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CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Motivated by the long-standing connection between Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this paper presents the first systematic literature review of the most frequent and productive linguistic features from SFL that are applied in practice by CDA analysts. Guided by PRISMA 2020 and following the SALSA framework, 4 databases (Wiley, Scopus, Sage Publications, and ProQuest) were searched, from which 78 papers were extracted and statistically analyzed with the TexMiLAB tool. The linguistic features that are most productive in CDA are lexical choices and evaluative lexis at the lexico-semantic level; while at the grammatical level, it is the type of processes and type of participants, together with the analysis of other linguistic elements, such as metaphors and quotations. The systems of Transitivity and Modality, and Appraisal theory are more recurrent over the remarkably underused Theme system. It could be argued that, to a large extent, SFL remains central to CDA research, although some CDA practitioners do not seem to follow a systematic methodology when applying SFL to their analysis.

Keywords: CDA, SFL, systematic literature review, PRISMA, SALSA, lexicogrammatical features

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Overview

The main aim of this paper is to identify and review current research published within the paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that has relied on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to address their research questions. To this purpose, by conducting a systematic literature review (SLR), we have identified and synthesized all relevant available research on this matter. A systematic protocol, which was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA 2020) guideline (Page et al., 2021), has been adopted in order to minimize bias, provide transparency, and ensure wide coverage and accurate reporting of relevant publications (Booth et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019). The review process followed the stages of the SALSA framework (Grant & Booth, 2009), whereas the TexMiLAB software tool (Periñán-Pascual, 2024a) assisted in the statistical analysis. Thus, this paper can significantly contribute to academic knowledge about the methodological association between CDA and SFL as is actually applied by its practitioners, as well as enlighten the path for those novel researchers who want to engage in CDA from a systemic functional linguistic perspective.

Properly conducted literature reviews are essential to direct and lead research in fruitful directions in any given discipline (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). In recent years, CDA studies have been the focus of attention of a limited number of systematic reviews. These have mainly synthesized and collated published papers on specific types of discourse, such as political discourse (Randour et al., 2020), hate speech (Sirulhaq et al., 2023), or ecological discourse (Chu et al., 2024). Similarly, Fionasari (2024) also conducted an SLR scrutinizing research on language and power in political and social contexts, among which it included publications in the CDA and SFL paradigms, but only as part of the diverse array of selected publications which were founded on other theoretical frameworks. To these recent SLRs, we can add a meta-analysis with a more methodological focus, which surveys the increasing incorporation of corpus-based methods in CDA (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019). The relatively scarce number of SLRs of research where CDA and SFL have been applied presents a gap that needs to be addressed.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section summarizes the main tenets of CDA and SFL with a view to highlighting their theoretical and analytical integration in empirical research. Following that, we present the research questions (RQs) that drove our SLR, detailing the step-by-step protocol followed to compile our final corpus of 78 peer-reviewed studies. Next, we list and analyze the main results gathered when

exploring the most frequent and effective SFL linguistic features studied by the CDA scholars in the corpus. This section also attends to the specific SFL systems employed by these researchers (Transitivity, Mood, and Theme). In doing so, the two RQs are fully addressed. Finally, we draw our conclusions, outline the limitations of the study and offer potential paths for further investigation.

Theoretical underpinnings: CDA and SFL

CDA is a well-established field of research that emerged and steadily developed since the last decades of the 20th century from the concern of an initial group of linguists with the broad aspects of the societal context in which language is used. Led by this interest and since its early times, CDA has gone beyond a descriptivist approach to discourse analysis and is, in essence, primarily concerned with pressing social situations, particularly those characterized by inequality and power abuse. In this sense, CDA is a problem-oriented practice (Catalano & Waugh, 2020: xxiii). As stated by van Dijk (2015), 'critical discourse analysts take an explicit position and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality' (p. 466). Additionally, in doing so, CDA practitioners usually take the part of the deprived and disadvantaged (Meyer, 2001, p. 30) with a clear commitment to practical applications that can bring about real changes in the world as a result of the social awareness they make explicit. This leads to a further characteristic of CDA, interdisciplinarity, as such broad concerns necessarily open up research to connections with the theories and methodologies of other disciplines, such as sociology, history, politics, anthropology, or education, that can enlighten the critical interpretation of discourse Over the years, CDA has broadened and come to be also named Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), since, according to van Dijk (2010, p. 3), the new term is more comprehensive and emphasizes the understanding that the field is thoroughly theoretically based and not merely analytical, as the former label could suggest. As mentioned above, because of CDA's own nature, its practitioners are a heterogeneous group that brings together the different conceptual and analytical tools that best suit their research questions. It is precisely the common concerns they address, as manifested through discourse, and the practical agenda of their research that give unity to CDA practice. Because of this diversity, which is indeed considered a strength in this field of research (Wodak, 2001), a panoply of approaches is generally recognized as working under the wide canopy of CDA.

Amidst the variety of approaches to CDA and common to most of them, SFL emerged as the language theory that proved to best suit the description and later critical interpretation of the formal linguistic features of discourse. In fact, since the early years of development of CDA, Fairclough (1999) was convincingly firm when he stated that 'issues of social identification in texts cannot be fully addressed without a multifunctional view of language such as Halliday's' (p. 202). Later on, the alliance between CDA and SFL has been well attested in the literature, as extensively summarized and discussed, among many others, in Martin's (2000) article, Young and Harrison's (2004) work, which is a collection of papers that illustrate this CDA-SFL collaboration both theoretically and analytically, and, more recently, O'Grady's (2019) chapter and Catalano and Waugh (2020). Nevertheless, it must be noted that SFL is not the only linguistic model applied in CDA. Indeed, the work of central scholars in CDA, such as Wodak, Dijk, or Chilton, does not rely on a systemic functional analysis in general terms. The main motivation for the predominant preference for SFL in CDA lies in this linguistic theory's conception of language as a societal phenomenon which, consequently, is studied in relation to its functions and use in social and cultural contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The basic contribution of SFL is the identification of the three main functions of language, namely, ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These are called metafunctions and, respectively, refer to the use of language for the expression of experience, for expressing interpersonal relations, and for the expression of the organization of information in a text. These functions are realized in language in three corresponding lexicogrammatical systems, i.e., Transitivity, Mood, and Theme. In addition, as a systemic theory, SFL understands language as a system of options. For the CDA researcher, these formal choices constitute choices of meaning (Fairclough, 1995, p. 18) through which language users convey meaning in their texts, disclosing their understanding of the world in doing so. Nevertheless, a functional analysis of discourse is not reduced to labelling the structures of language but implies an act of interpretation and reasoning that relates them to the ideologies embedded in discourse (Ravelli, 2000, p. 37). Likewise, as put by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), 'clauses of different process types thus make distinctive contributions to the construal of experience in texts' (p. 219), which enables CDA practitioners to carry out a critical interpretation of discourse. Hence, given the strong methodological connection between CDA practice and the categories of SFL, a systematic review of the literature that applies this linguistic model productively and effectively to CDA research is a pressing concern.

Study design

Researchers in CDA who apply the analytical tools of SFL should decide on which system (Transitivity, Mood, and Theme) of SFL to base their analysis on and which specific lexicogrammatical features of the texts are studied to draw their critical interpretation of discourse. Thus far, SLRs have not targeted and delved into this explicit relation between CDA and the efficiency of applying the SFL lexicogrammatical systems in the critical discursive analysis of social inequalities. Consequently, the present paper intends to address the following two primary RQs:

RQ1. Which linguistic features from SFL are most frequently used in extant CDA research?

RQ2. To what extent have the systems of SFL been successfully applied in a CDA approach to social inequalities?

Addressing these questions, our paper intends to map the current panorama of research in the confluence of CDA and SFL analysis to provide a firm foundation for developing research. To achieve this goal, the present systematic review follows the stages of the SALSA (Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, Analysis) framework (Grant & Booth, 2009), which guides the entire review process. The first two stages, Search and Appraisal, direct the methodical procedure for the selection of publications that will make up the corpus of articles to be reviewed, while the last two stages of Synthesis and Analysis detail the data extraction process as well as the assessment of results. To ensure maximum transparency in the identification of eligible publications and to complement and report on stages 1 and 2 of the SALSA framework, this SLR follows the screening procedure of PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). In addition, to automate and assist in the completion of stages 3 and 4, the TexMiLAB application (Periñán-Pascual, 2024b) has been used. It has specifically supported the synthesis of data obtained using text mining techniques to provide a statistical exploration of the dataset. It did not, however, replace the need for close reading and evaluation of the corpus of articles included in this SLR.

Hence, in the first stage, to retrieve relevant documents for this SLR, four databases were selected: Scopus, Wiley Online Library (hence, Wiley), ProQuest One Academic (hence, ProQuest), and Sage Journals. The decision to rely on multiple sources is based on Wanyama et al. (2021), who advocate for the convenience of supporting the collection of articles on more than one database since their study concluded that the results retrieved from various databases differed substantially and showed only a small

number of publications in common. Thus, combining various databases ensures extensive reporting of existing literature. In addition, according to Gusenbauer & Haddaway (2020)'s study, Scopus, Wiley, and ProQuest (Sage was not included in their study) are listed among the databases and search systems that are well-suited to be used as primary sources for systematic reviews. Hence, the four selected sources are comprehensive and trusted academic databases with international coverage, specifically including publications in the arts and humanities and language & linguistics (sub)disciplines. They thus become reliable sources of academic evidence that substantiate the present review's results and validity.

These databases were queried from November 2024 to January 2025 using a search string constructed with the key concepts of the RQs, namely, "critical discourse analysis" and "systemic functional linguistics", together with their related terms "critical discourse studies" and "systemic functional grammar". In addition, "inequality" and its synonyms were also included as they represent the key concern of CDA for situations of power abuse and different forms of inequality in society (van Dijk, 2015), hence leading to a more accurate selection of relevant articles. However, the commonly employed initialisms CDA, CDS, SFG, and SFL were excluded from the search string after initial fruitless attempts, which retrieved countless publications where these initialisms belong to other scientific disciplines. Thus, after some fruitful pilot searches, the search terms were combined into the following refined search string used within the article title, abstract, and keywords:

1) "(("Critical Discourse Analysis" OR "Critical Discourse Studies") AND ("Systemic Functional Linguistics" OR "Systemic Functional Grammar") AND (inequality OR inequity OR disparity OR imbalance OR disproportion OR unfairness OR bias OR discrimination OR prejudice))"

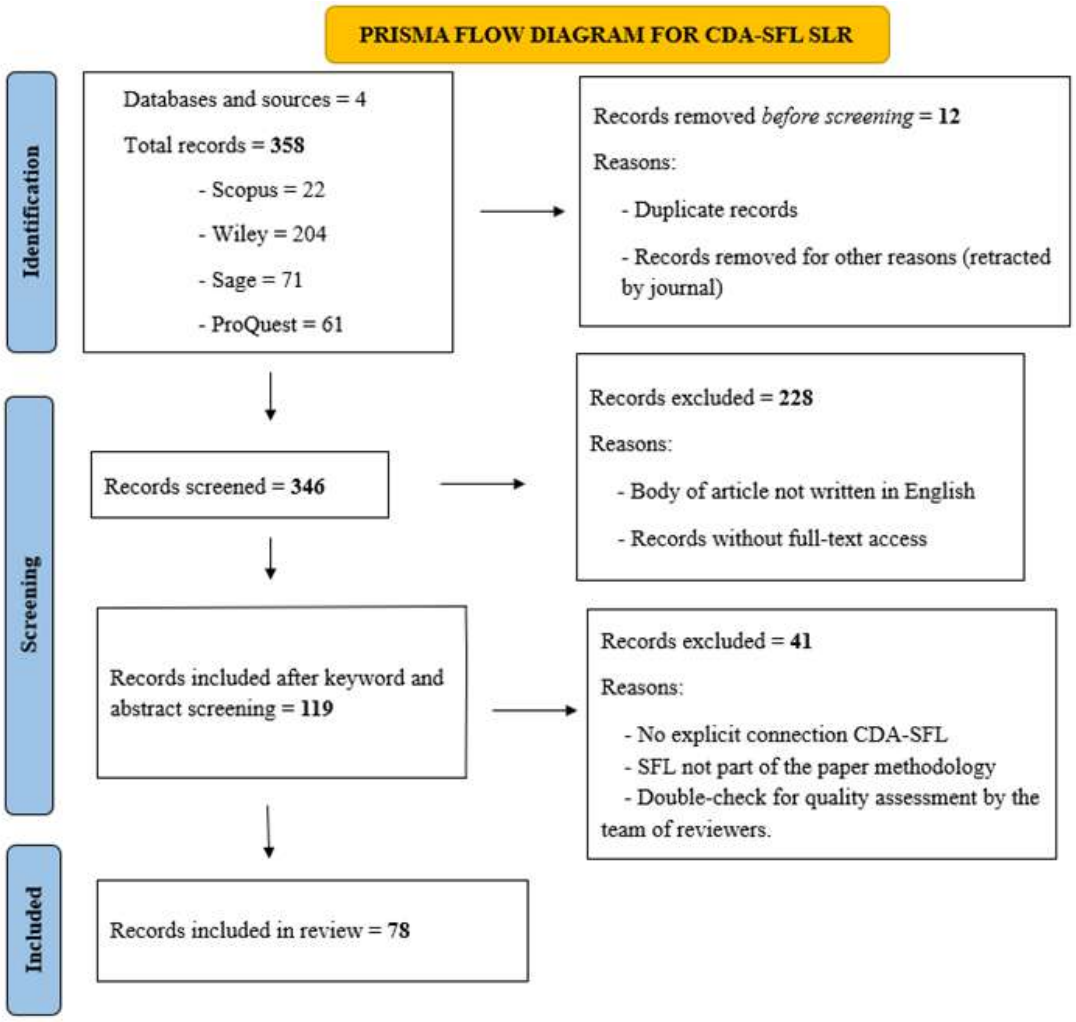
To ensure the consistency and quality of the selected publications, the query was restricted to peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, dating from 2001 to 2024, which provides a wide representation of the CDA-SFL collaboration in empirical research, ranging from basically the initial stages of development of CDA to ongoing investigation.

A total of 358 articles were retrieved via automated search. This number was reduced to 346 because 12 articles were removed before screening for being duplicates or for having been retracted by the journal. The team of researchers worked independently both in the first screening of titles and abstracts of the documents

retrieved, as well as in the later stage of full-text inspection. Team discussion and double-checking for quality assessment helped to achieve consensus on the final inclusion and exclusion of articles. In this process, 228 articles were removed to exclude those not written in English, nor with open access. After close reading, the remaining 119 were narrowed to include only those where the critical discourse analysis is based on the application of SFL features. Consequently, 41 articles were further removed. Therefore, decisions on document exclusion were carried out solely by human scrutiny; no automation tool was used at this stage. Strict deployment of the selection protocol and the inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in a carefully curated dataset known as the CDA-SFL Corpus, so that this collection consists of 78 articles that specifically apply SFL features as methodological tools to explore social inequalities within CDA. The screening process is presented following the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram, which shows the results of the search and the selection process.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram for CDA-SFL SLR



Results and analysis

This section corresponds to stages three and four of the SALSA framework, namely, Synthesis and Analysis, which present data extraction and examination, and assessment and report of the results, respectively. We converted the metadata and content data of the CDA-SFL Corpus into a table-format dataset to visually display results of individual studies. Table 1 displays the variables identified.

Table 1

Data variables in CDA-SFL Corpus

No.	Title	Author(s)	Publication year	Journal	Database	Lexicogramatical system of SFL	Linguistic features		
							Lexico-semantic	Grammatical	Miscellany

The first six columns include the variables for the metadata extracted from each corpus article, such as its ID number, title, author(s), year of publication, publishing journal, and the database from which it was retrieved. The remaining two columns accommodate the variables for the results of the content analysis carried out from a close reading of the corpus documents. Even though all the articles in the CDA-SFL Corpus are grounded on SFL, we wanted to identify, within this vast theory, the specific linguistic system(s) the scholars resort to for their linguistic analysis in relation to the three metafunctions of language previously mentioned. In this seventh column, Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) has also been included since it is a development of the Interpersonal function and, hence, naturally articulated in the architecture of SFL. The following column and its three subheadings record the linguistic features whose analysis prompted critical interpretation by the researchers. These linguistic elements have been classified into lexico-semantic, grammatical, and miscellaneous linguistic features. As is well known, canonical SFL (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) makes constant use of the concept of lexicogrammar or lexicogrammatical choices as an all-comprising notion that includes the analysis of both words and structures. However, since the inspection of the 78 papers revealed that CDA practitioners deploy a great variety of analytical tools that go well beyond strict SFL features, we felt the need for a finer-grained classification for the collection of the linguistic features present in the corpus articles. This explains our proposal for a three-fold distinction between lexico-semantic (word choice and semantics-related elements), grammatical (structural components), and miscellaneous

(neither lexico-semantic nor grammatical items) features. Table 2 lists the frequency and some examples of the 68 linguistic features identified in the corpus papers following this three-tier arrangement.

Table 2

Linguistic features in CDA-SFL Corpus

Category	Frequency	Example
Lexico-semantic	12 (17.6%)	Borrowing, Evaluative lexis, Lexical choice, Nomination, etc.
Grammatical	24 (35.3%)	Ellipsis, Modality, Mood, Nominalization, Voice, etc.
Miscellany	32 (47.1%)	Coherence, Cohesion, Irony, Metaphor, Quotation, etc.

Main lexico-semantic features analyzed in SFL-based CDA research.

The lexico-semantic category proposed in our three-fold classification includes what Eggins (2004) calls 'lexical choice' (p. 16), that is, word choice, along with semantics-related features. In other words, this class captures how particular words or combinations of words are employed to build lexical meaning in discourse. Table 3 displays the distribution and frequency of the 12 features among the 78 articles in the CDA-SFL Corpus.

Table 3

Distribution and frequency of lexico-semantic features in CDA-SFL Corpus

Lexico-semantic feature	Distribution by paper	Frequency
Borrowing	2	1.2%
Collocation	13	7.6%
Correlation	1	0.6%
Dysphemism	2	1.2%
Euphemism	3	1.8%
Evaluative lexis	39	22.9%
Lexical choice	57	33.5%
Nomination	17	10%
Overlexicalization	3	1.8%
Repetition	18	10.6%
Semantic field	8	4.7%
Sense relation	7	4.1%

Our SLR study reveals that the two most predominant lexico-semantic features in the CDA-SFL Corpus are Lexical choice (i.e., the selection of nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc.), with 57 instances or 33.5% of all the lexico-semantic features, and Evaluative lexis (the word connotations), with 39 examples or 22.9%. These results fully align with the rationale of CDA and SFL since they are the main means to represent ideological stance by connecting actors, events, and beliefs with a strategic selection of words and their connotation (Eggins, 2004), as can be seen in the analysis by Fernández-Vázquez and Sancho-Rodríguez (2020), among others.

According to SFL, lexical choice also contributes to maintaining discourse cohesion through "either the paradigmatic or the syntagmatic organization of lexis" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014, p. 643). Among the lexico-semantic features that rank high in our corpus, Repetition (18 instances or 10.6%), Nomination (17/10%), Semantic field (8/4.7%), and Sense relation (7/4.1%) illustrate the paradigmatic relations, whereas Collocation (13/7.6%) exemplifies the syntagmatic ones. According to these results, repeating the same lexical item, naming the participants with one or another label, and incorporating other words thematically related, as well as synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and collocates, are recurrent linguistic features whose analysis has proven to be effective in CDA research as they provide discourse with powerful cohesive effect and strong semantic connections. Furthermore, from the CDA perspective, these lexico-semantic features can be deployed, among others, with a view to amplifying or softening urgency and emotion (e.g., Repetition in Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015), (un)covering bias or power dynamics through Nomination in De Jesus and Caldas-Coulthard (2015), (de)legitimating participants in the discourse event (i.e., the use of semantic fields in Fenton-Smith (2007)), assessing precision or vagueness via sense relations as in Oni (2013), and reinforcing stereotypes or themes (e.g., through collocations in Course et al., 2024).

It is worth noting that our systematic review brings to light that there are 7 papers in our corpus (8.9% of the total) that, although they explicitly mention the use of SFL or a specific lexicogrammar system in their methodology section (e.g., Transitivity), they never address the lexico-semantic component of lexicogrammar (see Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2018; Martins and Heberle, 2021; Omari et al., 2020; Qasim, 2014; Tehseem et al., 2021; Wang, 2006; Zeng et al., 2020).

Main grammatical features analyzed in SFL-based CDA research

The grammatical class presented in our classification (see Table 2) aims to include the structural elements of language related to how words are arranged according to syntactic and morphological rules to form phrases and sentences. This proposed category aligns with the canonical SFL Transitivity and Mood systems, which, respectively, 'express representational meaning: what the clause is about, which is typically some process, with associated participants and circumstances and […] interactional meaning: what the clause is doing, as a verbal exchange between speaker-writer and audience' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 361). Table 4 showcases the distribution and frequency of use of the 24 grammatical features singled out in our corpus.

Table 4

Distribution and frequency of grammatical features in CDA-SFL Corpus

Grammatical feature	Distribution by paper	Frequency
Direct speech	7	2.1%
Ellipsis	3	0.9%
Exclusion	6	1.8%
Grammatical gender	3	0.9%
Grammatical number	3	0.9%
Indirect speech	7	2.1%
Intensifier	3	0.9%
Modality	28	8.6%
Modifier	4	1.2%
Mood	21	6.4%
Negation	5	1.5%
Nominalization	12	3.7%
Numeral	13	4%
Parallel syntactic structure	6	1.8%
Pronoun	32	9.8%
Reference	6	1.8%
Repetition of clause	4	1.2%
Type of circumstance	9	2.8%
Type of clause	21	6.4%

Type of clause relation	9	2.8%
Type of participant	43	13.2%
Type of process	48	14.7%
Verbal tense	5	1.5%
Voice	28	8.6%

According to our corpus, for CDA practitioners the analysis of Type of process and Type of participant are the two most productive features, with 48 (14.7%) and 43 (13.2%) instances each. The system of Transitivity is crucial in the SFL literature because

> Transitivity choices will be related to the dimension of Field, with the choice of process types and participant roles seen as realizing interactants' encoding of their experiential reality: the world of actions, relations, participants and circumstances that give content to their talk. (Eggins, 2004, p. 206)

Interestingly enough, the analysis of Type of circumstance only amounts to 9 examples, or 2.8%, in the CDA-SFL Corpus (see Table 4), which seems to suggest that this feature is not particularly productive for CDA practitioners in their critical interpretation of societal problems. When analyzed, the selection of processes, participants and circumstances is a tool for ideological representation that allows researchers to uncover or show power hierarchies among the interactants of the discourse event (e.g., the choice between Identified or Existent roles in Omari et al., 2020), and to foreground or background the place, time, or causality of the discourse situation as in Martins & Heberle (2021).

The findings of our SLF study (Table 4) also reveal that Pronoun (32 instances or 9.8%), Voice (28/8.6%), and Type of clause (21/6.4%) are widely used features in our corpus. These results validate the claim that analyzing the strategic use of personal and non-personal pronouns is vital to depict unequal power relationships established in terms of ideological opposites (e.g., Ghachem, 2014): in-group vs. out-group, inclusive vs. exclusive “we”, etc. Voice, specifically the contrast between active and passive, but also between passives with and without an agent, is the main means to hide agency and responsibility, minimizing the power of action of a certain individual or group as in Murata (2007). The choice of the clause type (i.e., finite, nonfinite, free, bound, etc.) also

constitutes an ideological tool to represent inequality as in Gerdin et al. (2024). Likewise, the analysis of the appropriate selection of the clause relation, although only recorded 9 times in our corpus (2.8%), may add to reinforcing negative stereotypes through parataxis (e.g., My Nhat & Thu Hien, 2023) or, via hypotaxis, to maintain unbalanced power relations by superseding one point of view to another, as in Yu and Hong (2016).

For the expression of interactional or interpersonal meaning as an exchange, SFL puts forward the Mood system, which, basically, accounts for the distinct mood types of clauses (declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamative) and the function of modality (Eggins, 2004, p. 141; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 134). As shown in Table 4, the Mood system is frequently analyzed in the CDA-SFL Corpus through the features Modality and Mood (understood as mood types), with 28 (8.6%) and 21 items (6.4%), respectively. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, pp. 172-173) claim, the study of modality needs to go beyond modal verbs to incorporate all the lexical expressions speakers use to modulate their attachment to, or detachment from, a proposition. Thus, from the CDA perspective, opting for a nonmodulated discourse results in an objective and transparent presentation as sustained in Caughlan and Jiang (2014). On the other hand, depending on the type of modal wording, a discourse event with modality forms may reduce accountability or impose facts and actions as unavoidable (e.g., Chen, 2018). As for Mood, researchers like Ijem and Agbo (2022) claim that an excessive number of declarative sentences may help to present propositions as if they were facts. However, the interrogative mood might portray asymmetrical power relationships, as demonstrated by Wang (2006), whose study showed that 'the statistics show judges/lawyers, interviewers, doctors, teachers, and customers ask far more questions than witnesses, defendants, patients, students and sellers' (p. 541), since those participants that make questions are in control of the discourse event and expecting an answer from the addressees.

The findings of our systematic review also disclose that 6.4% of the corpus papers (Brookes & McEnery, 2020; Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015; He & Zhou, 2015; Milner et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022) ignore the use of any SFL grammatical feature to explore social inequalities within CDA, even though all but one (Milner et al., 2020) specify the SFL system or component used.

Other miscellaneous features analyzed in SFL-based CDA research

Table 5 below displays the results for, and the frequency of use of, the third proposed category, namely miscellany, intended as an umbrella class for those 32 linguistic devices found in the analysis carried out by CDA articles that, however, do not qualify as belonging in either of the SFL lexico-semantic or grammatical features identified above (see Table 2).

Table 5

Distribution and frequency of miscellaneous features in CDA-SFL Corpus

Miscellaneous feature	Distribution by paper	Frequency
Ambiguity	1	0.9%
Coherence	1	0.9%
Cohesion	3	2.6%
Cynicism	1	0.9%
Cultural/historical reference	3	2.6%
Disclaimer	1	0.9%
Enumeration	1	0.9%
Exaggeration	1	0.9%
Humor	2	1.7%
Idiomatic expression	1	0.9%
Implication	1	0.9%
Inference	1	0.9%
Intertextuality	5	4.3%
Irony	3	2.6%
Metaphor	22	19.1%
Omniscient narrator	1	0.9%
Personification	3	2.6%
Persuasion	1	0.9%
Presupposition	6	5.2%
Proverb	2	1.7%
Quotation	15	13%
Register	3	2.6%
Rheme	4	3.5%
Rhetorical question	7	6.1%
Sarcasm	1	0.9%

Semiotic resource	2	1.7%
Simile	3	2.6%
Slogan	1	0.9%
Speech act	9	7.8%
Theme	7	6.1%
Turn-taking	2	1.7%
Ungrammatical structure	1	0.9%

Although SFL linguists explore, in their research and related to the Textual metafunction of language (Halliday, 1994), Speech acts, Coherence, Cohesion, Theme, Rheme, and rhetorical devices such as Irony, Metaphor, Sarcasm, etc., there are other features that, strictly speaking, are not part of the SFL realm, like Intertextuality, Cultural/historical reference, and Omniscient narrator, to name a few. Hence, to account for all these devices found in our SLR study that trespass the twofold classification of lexico-semantic and grammatical features, the category miscellany is proposed. In this class, the features that top the list are: Metaphor (22 instances/19.1%), Quotation (15/13%), Speech act (9/7.8%), Rhetorical question and Theme (7/6.1% each). Hence, presenting social and political issues, and the actors involved, through the use of these linguistic resources, has shown to produce effective results in the critical analysis of the connection between language and power and how the former creates, sustains, and reinforces the latter. In our corpus, Chiluwa and Ifukor (2015), Murata (2007), and Rogers and Mosley (2006), among others, have disclosed how the voices of the powerful and the deprived are included or excluded via quotations or how rhetorical questions serve to emphasize a particular ideology.

A word is needed for the 24 papers in the CDA-SFL Corpus that do not apply any of these miscellaneous features. As already pointed out, a small percentage of articles (8.9% and 6.4%) avoid the choice of any SFL lexico-semantic-grammatical feature in their analysis. However, the percentage here is much higher: 30.8%. This is certainly surprising because miscellany includes linguistic features from the Theme system (e.g., Theme, Rheme, Coherence, and Cohesion), which plays a central role in SFL as it facilitates the integration of ideational and interpersonal meanings into coherent discourse. Furthermore, none of the 24 articles employ speech acts in their inequality studies, even though they are essential tools for interacting and establishing (un)equal relations among the discourse participants (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 97).

After this thorough account of the variable linguistic features of the dataset and the three proposed categories (see Table 1), the findings obtained in our systematic review allow us to state that SFL continues to be central to CDA empirical research. Therefore, our first RQ (i.e., Which linguistic features from SFL are most frequently used in extant CDA research?) can be answered by affirming that, at the lexico-semantic level, the analysis of Lexical choice and Evaluative lexis are the most productive linguistic features for researchers to draw a critical interpretation of discourse. At the grammatical level, it is the linguistic elements Type of process and Type of participant that CDA practitioners particularly analyze, while also deploying other linguistic features, primarily Metaphor and Quotation, to support the interpretation that is strictly derived from the study of the other SFL analytical tools. The next section addresses RQ2: To what extent have the systems of SFL been successfully applied on CDA studies on social inequality?

SFL lexicogrammatical systems in CDA research

To provide an answer for RQ2, the dataset variable lexicogrammatical system of SFL needs to be examined (Table 1). Table 6 shows the results and frequency of use of the SFL lexicogrammatical systems extracted from each of the papers in the CDA-SFL Corpus.

Table 6

Distribution and frequency of SFL lexicogrammatical systems in CDA-SFL Corpus

SFL lexicogrammatical system	Distribution by paper	Frequency
Appraisal	10	12.8%
Lexical classification	1	1.3%
Lexicalization and Transitivity	1	1.3%
Modality	1	2.6%
Mood and Modality	2	1.3%
SFG	3	3.8%
SFL	13	16.7%
Stance (Affect) and Appraisal	1	1.3%
Textual metafunction	1	1.3%
The grammatical cohesion of reference	1	1.3%
Transitivity	27	34.6%
Transitivity and Appraisal	6	7.7%
Transitivity and Hasan's (1985) dynamism	1	1.3%

Transitivity and Lexical cohesion	1	1.3%
Transitivity and Modality	3	3.8%
Transitivity, Modality and Appraisal	1	1.3%
Transitivity, Modality and Theme	4	5.1%
Transitivity, Mood and Modality	1	1.3%

The present SLR study reveals that the system that scores the highest is Transitivity, with 27 absolute instances (34.6%), which sides with the already mentioned relevance of this system within SFL and with the results obtained for the grammatical features in Table 4. Furthermore, Transitivity is used along other systems, such as Appraisal theory (6 papers/7.7%), Modality and Theme (4/5.1%), Modality (3/3.8%), Hasan's (1985) dynamism, Lexical cohesion, Modality and Appraisal, and Mood and Modality, with one instance each or 1.3%. Hence, Transitivity, whether on its own or combined with other SFL systems, is deployed in 42 academic papers, that is, 56.4% of the CDA-SFL Corpus.

The Appraisal framework is also widely used in our corpus. On its own, it was employed in the analysis of 10 academic papers (12.8% of the total number of corpus articles), although it was jointly applied with other tools like Stance (Affect) (1/1.3%), Transitivity (6/7.7%), and Transitivity and Modality (1/1.3%). Thus, Appraisal theory, whether on its own or combined with other systems, is deployed in 18 corpus papers, that is, 23% of the total. This supports the prominent role of Appraisal theory within SFL and CDA, as it naturally fits within these paradigms because it is a development of the interpersonal function of language. The Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005) provides the categories of Engagement, Attitude, and Graduation. In particular, within Attitude, this theory contributes to unveiling how interactants convey emotions and feelings (Affect), evaluate people and their behavior (Judgement), and judge objects, processes, and phenomena (Appreciation), as for example in O'Farrell (2022).

The third SFL system that is statistically most productively employed in SFL-based CDA research is Modality. Although it only amounts to 2 instances (2.6%) by itself, when combined with other components like Mood (1/1.3%), Transitivity (3/3.8%), Transitivity and Appraisal (1/1.3%), Transitivity and Theme (4/5.1%), and Transitivity and Mood (1/1.3%), Modality is analyzed in 12 publications, accounting for 15.4% of the total number of corpus papers.

We also recorded those articles whose authors did not specify the system or component of SFL analysis employed in their studies. These instances were labelled plain SFG (3.8%) and SFL (16.7%) in Table 6, and amount to 20.5% of the CDA-SFL Corpus. Although a more detailed study is pending, these findings suggest that almost a quarter of the CDA scholars (16 cases) that reference SFL/SFG, however, do not consistently identify its lexicogrammatical systems.

After carefully describing the dataset variable lexicogrammatical system of SFL, we can address RQ2: To what extent have the systems of SFL been successfully applied on CDA studies on social inequality? Our systematic review yields conclusive results that lead us to claim that Transitivity (56.4%), Appraisal theory (23%) and Modality (15.4%) are the SFL systems successfully exploited by CDA scholars to conduct their empirical research. These findings partly side with those presented above for RQ1, as the Transitivity system is mainly instantiated through the analysis of types of processes and participants, while Appraisal theory is often employed to examine lexical choices and evaluative language. Likewise, the Theme system (5.1% in conjunction with Transitivity and Modality) and the Textual metafunction (1.3%) are surprisingly underused in the CDA-SFL Corpus. This aligns with the findings displayed for the category Miscellany (Table 5), in which 30.8% of the corpus articles omitted the analysis of features like Theme, Rheme, Cohesion, Coherence, and Speech act. In the same vein, 20.5% of the corpus papers do not explicitly state the SFL system analyzed in their research. More work is needed to explore whether some correlation could be established between the underspecification of SFL systems and the actual linguistic features exploited in those CDA studies.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study represents the first SLR that focuses on the methodological connection between CDA and SFL. The outcome of our analysis is a comprehensive and up-to-date reference on the most frequent, effective, and relevant linguistic features from SFL actually applied by linguists in CDA research.

Our semi-automated SLR has been conducted in a rigorous way, adopting the tested protocol of the SALSA framework. Likewise, document selection was reported in the PRISMA flow chart, and statistical analysis of the dataset was aided by the TexMiLAB application. Following this protocol, we searched 4 primary sources (Scopus, Wiley,

Sage, and ProQuest) from which 78 documents were automatically retrieved and later manually selected and examined.

Considering the publication timespan of the articles reviewed (2001-2024), our findings show that SFL remains central to CDA research. Addressing our first RQ, this paper has unveiled how the linguistic features of SFL are actually applied and critically interpreted in CDA research. More specifically, we have found that the lexico-semantic features that are most productive to draw a critical interpretation of discourse are Lexical choice (33.5%) and Evaluative lexis (22.9%), while at the grammatical level, Type of process (14.7%) and Type of participant (13.2%) have shown to be the most frequently analyzed elements in the publications that make up the CDA-SFL Corpus. Additionally, linguists in the CDA paradigm mainly resort to the examination of other linguistic elements in their texts, such as Metaphor (19.1%) and Quotation (13%), to support the critical interpretation that strictly derives from the analysis of systemic-linguistic features. On the other hand, and answering our second RQ, we can state that the systems of Transitivity and Modality, and Appraisal theory are more recurrent, over the Theme system, which is remarkably underused in the CDA-SFL Corpus. Likewise, there are noticeable gaps in the actual application of the analytical tools of SFL in 20.5% of the published papers, which, although allegedly theoretically grounded on this linguistic theory, fail to recognize or misidentify the SFL system(s) that are specifically analyzed. Similarly, 15.3% of the corpus articles did not actually apply any lexicogrammatical feature of SFL to support their critical interpretations. Consequently, it could be argued that our SLR has shown that, to a large extent, CDA analysts do not seem to follow a systematic methodology when applying the SFL framework to their analysis, even though there are works that have proposed step-by-step guidelines for an SFL analysis of texts (Briones, 2016; Fontaine, 2013).

This study is not, however, without limitations, which in turn can open new avenues for further research. It would be advisable to expand the study with a larger corpus of publications, using other databases as sources for different publications, and potential studies could also focus on articles in other languages. Despite these limitations, our investigation can provide a framework for further research in CDA. Further studies could expand the systematic review of this CDA-SFL Corpus to include other relevant questions in CDA research, such as the specific dimensions of social inequality that are most frequently studied through the linguistic features of SFL. By and

large, the findings of this SLR can be of significance and benefit for those linguists, either students, newcomers to the field, or established researchers, who want to systematically apply the features of SFL to their CDA research in a structured, coherent and methodical manner.

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