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Nominalization in the Discourse of Oppenheimer: A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

*Fatemeh Sadat Hosseini**

Fa.s.hosseini@student.alzahra.ac.ir

Nominalization is a process in language that changes verbs or adjectives into nouns. It can make discourse more abstract, formal, or impersonal. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an approach that studies how language influences social relations, ideologies, and power structures. Norman Fairclough, a pioneer of CDA, developed a framework for analyzing texts at three levels: description, interpretation, and explanation. Fairclough argues that nominalization can be used to hide agency, responsibility, or causality in texts, especially in institutional or official discourses.

Here are some examples of nominalization that Fairclough examines using his CDA framework:

In his book "Language and Power" (1989), Fairclough discusses a news report about a prison riot. He points out that the report uses nominalizations like 'disturbance', 'damage', and 'injury' to avoid specifying who did what to whom. For instance, the sentence 'There was considerable damage to property and injury to staff and prisoners' doesn't mention who caused the damage or injury, or who the victims were. Fairclough suggests that this is a way of downplaying the violence and conflict between the prisoners and authorities.

In his article 'Critical Discourse Analysis and Nominalization: Problem or Pseudo-Problem?' (2003), Fairclough responds to criticisms of his use of nominalization in CDA. He analyzes a government report on education that uses nominalizations like 'the introduction of the national curriculum', 'the development of assessment procedures', and 'the improvement of standards'. He argues that these nominalizations are part of a discourse that presents the government's policies as natural, inevitable, and beneficial, without acknowledging the controversies, alternatives, or consequences they entail. Fairclough's book, *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (2003), delves into a speech given by Tony Blair, the former UK prime minister. Fairclough observes that Blair employs nominalizations like 'the challenge of change', 'the forces of conservatism', and 'the modernization of public services'. According to Fairclough, these nominalizations contribute to a discourse that establishes a clear contrast between 'modernizers' and 'conservatives'. This discourse presents Blair's agenda as forward-thinking, logical, and essential, while dismissing his opponents as resistant, illogical, and obstructive.

In this section, I will examine some examples of nominalization in the discourse of an influential figure Oppenheimer.

Politicians and other public figures may use nominalization for various reasons, such as making their speech more abstract, formal, or impersonal, or hiding or obscuring agency, responsibility, or causality in their statements.

Oppenheimer was not a politician, but a physicist who was involved in politics. He was a physicist who led the Manhattan Project, the development of the atomic bomb during World War II. He is also known for his famous quote “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”, which he said after witnessing the first atomic test in 1945. In the film *Oppenheimer* (2023), he is portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch, who delivers several speeches that use nominalization. Considering Fairclough’s CDA method about nominalization here are 10 quotes from the film that use nominalization:

- “The power you are about to reveal will forever outlive the Nazis, and the world is not prepared.” This quote uses nominalization (‘power’, ‘reveal’, ‘outlive’) to express an abstract concept, and to imply a sense of authority or destiny.
- “The important thing isn’t can you read music; it’s can you hear it. Can you hear the music, Robert?” This quote uses nominalization (‘music’, ‘hear’) to express a metaphorical idea, and to suggest a personal connection or inspiration.
- “You are the man who gave them the power to destroy themselves.” This quote uses nominalization (‘power’, ‘destroy’) to emphasize the effect of the atomic bomb, and to imply a sense of regret or guilt.
- “I don’t wish the culmination of three centuries of physics to be a weapon of mass destruction.” This quote uses nominalization (‘culmination’, ‘physics’, ‘weapon’, ‘destruction’) to make the speech more formal and impersonal, and to hide or obscure the agency or responsibility of the action of creating the atomic bomb.
- “This isn’t a new weapon; it is a new world.” This quote uses nominalization (‘weapon’, ‘world’) to construct a binary opposition, and to portray the atomic bomb as a revolutionary or transformative force.
- “The responsibility for the decision to use this weapon rests with the President of the United States.” This quote uses passive voice (‘to use this weapon’) and nominalization (‘responsibility’, ‘decision’) to conceal the agent of the action of using the atomic bomb, and to shift the responsibility to the President.
- “The atomic bomb is not a weapon of war; it is a weapon of annihilation.” This quote uses nominalization (‘weapon’, ‘war’, ‘annihilation’) to emphasize the effect of the atomic bomb, and to imply a sense of regret or guilt.
- “The only hope for humanity is the renunciation of nuclear weapons.” This quote uses nominalization (‘hope’, ‘humanity’, ‘renunciation’, ‘weapons’) to express a political stance, and to persuade the audience to support the abolition of nuclear weapons.

- “The pursuit of knowledge is not a sin, but the misuse of it is.” This quote uses nominalization (‘pursuit’, ‘knowledge’, ‘sin’, ‘misuse’) to express a moral dilemma, and to justify or defend the scientific endeavor.
- “The tragedy of our time is the loss of the sense of the sacred.” This quote uses nominalization (‘tragedy’, ‘time’, ‘loss’, ‘sense’, ‘sacred’) to express a philosophical or religious view, and to lament or criticize the modern condition.

In conclusion, in this study I briefly explored the concept of nominalization and its effects on discourse, using Fairclough’s CDA framework and Oppenheimer’s quotes from the film as examples. It has shown how nominalization can be used to construct or represent reality in a certain way, and how it can be a tool for critical discourse analysis, which examines how language shapes and reflects social relations, ideologies, and power structures. It has also demonstrated how nominalization can be identified and interpreted at different levels of analysis, such as description, interpretation, and explanation.

References

- *Language and Power* (1989)
- *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (1995)
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- *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (2003)
- **75+ Most Chilling Oppenheimer Movie Quotes** (mamasgeeky.com)