that only the known is safe, only the known is predictable and acceptable), has sneaked down to even more profound and more dangerous levels, up to endangering critical thinking and imposing limitations on human knowledge.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

As we can never entirely separate the individual from society and vice versa, we will always be interested in the correlation between language and society, namely in the way social identity is constructed using linguistic, but also extra-linguistic, tools. To do this, though, the researcher needs to resort to a high degree of interdisciplinarity, as sociology or sociolinguistics alone are not enough to make the whole context complete. Hence, "this view of social identity as an inferential *outcome* of linguistically encoded acts and stances goes dead against sociolinguistic analyses that assume social identities as a priori givens, including all correlational studies of language and social identity, where taken-for-granted social identities are posited as independent variables. [...] We recognize that social identities have a sociohistorical reality independent of language behaviour, but, in any given actual situation, at any given actual moment, people in those situations are actively constructing their social identities rather than passively living out some cultural prescription for social identity. [...] In *all* situations, even the most institutionalized and ritualized, people are *agents* in the production of their own and others' social selves" (Ochs, 2006, p. 84), nowadays divided into COVID believers and non-believers, vaxxers and anti-vaxxers, only confirming that the concept holds valid in contemporary society as well.

In this respect, research can only benefit from resorting to discourse analysis and CDA (critical discourse analysis), that help shed a clearer light on what is usually going on and not only take things at face value. The very word discourse is obviously intertwined with the concept of representation, as "representation is clearly a discursive matter, and we can distinguish different discourses, which may represent the same area of the world from different perspectives or positions. Notice that 'discourse' is being used here in two senses: abstractly, as an abstract noun, meaning language and other types of semiosis as elements of social life; more concretely, as a count noun, meaning particular ways of representing part of the world" (Fairclough, 2006, p. 26).

Moreover, this entails the concept of interdiscursivity, particularly under contemporary pandemic circumstances, where power as control and control of the public discourse have become realities of everyday life. Interest here especially focuses on interdiscursivity as "the local authority anticipating the practices of business within which it hopes its publicity will be taken up" (Fairclough, 2006, p. 35), which, reformulated in present day terms, reads local, national and international authorities engaged in this race of anticipating people's reactions to limitations and impositions meant to control the

pandemic, trying to walk a fine line between deliberately diminishing critical thinking and access to knowledge and facts and still observing constitutional rights.

The 'narrative' thread of such analysis has to rely on dissimilarities in discourses paralleling differences in people and the social/economic/educational/etc. categories they belong to and which dictate changes in the way they respond to messages addressed to them, either at an individual, or at an official level. And this takes us directly to the concept of dialogicality of any text, as "orientation to difference brings into focus degrees and forms of dialogicality in texts," reference being made here of "an aspect of Bakhtin's 'dialogical' theory of language: 'a word, discourse, language and culture undergoes *dialogization* when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative and absolute' (Holquist, 1981, p. 427). Texts are inevitably and unavoidably dialogical in the sense that 'any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances' with which it 'enters into one kind of relation or another' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69)" (Fairclough, 2006, p. 42). Thus, let us bear in mind that individuals are involved in a constant dialogue not only with society, but also with larger or small communities that they belong to, and ultimately with themselves, probably the most important dialogue of them all.

Turning to the latter tool in the pair listed above, CDA, van Dijk is definitely right in clearing up what CDA is not, when trying to define the concept: "CDA is not a direction of research among other, like TG grammar, or systemic linguistics, nor a subdiscipline of discourse analysis such as the psychology of discourse or conversation analysis. It is not a method, nor a theory that simply can be applied to social problems. CDA can be conducted in, and combined with any approach and subdiscipline in the humanities and the social sciences. Rather, CDA is a – critical – perspective on doing scholarship: it is, so to speak, discourse analysis 'with an attitude'. It focuses on social problems, and especially on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse and domination. Wherever possible, it does so from a perspective that is consistent with the best interests of dominated groups. It takes the experiences and opinions of members of such groups seriously, and supports their struggle against inequality. That is, CDA research combines what perhaps somewhat pompously used to be called 'solidarity with the oppressed' with an attitude of opposition and dissent against those who abuse text and talk in order to establish, confirm or legitimate their abuse of power. Unlike much other scholarship, CDA does not deny but explicitly defines and defends its own socio-political position. That is, CDA is biased – and proud of it" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 96).

Hence, considering the complex multidisciplinary nature of CDA, as pointed out above and to which the current research fully agrees, we can easily grasp the intricate rendering of both background or context, and face-front message that CDA can provide. In so doing, we must take into account that, "given the fundamentally verbal nature of discourse, explicit CDA needs a solid 'linguistic' basis, where 'linguistic' is understood in a broad 'structural – functional' sense. In other words, whatever other dimensions of discourse CDA deals with, CDA as a specific form and practice of discourse analysis obviously always needs to account for at least some of the detailed structures, strategies and functions of text and talk, including grammatical, pragmatic, interactional, stylistic, rhetorical, semiotic, narrative or similar forms of verbal and paraverbal organization of communicative events" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 97). As a consequence, CDA not only permeates all levels of language and interaction, but it also manages to contribute to establishing a relationship among discourse, society and cognition, which again emphasizes its interdependence with other sciences.

Furthermore, "because CDA is interested in power, domination and social inequality, it tends to focus on groups, organizations and institutions. This means that CDA also needs to account for the various forms of social cognition that are shared by these social collectivities: knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 113), which lays special focus on the cognitive dimension of the message, comprising both text and subtext.

And, when touching upon the issue of the subtext, mention must be made here of the importance of what is not openly said, but implied, with direct reference to implicatures (pertaining to the realm of pragmatics), assumption, presuppositions, in a nutshell everything that is not stated, but implied, and which can or cannot be decoded by the interlocutor(s): "especially interesting for CDA research is the study of the many forms of implicit and indirect meaning, such as implications, presuppositions, allusions, vagueness, and so on. We call information implicit when it may be inferred from (the meaning of) a text, without being explicitly expressed by the text. In theoretical terms [...] this means that implicit

information is part of a mental model of (the users of) a text, but not of the text itself. That is, implicit meanings are related to underlying beliefs, but are not openly, directly, completely or precisely asserted, for various contextual reasons, including the well-known ideological objective to de-emphasize our bad things and their good things” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 104) , which clearly holds valid in contemporary society, not only at the level of politics and advertising, but also at that of national campaigns, such as the latest vaccination and distancing measures campaigns, in the context of the current Sars-CoV-2 pandemic.

Because, let us not forget that, ultimately, it is all about power and control, and Wodak summarizes it best: “Power is about relations of difference, and particularly about effects of differences in social structures. The constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and long term. Language provides a finely articulated means for differences in power in social hierarchical structures. Very few linguistic forms have not at some stage been pressed into the service of the expression of power by a process of syntactic or textual metaphor. CDA takes an interest in the ways in which linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations of power. Power is signalled not only by grammatical forms within a text, but also by a person’s control of a social occasion by means of the genre of a text. It is often exactly within the genres associated with given social occasions that power is exercised or challenged” (Wodak, 2006, p. 11).

Therefore, considering the troubled times we have been experiencing since the onset of the current pandemic, it comes as no surprise that CDA, combined with discourse analysis, pragmatics, rhetoric, sociology, sociolinguistics, behavioural and mass psychology, NLP (neurolinguistic programming), and so on, can be indeed seen as bridging the gap between what is said and what is not said, but implied, and it can even shed light in the present unequal fight against harmful phenomena such as fake news and conspiracy theories.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Hence, taking into account the contemporary international context, in all its complexity, researchers could not possibly avoid raising questions regarding mind control in the media and the political discourse, especially if we consider that authorities must impose their point of view on the general population if they were to stand a chance of controlling the current pandemic. Mind control is obviously referred to here not in terms of science fiction literature or the paranormal, but in terms of using the verbal and the non-verbal, sometimes at the level of the subliminal, so as to convince people to accept harsh measures or to go and get vaccinated, or to plant the seed of a thought in their heads, which is very easy to see in the quick spread of conspiracy theories. In other words, we may be dealing with real-life *Inception* (2010), where the plot revolves around instilling an idea in the deep subconscious of an individual by means of various techniques, so that the individual actually believes that the respective idea is of his/her own creation, thus internalizing it, not being aware of outer interference. Although the movie resorts to science fiction elements, the concept still stands and we can safely say that we have seen it at work so many times in human history, but all the more so in contemporary society, since information can travel much faster and reach more people than it used to.

In this respect, so as to clear things up, we rely again on van Dijk’s expertise in the field, who reveals that “if controlling discourse is a first major form of power, controlling people’s minds is the other fundamental way to reproduce dominance and hegemony. Within a CDA framework, ‘mind control’ involves even more than just acquiring beliefs about the world through discourse and communication. [...] First, recipients tend to accept beliefs, knowledge and opinions (unless they are inconsistent with their personal beliefs and experiences) through discourse from what they see as authoritative, trustworthy, or credible sources, such as scholars, professionals, or reliable media (Nesler et al., 1993). Second, in some situations, participants are obliged to be recipients of discourse, e.g. in education and in many job situations. [...] Third, in many situations, there are no public discourses or media that may provide information from which alternative beliefs could be derived (Downing, 1984). Fourth, [...] recipients may not have the knowledge and beliefs needed to challenge the discourses or information they are exposed to (Wodak, 1987)” (van Dijk, 2003, p. 357). Thus, the present study is interested not only in how people

reacted to media discourse manipulation, but also in investigating the manipulative techniques employed and how they can be used and identified by a larger segment of the population.

Moreover, it is not only the media discourse that has always resorted to such linguistic and extra-linguistic methods meant to control the masses, as it has always been perhaps even surpassed by the political discourse. We owe Orwell the first clear theoretical signalling of what we may call the political potential of any language, as he helped open our eyes to the way politicians may use language to suggest and manipulate, claiming that “political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible” (Orwell, 1969, p. 225).

Further investigation of the concept reveals its relative dimensions, as everything may be turned around to match the speaker’s communicational intent: “The general principle here is one of transformation. Similar words and phrases may come to be reinterpreted within different ideological frameworks. Linked directly to this process is the concept of ‘representation.’ Representation refers to the issue of how language is employed in different ways to represent what we can know, believe, and perhaps think” (Wilson, 2003, p. 401; see also Montgomery, 1992). As a consequence, focus will be laid on what makes political discourse still function so well, despite the fact that many of its techniques have been exposed over time.

4. FINDINGS

In trying to answer the questions above, the present study has taken into account several concepts, easily applicable to all types of discourse, but yielding particularly relevant results in the cases of the media and the political discourses. Thus, special attention has been paid to:

- ❖ the pragmatic dimension of language as context, focusing on speaker and contextual meaning, with utmost relevance to the decoding of the message;
- ❖ the invisible meaning, so important in pragmatics, discourse analysis and CDA, as, sometimes, what is not being said carries more conversational weight than what is actually uttered;
- ❖ the Gricean maxims and the principle of cooperation, investigating whether the maxims of quality, quantity, manner and relevance are observed at the level of mass media and political texts;
- ❖ violating or flouting the Gricean maxims, this being of particular interest to CDA and manipulative discourse in general, as it means stepping off the beaten track and creating linguistic magic, while bending or even breaking traditional rules of engagement;
- ❖ the importance of the non-verbal, or the extra-linguistic, which can be quantified and analysed at the level of micro- and macro-behavioural markers to be found in body language, face mimic, tone of voice and intonation, clothing and accessories, stance, etc.

Investigating manipulative texts at several levels (mass media, politics, advertisements), we have discovered that a successful persuasive formula can easily be obtained if the speaker or writer of the message manages to touch upon four main areas of interest. Interest here should be read as pertaining to the audience, since it is your interlocutor(s) that must perform the intended decoding of the message and act accordingly.

First, perhaps the most important question to answer is **who your audience is**, and this involves thorough research, if you want your text to hit home, so to speak. As the emitter of the message, you need to be aware of the *social background* of the interlocutors, of their belonging to various social strata, at the same time being knowledgeable of the *economic context* of the area, including local problems, unemployment level, crime rate, housing and rent, etc. Another important factor in this category is the audience’s *level of education*, as this dictates the degree of formality of your discourse and allows you to make sure you draw their attention to what you have to say. Equally important, the audience’s *average age* is to be taken into account, as you address youth differently than older people, simply because they not only have dissimilar interests, but also react to different linguistic and extra-linguistic elements, and you need to speak the language they understand and can properly decode. Other factors should also be considered when researching your audience, such as *ethnic identity*, *religion* and *historical background* with a double purpose in mind: on the one hand, it is of utmost importance to avoid faux-pas in these respects, while, on the other, knowing and referring to the history and the personalities of the area could gain you valuable points with your interlocutors.

Second, especially with oral communication, the **location** of speech delivery is paramount in achieving manipulative tasks. Research must be conducted in assessing realities in terms of *urban vs rural communities* that are being addressed (simply because such groups of people have different realities and problems that concern them), the *historical and cultural background* of the place (in order to include details that would make the audience find it easier to relate to your message), and the *socio-economic context* of the area (with particular focus on potential regional problems, such as conflicts, low wages for certain categories of people, child labour, etc.). For a better grasp on the location, further information should be acquired on *local infrastructure, tourism, health system and demographics*, with the same view to enhancing the chances that your message manages to reach and convince your audience.

Third, another dimension that has been identified as contributing to mass or individual manipulation at discourse level refers to complex ways of rendering **purpose and content of speech or written text**, where ideas or specific details can easily be highlighted at a subliminal level, thus making it more likely to remain with the audience long after having heard the speech or having read the text. Close analysis of media, political and advertising texts has revealed that this can be achieved by means of:

- a) *repetitive patterns*, i.e. repeating the same word(s), paraphrasing the same idea as close to the original as possible, or even using keywords throughout the speech / text;
- b) *purpose-focused language*, meaning that consistency is achieved within the same lexical field, which makes it impossible for the audience to miss the point, since reference to it is constant;
- c) *avoiding certain local or general taboos and using politically correct language*, which keeps the locutor safe from any potential cultural, religious, collective or individual misunderstanding, that would hinder message delivery and decoding;
- d) *being consistent* about the ideas conveyed, as inconsistency at this level would only result in the audience losing interest in the speech or text and turning away from it altogether;
- e) *marketing arguments as well as possible*, which mainly refers to the fact that, in media, politics and advertising, perception is vital, more so than the message itself. We may have heard the concept more often associated with politics, when saying that ‘politics is perception,’ but the same holds valid in media and advertising, and its importance cannot be denied: whatever you are selling, you need to market it well, no matter if we are talking about planting ideas in people’s heads, or convincing them to vote for or against someone or something, or enflame a lethargic crowd, or calm down an angry mob, and the list could go on forever.

Fourth, exclusively pertaining to the realm of oral conversation, but no less important in the functioning of the locutionary – illocutionary – perlocutionary interaction, the **extra-linguistic** or the **non-verbal** plays a crucial part in creating that invisible meaning that pragmatics, discourse analysis and CDA are so interested in. Just because some things cannot be addressed openly, by means of verbal utterances, but they can very well be conveyed subliminally. In this respect, we have discovered that elements such as *micro- and macro-behavioural markers* (body language, face mimic, repetitive gestures, etc.), *tone of voice and intonation*, or *clothing and accessories* may reveal either more than your interlocutor is willing to have exposed about themselves, or precisely what your interlocutor cannot say verbally for a variety of reasons. We are all aware, even at the level of everyday interactions, that the same utterance may acquire different, even up to opposing, meanings depending on the tone of voice or/and intonation employed. In its turn, clothing may communicate more than what meets the eye and a famous case in point is to be identified in Donald Trump’s choices in clothing vs Hillary Clinton’s during the 2016 US presidential campaign: Donald Trump made sure to constantly wear the colours of the American flag throughout his campaign (which perfectly complimented his equally famous, patriotic “Make America Great Again” logo and his going-back-to-traditional-values line of running for office), while Hillary Clinton started and continued to don white (or predominantly white) clothing from the moment she was accused of having leaked national security detail to the public by using an unsecured e-mail service, thus using white to suggest innocence, purity, lack of guilt.

We can find all these four dimensions combined in contemporary discourse, when the world is fighting an unequal battle against an invisible enemy and when the current Sars-CoV-2 pandemic has suddenly changed the rules of the game. During such troubled times, people are literally flooded with information from so many sources, both official (authorities, politicians, mass media, community leaders) and informal (social networks, friends, mass media), making it difficult for many to discern the truth or identify conspiracy theories for what they are. In case you noticed ‘mass media’ being included in both

types of sources in the previous sentence, this was not a slip, but a deliberate choice, since we cannot include all mass media in the category of official sources of information, since there is a worrying number of alarmist tabloids and sensationalist TV channels that live off creating panic and that would not meet the criteria required to make it into the former category of the two mentioned above.

Further investigation into media discourse has brought some murky problems into specific relief, identifying certain techniques being repeatedly used to manipulative ends:

- ❖ broadcasting clipped videos or printing clipped information for the masses, so as to prove the point intended by the network or newspaper, but not necessarily by the original emitter of the message, with such practices resulting in taking things out of context, or, worse, editing separate information into a coherent new statement, never intended as such by the original author;
- ❖ careful and deliberate sequencing of news reports in TV news broadcast that go beyond logic and coherence into the realm of manipulation, in an attempt to induce a certain response in the audience, with the emotional component being the target most of the times, as people have been proved to react emotionally much quicker and more often than rationally, since emotion is instant, whereas reasoning takes time (or at least should do so);
- ❖ using and abusing the emotional component of manipulation, both in the media and the political discourse, as already discussed above, and which has already backfired, since we can identify people rejecting official statements or sound advice coming from authorities, just because they have grown to constantly suspect that they are being toyed around (Mention must be made here that this is more likely to occur in countries that have previously experienced authoritarian and oppressive regimes, such as post-communist countries, because people in such countries have a traumatic past where the official propaganda functioned along the same lines as conspiracy theories do now, or it even changed fundamental concepts from one day to another, and people never knew what to rely on or what to believe, at the same time refraining from speaking out, fearing the harsh consequences that came with freedom of speech which they were not entitled to.);
- ❖ making special use of register, vocabulary and intonation in reporting facts, which, again, elicits different responses in people than the same facts would have generated if portrayed in neutral terms;
- ❖ resorting to the manipulative impact of the visual in news reports, and we are all well aware that an image is worth a thousand words, but extensively displaying images that clearly affect the audience will eventually result in them refusing to watch the news;
- ❖ constantly playing upon the locutionary – illocutionary – perlocutionary, not only at the level of taking bits of information out of context, but also in using archived resources when it comes to public statements and broadcasting them again when politicians, for example, end up contradicting themselves on the same issue(s) within the span of just a couple of days, weeks or months.

All these considered, we can definitely say that people have ended up dealing with various kinds of limitations to how much they can or choose to know. We can, thus, identify modern limits to human knowledge falling under (at least) two large categories:

- A. limitations imposed by others (such as authorities, mass media, bosses or leaders, etc);
- B. what we may call self-imposed limitations, i.e. choosing to disregard some information or another, refusing to keep up to date with a state of facts, rejecting scientifically proved data, etc.

We may actually be talking about **outer manipulation** (in option A above), or **inner manipulation**, if we may call it as such, namely the protection of personal comfort even over irrefutable evidence (in option B above). “Ignorance is bliss” (The Matrix, 1999), right? At least for some people.

This is of particular interest in contemporary society, since all countries are engaged in a race to get as many people vaccinated as quickly possible and to convince them to observe social distancing measures at the same time. Unfortunately, the dangerous cocktail of what we called earlier outer and inner manipulation still stands in the way of their success and it might be a good time to change strategy if they want to reach their goals.

With respect to finding ways of fighting against manipulation, fake news and conspiracy theories, however, there is one potential universal tool that can help, irrespective of one’s cultural, social, financial, linguistic, etc. reality: critical thinking. The importance of critical thinking in the modern world

is paramount, as it can go as far as diminishing or even erasing the limitations to human knowledge we mentioned above, and it can contribute to shedding light on current issues, such as the whole anti-COVID propaganda and vaccination process. Moreover, its applicability in everyday life would result in people becoming less prone to being easily manipulated, but they must, in this case, be prepared to cope with the sometimes-ugly sub-text of everything that is going on. And, since we have touched upon the negative aspects connected to this concept, mention must be made here that an additional disadvantage to critical thinking is that it represents a clear danger to authoritarian and oppressive systems or regimes, which makes it a very uncomfortable concept to embrace and practice.

Nevertheless, we have discovered that critical thinking may just play the most important part in being capable of really discerning right from wrong, conspiracy theory from scientific fact, lie from truth, pre-digested information from actual fact, illusion/delusion from reality and so on and so forth. Responsibility also lies, in this case, with what we may call vectors of disseminating critical thinking, such as public figures, (serious, genuine) influencers, teachers, or more experienced family members, who should do their best and initiate others down this intricate, uncomfortable, but rewarding path of using one's own mind and getting used to doing research to assess information and events.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion may thus be drawn that pragmatics, discourse analysis and CDA permeate all levels of language and expand far beyond it, along the lines of the extra-linguistic or the non-verbal, into our everyday lives, whether we are aware of it or not. We resort to them on a daily basis, not only in our interpersonal interactions, but also in the complex process of trying to make sense of the world.

Another long-lasting truth is that manipulation has been around since the beginning of time and has become ever subtler over the years, perfecting the subliminal as its weapon. In response, people have reacted differently to such a process, either by accepting limitations to knowledge imposed by other, or by creating their own limitations as coping mechanisms or as ways of protecting themselves from a dangerous, invasive outer world.

Unfortunately, nobody can deny the fact that uninformed, or, worse, misinformed masses are much easier to manipulate, and, therefore, control, as they can either be fed any type of information, if they are not aware of the respective field at all, or be led down one path or another according to somebody else's interests, since one only needs to alter their beliefs, not change them completely, this being precisely the very technique behind the wide and quick spread of conspiracy theories.

To counteract all these, critical thinking might very well be our last line of defense against a future where everybody is compliant, submissive, obeying all kinds of orders without questioning anything. Using one's own mind and doing through research relying on credible sources will always help in this fight against identifying the truth value of what you are being told or shown.

Ultimately, disseminating critical thinking should be looked upon as everybody's responsibility in passing on a legacy that might save the human spirit from being crushed, or, worse, enslaved.

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