

Intertextuality and recontextualization in music: an analysis of songs

*Intertextualidade e recontextualização na música:
uma análise em canções*

Fabielle Rocha Cruz

University of Calgary

fabielle.rochacruz@ucalgary.ca

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6364-8603>

ABSTRACT

Critical Discourse Analysis is an area in constant development, especially with the relevance of multimodal texts, which are becoming increasingly frequent due to the presence of technology. Considering the significance of CDA in applied linguistics and other areas, this article aims to present the concepts of intertextuality and recontextualization through the lens of music, highlighting how many texts draw from and build upon existing works. With the conceptualization of these two essential elements in the area of Critical Discourse Analysis, as well as the understanding of multimodality as texts that use different modes to convey their meanings, the article presents the analysis of excerpts from three songs to demonstrate the applicability in a context diverse and non-academic, as CDA is commonly attributed to research. The results indicate that some songs create meaning by merging lyrics with literary, historical, cultural, and journalistic references inserted into the lyrics through recontextualization and intertextuality.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; Multimodality; Lyrics analysis.

RESUMO

A Análise Crítica do Discurso é uma área em constante desenvolvimento, sobretudo com a relevância dos textos multimodais, que se tornam cada vez mais frequentes por conta da presença da tecnologia. Levando em consideração a relevância da ACD, não somente na área de linguística aplicada, mas em outras áreas, o presente artigo busca apresentar os conceitos de intertextualidade e recontextualização com base no uso de música, tendo em vista que muitos textos são fundamentados por outros textos. A partir da conceitualização destes dois elementos importantes na área de Análise Crítica do Discurso, bem como do entendimento de multimodalidade como textos que usam diferentes modos para convergirem seus significados, o artigo apresenta a análise de trecho de três músicas para demonstrar a aplicabilidade em um contexto diversificado e não acadêmico, uma vez que a ACD é comumente atribuída à pesquisa. Os resultados indicam que algumas músicas criam sentido e significados por meio da construção de letras com referências literárias,

históricas, culturais e jornalísticas, que são inseridas nas letras por meio de recontextualização e intertextualidade.

Palavras-chave: Linguística Aplicada; Análise Crítica do Discurso; Multimodalidade; Análise de letra.

INTRODUCTION

Among the various fields in applied linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been an area in constant development, study, and research. Names like Fairclough, Wodak, and Gee have impacted and continue to change the area, primarily due to the increasing importance of understanding what is said and implied within a technological world in which texts, images, and sounds collide.

The idea of multimodal texts—texts composed of different means and forms of expression—implies new forms of communication and the use of resources to transmit and implement the message. In music, for example, the message or meaning lies in the collaboration of melody, lyrics, and even other resources (such as music videos or lyrics videos).

For example, many songs are inspired by (as well as they inspire) films, folklore, comics, and books. Regardless of whether they are fictional inspirations, the main message is given through intertextuality – references from other texts – and recontextualization – the use of one or more themes in another context. That is, the meaning and intention of the singer or band reside in the listener's understanding and the inferences they must make.

Thus, through the lenses of Critical Discourse Analysis, this article proposes to analyze three songs and the use of recontextualization and intertextuality resources, also from CDA, to achieve the desired meaning. As it is an analysis of song lyrics, this article uses qualitative research methods, applying CDA to exemplify the concepts.

The first section will present the methodology and literature that supported this article, conceptualizing intertextuality and recontextualization, which will be essential for the analysis.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Within the broad area of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), several authors researched the development and application of this study in different contexts. One of these names within the CDA is Ruth Wodak, a researcher who works with critical discourse and is the author of books and articles on the topic.

Wodak (2021) argues that critical discourse studies began in 1990 and became more established at the beginning of the 21st century. Thus, the term “discourse” encompasses the idea of meaning-making, considering communicative resources used in different spaces. Studying it does not only imply research in sociology or linguistics, as is commonly used, but it has implications that can be analyzed in diverse contexts.

On the other hand, another name in the area is James Paul Gee, who, like Wodak, proposes to study and publish CDA focusing on discourse and Discourse. For the author (2011), the difference is that discourse (with a lower-case D) relates to texts, whether written or not. Discourse, with a capital letter, is based on communication, what is beyond the text, and understanding that language is just a part of the whole.

Considering the propositions of the two authors, although they present significant distinctions regarding the application of CDA and specific terminology for some concepts, their studies have many intersections. For example, the idea of what Gee (2011, p. 39) calls “situated meaning” is shared by Wodak (2021) regarding the understanding of those who read or hear concerning what is known. In other words, both authors observe that values, beliefs, and experiences affect the understanding of the text.

According to Gee (2011, p. 39),

when speakers speak, they assume that listeners share enough knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences with them to situate their words' meanings. Listeners situate the meanings of words by consulting what the speaker has said, the context in which it has been said, and (if they actually have it) the wealth of shared background the speaker assumes they have.

Similarly, Wodak (2021, p. 40) suggests that it is essential “to focus on the latent meanings produced through pragmatic devices, such as implicatures, hidden causalities, presuppositions, insinuations, and certain syntactic embeddings.” Contrasting the two authors, it is inferred that the context of production is essential for understanding the

Discourse and the appropriate context for its reception. If the author and the reader or listener do not share the message space, it is possible that some meanings will not be understood.

Another connection between Gee's and Wodak's studies is the idea that words are not used solely based on their definitions in the dictionary. Both authors seem to agree that word choice is made based on other references, such as models, contexts, and stories, so that "the way the world should be" (Gee, 2011, p. 41) defines what is acceptable or "normal".

For Gee (2011), these are called "figured worlds", and, in Wodak's view (2021), they are *topoi*. Although *topoi* are related to the idea of "content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion or the central claim" (Wodak, 2021, p. 43), it is observed that there is a reference to the space that comprises the author and the reader.

Within CDA, one way to establish meaning in content is through the use of different resources, which allow the author and reader, for example, to share meanings and understandings. Two of these resources are intertextuality and recontextualization.

INTERTEXTUALITY, RECONTEXTUALIZATION, AND MULTIMODALITY

Ruth Wodak, in her work with the CDA, proposes that several factors impact the process of critical discourse studies. Among them, the author (2021) highlights intertextuality and recontextualization to create a connection between the text and the world based on knowledge. According to Wodak (2021, p. 43),

'Intertextuality' refers to the linkage of all texts to other texts, both in the past and in the present. Such links can be established in different ways: through continued reference to a topic or to its main actors; through reference to the same events as the other texts or through the reappearance of a text's main arguments in another text. The latter process is also labeled 'recontextualization'.

This excerpt from the author reflects on how texts connect with other texts, building knowledge and inferences in Discourses, which results in intertextuality.

Likewise, recontextualization constantly uses these texts (or topics), transposing them to different contexts and creating new knowledge through their reuse.

Within this perspective, Greenall and Løfaldli (2019, p. 244) explain recontextualization as “the implication that something is being carried over from the old context to the new”. Therefore, it is possible to infer that the recontextualization process comprises the movement of a theme or work, for example, from one location to another, given that the location can be physical or symbolic, such as a text or an image in virtual spaces.

Within CDA, recontextualization allows for the analysis and verification of the coexisting contexts while enabling inferences and the creation of new knowledge within the delimitation. This idea indicates that, in CDA, recontextualization allows the reflection that “the study of meaning shifts of discourse when the original meaning travels from one context to another” (Wu *et al.*, 2016, p. 442) is necessary to understand the meaning.

Focusing on what is presented by Maclean *et al.* (2018, p. 1734), intertextuality “is an interdisciplinary term borrowed from modern linguistics and literary theory that acknowledges the fundamental interdependence of texts, highlighting that texts draw their substantial meaning from previous texts”.

For Wu *et al.* (2016, p. 442), “recontextualization and transformation can be considered two important processes involved in the productive mechanism of intertextuality”. In other words, to be able to identify intertextuality, recontextualization must be applied equally. Recontextualization is a step within intertextuality so that the context of use, as previously presented by Gee (2011) and Wodak (2021), determines the understanding and inference that must be made by the reader or, in this case, the listener.

Maclean *et al.* (2018) point out that intertextuality comprises several ways texts appropriate and recontextualize other works. Considering this argument, it is fair to agree with the authors when they mention that “texts derive much of their sense from their precursors, which authors recontextualize to create something similar yet different, attentive to new situations” (Maclean *et al.*, 2018, p. 1734).

Considering these aspects, one final concept that is important to mention is the idea of multimodality. Multimodality is essential within this context because once recontextualization presupposes the transposition of one context to another, and

intertextuality refers to texts in different media, the presence of various texts is observed, whether they are verbal, nonverbal, imagery, audio, or other modes.

Thus, multimodality or multimodal texts encompass texts produced by combining different texts. For example, films construct meaning using appropriate visual and verbal elements, such as lines, settings, camera framing, and time. A multimodal text can contain two or more different modes.

As Xing and Feng (2023, p. 615) indicate, “theories of intertextuality (and interdiscursivity) were developed for analyzing linguistic discourse, but recent studies have applied the notions to multimodal discourse”. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that there is space within the CDA for discussing and analyzing various materials in addition to interviews, conversations, and political texts.

The following section will present the analysis based on the authors' postulations about intertextuality and recontextualization, using the lyrics or part of the lyrics of three songs that use other fictional and non-fiction texts to produce meaning.

APPLYING CDA: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

As music is a form of expression and communication like other modes, intertextuality and recontextualization are also present. According to Matson (2016), intertextuality within music is not a new or rare theme, mainly because it is quite common for one song to reference another. For the author, for example, the origin of many progressive rock songs released between 1960 and 1980 is classical music, and “the source is Johann Sebastian Bach, whose music is one of the major nexus points for musical intertextuality in many styles” (Matson, 2016, p. 4).

However, as presented in the previous section of this article, intertextuality uses recontextualization to move meaning from one space to another. This means that, as this article aims to present, intertextuality does not need to be restricted only to music; it can also resort to other modes (multimodality) for meaning-making.

Before the analysis, it is essential to emphasize that not all songs have references based on recontextualization and intertextuality, considering that some are written based on the singer's experience, which listeners do not share. It is believed that, in a way, many

songs are written following what is established by cultural references, which can vary according to the musical genre and the lyricist's own choice.

With this in mind, three songs will be presented and analyzed, focusing on how the lyrics were constructed from intertextuality and recontextualization. The songs chosen were “We Didn't Start the Fire,” “Call Me Little Sunshine,” and “Run to the Hills” to explore intertextuality with literary, historical, cultural, and journalistic productions.

WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE: HEADLINES AND NEWS PIECES

Initially released in 1989 by the singer and songwriter Billy Joel, with 118 references to political, scientific, and cultural events, this song exemplifies how music uses intertextuality to build situated meanings (Gee, 2011) according to the singer's intention. In this case, the songwriter chose to mention, throughout the lyrics, events ranging from 1948 to 1989, the year the song was released. The events cited influenced the world as it was back then and how every single event shaped people's lives somehow.

The first verse, for example, reads “Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnnie Ray, South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio” (Joel, 1989). Some names and places indicated in this excerpt refer to the political context of the time – Harry Truman was the 33rd president of the United States, and Red China marks Mao Zedong's rise to power, as well as communism. Others, such as Joe DiMaggio and South Pacific, are cultural examples. In 1949, Joe DiMaggio became the first baseball player to sign a \$100,000 contract, while South Pacific opened on Broadway in the same year, based on a 1947 Pulitzer Prize-winning book of the same name.

In this first excerpt and the verses in the song, it is possible to observe what Gee (2011) calls “situated meaning”. If a person has heard the term but is not familiar with the context, they will not recover the meaning presented in the song's lyrics. However, those who know the people or have read/heard about the references can reach conclusions based on their knowledge.

A possible example is the choice to use Joe DiMaggio's name in this excerpt, considering that Joel wrote the song in chronological order, starting in 1949. It is impossible to be sure without talking to the lyrics' author. Still, many references are possible about its inclusion – an application of intertextuality, in which the reference

comes from other texts. A tabloid reader might interpret that DiMaggio's inclusion was due to his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, the famous actress. At the same time, sports fans would claim the reference is due to his unique contract in baseball history.

If the lyrics of “We didn't start the fire” were not enough to draw several conclusions based on the resources of intertextuality and recontextualization, several versions were released. In this article, Fall Out Boy's interpretation stands out. The American band re-released the song with references to events from 1989 to 2023.

The update made by the band is what Gee (2011) indicates as a “figured world”. According to the researcher (2011, p. 36), “Figured worlds are narratives and images different social and cultural groups of people use to make sense of the world. They function as simplified models of how things work when they are ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ from the perspective of a particular social and cultural group.” In other words, the figured world is particular to a group or community, and, considering that the band Fall Out Boy started in 2001, its most current version of the song is related to the context of its listeners, for example.

While Joel's original song began with “Harry Truman, Doris Day”, the reimaged lyrics from the 2023 version featured the following opening line: “Captain Planet, Arab Spring, L.A. riots, Rodney King.” Again, there is the use of recontextualization and intertextuality since the words chosen are explicit references to recent events, taken from the journalistic context, for example, and inserted into the song. In the same way as in the first version of the song, the words and names chosen are directly related to the “situated meaning” that Gee (2011) presents, mainly because it is necessary to have lived or known it to make the required inference and understand why a particular event was mentioned in the lyrics.

Two excerpts from the Fall Out Boy's version can be used as examples. The first is “More war in Afghanistan”, in the verse right after the first chorus. This excerpt refers to the War in Afghanistan, a conflict between 2001 and 2021, and the use of the word “more” emphasizes a long and repetitive war, which is often brought up again on the international scene.

The second example is “Prince and The Queen die”, a section that appears in the last verse of the song and which plays with the words “prince” and “queen” as royalty figures but also depends on the inference of the listener or reader to understand that they

are Prince, the singer who passed away in 2016, and Queen Elizabeth II, regent of the United Kingdom who passed away in 2022.

This song (and its versions) is an excellent example of applying intertextuality and recontextualization resources within music as used in Critical Discourse Analysis. Through the lens of CDA, it is observed that these lyrics have potential for exploration based on the premises of Gee (2011) and Wodak (2021).

CALL ME LITTLE SUNSHINE: DRAWING REFERENCES FROM LITERATURE

While the song “We Didn't Start the Fire” brings inferences and situated meanings of politics and culture, which often arrive through journalistic broadcasting, other pieces use varied resources to be elaborated, as is the case of “Call Me Little Sunshine”, by the Swedish band Ghost.

In this song, the narrator is Mephistopheles, a demon famous in German folklore and known mainly in the legend of “Faust”. According to legend, Faust, a scholar, sought satisfaction in all areas of his life, although he was already successful academically (Von Goethe, 2014). Thus, he decides to make a deal with the devil’s representative, Mephistopheles, which guarantees access to knowledge and the world’s pleasures.

The work is already a recontextualization of many myths and religious narratives, which opposes human and divine knowledge and divine knowledge, as presented in Goethe’s creation of the same name. However, the song, narrated by Mephistopheles himself, draws on folklore to ensure that it sounds like an appeal to Faust, a role that falls to the song’s listener.

According to legend, Mephistopheles would serve Faust for several years until his death, when his soul would be handed over. The song portrays this intention in several parts, such as “You will never walk alone, you can always reach me” and “Call me when you feel all alone.” Here, the idea is that loneliness can be resolved by Mephistopheles's actions and subservient company until the end of Faust’s life.

Another verse, in the demon's voice, indicates “Fall out in the cold starlight, I can save you if you do”. Thinking analytically about this excerpt through recontextualization and intertextuality, even from Von Goethe’s (2014) work and the original folklore, there

is a reference to the need to be saved from the life of sadness and dissatisfaction that Faust lived with only academic knowledge and yearning for more.

Interestingly, the folklore is harsh at this point, and Faust is punished for his choices, losing his mistress forever. However, in Goethe's work, Faust longs for more than just eating and drinking, and even though he has made a deal with Mephistopheles and given up his soul, he is saved by God.

These counterpoints are not presented in the song. However, for those who know these references – whether from traditional folklore or Von Goethe's (2014) version – the song contains excerpts that can be observed in both contexts. Another point is the recontextualization used to give voice to the demon, who sings and narrates Ghost's song to win Faust, as well as the intertextuality between folklore and Goethe's play, which helps to infer the lyrics' content.

RUN TO THE HILLS: HISTORICAL REFERENCES

The last song to be used for this analysis is “Run to the Hills”, written by the English band Iron Maiden. The song, released in 1982, presents references consistent with the colonization of North America from the perspective of an indigenous person, a member of one of Canada's First Nations, and a soldier who participated in wars against members of native communities.

This initial reference is necessary to understand the song's lyrics properly. Through recontextualization and intertextuality, Steve Harris, the song's composer and bassist for the band, created a narrative that describes both sides of the same event, focusing on comparing and contrasting the events.

When analyzing the initial section of the song, it is possible to observe the perspective of an indigenous person: “White man came across the sea / He brought us pain and misery / He killed our tribes, he killed our creed / He took our game for his own need” (Iron Maiden, 1982). There is the identification of the white man who came from the other side of the ocean, decimating the indigenous populations in Newfoundland and taking advantage of the resources.

To understand the song's theme, the listener must know the history of the colonization of the Americas, which was taken over by Europeans who, in turn,

exterminated the original owners of the land. However, this excerpt does not make references or help identify which community it refers to, which can be inferred from the quote, “But many came, too much for Cree.”

With historical and geographical knowledge, it is possible to infer that the Cree are a people originally from the lands of Canada, considered one of the largest communities. This reference to the Cree people helps the listener understand the lyrics, showing them questioning whether they will be free one day. This reference, for example, is relatively current, considering that the Canadian Prime Minister defined the Recognition and Implementation of Indigenous Rights Framework in 2018 (Canada, 2018), although the song was written in 1982.

The construction of the second stanza is due to the change in perspective, now that of the soldier, as presented in the phrase “Chasing the redskins back to their holes.” In this sentence in question, for example, the expression “redskins” is a reference to the color of the indigenous people's skin, as well as an expression that became common in Western films in the United States. Another detail contained in this same expression is the counterpoint between redskins and white men, so this detail emphasizes the conflict between them.

In this same stanza, the phrase, “Fighting them at their own game” suggests another reflection. It is interesting to point out the duplicity in the meaning of the word “game”, which, in this context, indicates that the indigenous people's action was seen as just a game. However, at the beginning of the song, the word “game” is used in another sense, as the indigenous man indicates that his “game” was stolen for the benefit of the colonizer. Thus, the word “game”, due to the context, refers to the meat of animals such as geese, elk, deer, and moose, which are common in Canadian territories. Understanding this double meaning and the use of the same word in two contexts also depends on the “figured worlds”, as established by Gee (2011), as it is necessary to know this type of food to understand the choice of words.

Finally, the song's title and main chorus, “Run to the Hills” is also a reference. Although its origin is much discussed, many historians indicate that its first use was at the end of the 19th century, but there are no confirmations. The phrase became famous and is used at other times through recontextualization.

CONCLUSION

Critical Discourse Analysis is an essential tool for analyzing multimodal texts. A better understanding of the concepts of intertextuality and recontextualization can help understand and apply this area of linguistics in other contexts.

Thus, the article sought to conceptualize the two terms based on studies by Wodak (2021) and Gee (2011), with support from authors such as Maclean *et al.* (2018), Wu *et al.* (2016), and Xing and Feng (2023). It was observed that intertextuality is a resource in which a text makes an inference or is constructed from another. At the same time, recontextualization uses the transposition of a text from one space to another, physical or symbolic. Furthermore, according to the authors' postulations, recontextualization is part of intertextuality.

For the analysis, the three chosen songs presented intertextuality and recontextualization of other spaces, such as cultural, historical, journalistic, and literary knowledge. This indicates that to understand the lyrics of the chosen songs better, the listener must know how (and where) to draw conclusions about them.

Although intertextuality within music has existed for a long time, as the article demonstrates, it is not restricted only within the musical field. As the article demonstrated, other areas can influence its composition, such as a country's folklore—presented in the example of “Call Me Little Sunshine”—or notable news from a period—as in “We didn't start the fire”.

The article presented the possibility of applying CDA in other areas besides applied linguistics. It may serve as an example and inspiration for further research, which uses not only CDA but linguistics for other spaces as an excellent example of recontextualizing this knowledge.

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Fabielle Rocha Cruz: Graduada em Letras Português e Inglês pela PUC-PR, onde foi bolsista do Programa de Iniciação Científica da CAPES e pesquisou o uso de video-games na aquisição de segunda língua. Durante os anos de graduação, foi representante brasileira no programa Summer Ambassador da Kake-Junsei Educational Insitute no Japão, em 2012, e aluna do Canadian English Experience da Queen's University, no Canadá, em 2014. Em 2018, concluiu a pós-graduação em Educação Bilíngue, onde pesquisou sobre Letramento Digital e video-games em contextos interdisciplinares. No período de 2018 à 2019, foi bolsista do Departamento de Estado dos Estados Unidos e atuou como professora assistente de língua portuguesa na University of Notre Dame. Atualmente, é mestranda em educação da Universidade Federal do Paraná.