

Textual Analysis of Conversation Evidence in the Burning Sun Case: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Fairclough's Model

Analisis Tekstual Bukti Percakapan dalam Kasus *Burning Sun*:
Analisis Wacana Kritis Model Fairclough

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Abstract

The Burning Sun scandal provides an important opportunity to study the use of language in criminal behavior and its influence on power structures in illegal networks. This research aims to answer the questions: How is language used in conversations related to this scandal to create and sustain criminal behavior? Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on Norman Fairclough's framework, this study analyzed conversations related to the case. Conversational evidence was taken from several trusted Korean news portals and categorized by topics such as prostitution, drug use, gambling, and illegal content dissemination. The analysis showed that the criminal group used language that reflected a well-coordinated structure, where various roles were clearly laid out, despite the rigid communication patterns. The use of imperative and interrogative sentences indicates careful planning and efficient interaction. In addition, this study reveals how social expectations and cultural prejudices are utilized, especially in the exploitation of women. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of text analysis in forensic investigations, providing insights into how language reflects criminal activity and power dynamics. The findings support combining linguistic methods with legal procedures to uncover hidden aspects of criminal organizations and improve the efficiency of law enforcement.

Keywords: *Burning Sun*, CDA, textual analysis, Norman Fairclough.

Abstrak

Skandal Burning Sun memberikan peluang penting untuk mempelajari penggunaan bahasa dalam perilaku kriminal serta pengaruhnya terhadap struktur kekuasaan dalam jaringan ilegal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjawab pertanyaan: Bagaimana bahasa digunakan dalam percakapan terkait skandal ini untuk menciptakan dan mempertahankan perilaku kriminal? Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana kritis (CDA) berdasarkan kerangka Norman Fairclough, penelitian ini menganalisis percakapan terkait kasus tersebut. Bukti percakapan diambil dari beberapa portal berita Korea terpercaya dan dikategorikan berdasarkan topik seperti prostitusi, penggunaan narkoba, perjudian, dan penyebaran konten ilegal. Analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa kelompok kriminal menggunakan bahasa yang mencerminkan struktur terkoordinasi dengan baik, di mana berbagai peran disusun secara jelas, meskipun pola komunikasinya kaku. Penggunaan kalimat imperatif dan interogatif menunjukkan perencanaan cermat dan interaksi efisien. Selain itu, penelitian ini mengungkap bagaimana ekspektasi sosial dan prasangka budaya dimanfaatkan, terutama dalam eksploitasi perempuan. Kesimpulannya, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya analisis teks dalam penyelidikan forensik, memberikan wawasan tentang bagaimana bahasa mencerminkan aktivitas kriminal dan dinamika kekuasaan. Temuan ini mendukung penggabungan metode linguistik dengan prosedur hukum untuk mengungkap aspek tersembunyi dari organisasi kriminal dan meningkatkan efisiensi penegakan hukum.

Kata kunci: *Burning Sun*, AWK, analisis tekstual, Norman Fairclough

INTRODUCTION

The Burning Sun scandal in early 2019 exposed a tangled web of illegal activities involving famous idols, influential business figures, and law enforcement authorities in South Korea. Centered on the Burning Sun nightclub in Seoul, the scandal highlighted unauthorized behaviors such as drug

dealing, seeking sexual services, sexual abuse, and the sharing of non-consensual explicit content. Reports from investigative journalism and legal proceedings revealed that the nightclub served as a hub for organized crime operations, with chat logs evidencing the coordination of illicit activities through coded language. The involvement of prominent K-pop idols in these crimes amplified public outrage, as their celebrity status shielded criminal operations while exploiting public trust.

The function of language in criminal contexts, particularly in cases like Burning Sun, has been illuminated by existing research. Fitzgerald and Kelly (2022) examine how discourse sustains power dynamics within organized crime networks, emphasizing the role of language in upholding criminal hierarchies. While their research provides valuable insights, it lacks detailed case studies like Burning Sun, which highlight the nuances of language in specific criminal scenarios. Similarly, Kusno (2018) focuses on law enforcement terminology in corruption cases, revealing how legal language shapes public perception but falls short of addressing the informal and covert linguistic strategies seen in illicit chat communication. Miller and Scharff (2020) explore linguistic tactics in criminal contracts but concentrate on bargaining methods, missing broader aspects like planning or concealment. Gibson and O'Halloran (2021) investigate digital discourses in child exploitation networks, offering insights into cybercrime but with limited relevance to other types of illegal activities. This study builds on these works by analyzing chat evidence from the Burning Sun case, offering a unique perspective on how language aids in organizing, concealing, and perpetuating criminal activities. Through the examination of text patterns, it underscores the critical role of language in facilitating crime within a specific cultural and organizational context.

The main focus of this study is to examine how language influences criminal behaviors and power dynamics within illegal networks. The use of language plays a significant role in coordinating and facilitating illegal activities. Discourse is an area where power relations are both established and disputed (Fairclough 1992). Discourse also constitutes social activities. The Burning Sun case chat evidence provided information about the strategies used by the people involved. This research analyzes these chat evidence to understand better how language is used to start, continue, and hide criminal behavior. The conversations on the Burning Sun case that are included in the chat evidence involve the preparation for several illegal activities. The conversations provided an understanding of the power dynamics and hierarchical structures within the group members and the effectiveness of their coordination efforts. Language is a material form of ideology, and linguistics is essential to studying how power operates in modern societies (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). This underscores the necessity of integrating linguistic methodologies with legal and sociological perspectives to uncover the hidden mechanisms of criminal enterprises.

The comprehensive Burning Sun case is a compelling example of the importance of closely examining criminal actions. Common methods of investigation typically concentrate on tangible proof and the behavior of the offenders. However, examining the linguistic patterns in criminal activity may provide a deeper understanding of these organizations' goals, composition, and legal protocols. Van Dijk (2008) notes that discourse is a crucial element in enacting, reproducing, and legitimizing power and dominance. Moreover, the issue also encompasses the manipulation of societal standards and cultural prejudices, especially in the exploitation and commercialization of women. The chat records show how cultural perceptions about gender and authority are utilized to enable the trafficking and mistreatment of women, often disguised as entertainment and business dealings. This problem points out the connection between criminal activity and social issues that require thoughtful analysis considering linguistic and social factors. Language is a powerful means of establishing and challenging norms (Butler 1997).

The objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of chat evidence from the Burning Sun case using textual analysis. Therefore, the research purpose is to identify the ways that language is used to facilitate and conspiratorially mask criminality, respectively. Consequently, using chat records, the study intended to identify what kinds of crimes were being discussed, the role of language in changing community perceptions, and the effect of this communication on the acceptance of criminal activities in South Korea's entertainment industry.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Norman Fairclough, provides a framework for examining how language and discourse both shape and are shaped by social structures and power dynamics. This perspective underscores the ways in which language is instrumental in constructing, reinforcing, and challenging societal inequalities. Van Dijk (2009) emphasizes that CDA explores the role of discourse in the (re)production and resistance to dominance, where dominance refers to the exercise of social power by elites, institutions, or groups, often resulting in inequalities based on race,

class, gender, or ethnicity. This lens offers critical insights into how language within texts can reflect and perpetuate power dynamics.

Fairclough's CDA is notable for conceptualizing discourse as a social practice that interacts with and influences broader societal structures. His framework involves three interconnected levels of analysis: the microstructure of language use in texts, the mesostructure linking texts to wider discourses, and the macrostructure reflecting sociocultural practices (Fairclough, 2013). Through these levels, the intricate relationships between linguistic features, contextual operations, and societal settings are illuminated.

This approach is crucial for understanding the linguistic choices in the chat evidence from the Burning Sun case. These choices, spanning syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic aspects, reveal the subtle ways in which language shapes meaning and reinforces ideologies. Syntax, for example, can influence interpretation by obscuring responsibility through passive constructions, as noted by Gee (2014, p. 56). This highlights how linguistic structures can strategically shift attention away from agency, which is an important factor in contexts where accountability is contested.

Lexical choices, as Fairclough (2013) asserts, play a significant role in embedding ideological stances within language. Specific vocabulary choices can normalize certain viewpoints while marginalizing others, often through euphemisms or other rhetorical devices that diminish the perceived severity of actions. Such patterns are especially prominent in media and political discourse, where language is employed to shape public perception and obscure contentious realities.

Pragmatics further deepens this analysis by examining how context shapes meaning and interpretation. Wodak (2011) argues that uncovering the ideological underpinnings of texts requires attention to pragmatic elements, such as implied meanings, speech acts, and contextual assumptions. In the Burning Sun case, pragmatic analysis sheds light on how linguistic and grammatical choices reflect underlying assumptions, motivations, and agendas, which are often masked by strategic communication tactics.

The research on the Burning Sun case offers several unique contributions to the fields of discourse analysis, criminology, and forensic linguistics. The analysis offered here is unique in that it focuses on examining criminal activities, particularly the grammar, vocabulary, and practical parts of chat evidence. The use of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach in investigating cases involving celebrities and organized crime provides a unique perspective for communication analysis, reflects on crucial discoveries, reveals how language actively facilitates, organizes, and conceals criminal behaviors, reveals important details that are frequently disregarded in conventional criminology research. This study demonstrates how CDA can untangle the complexities of contemporary criminal conduct in the context of media and celebrity culture.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method, characterized by its focus on understanding the meanings and interpretations of participants' language use. This approach is particularly suited for examining chat evidence, as it allows for nuanced insights into the complexities of power dynamics and societal norms. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Norman Fairclough (2013) was chosen due to its robust framework for exploring the interplay between language and power, making it ideal for analyzing the chat evidence related to the Burning Sun case.

The primary data sources were secondary documents, specifically chat transcripts and screenshots disclosed by reputable Korean news outlets, such as Dispatch, SBS News, YTN News, and Sisa Journal. These outlets were selected based on their credibility and the relevance of their reporting on the Burning Sun case, which involved K-pop idols and other significant figures. Data collection followed Sugiyono's (2013) guidelines on qualitative data gathering, including identifying and validating credible sources. Each source was cross-referenced with multiple reports to ensure accuracy and reliability before inclusion in the analysis.

The gathered data was organized into thematic categories such as secret filming, drug use, and solicitation of prostitution. These categories were derived from both predetermined themes based on existing literature and emergent themes identified during the analysis process. Data analysis adhered to the Miles and Huberman (2014) flow model, encompassing five stages: identification (selecting relevant excerpts), data reduction (filtering out irrelevant information), data presentation (organizing data into structured formats), conclusion drawing (interpreting data to identify patterns), and verification (cross-checking findings with literature). Key findings were presented in structured formats,

such as excerpts and tables, to facilitate clear communication of the linguistic patterns and power dynamics identified in the chats.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, which reveal how language used in the chats related to the Burning Sun case reflects normalization of criminal behavior, the influence of group dynamics, desensitization to violence, normalization of sexual violence, casual perception of drug use, and avoidance of accountability. Using Norman Fairclough's CDA framework, these findings are interpreted through linguistic features (vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure) and social theory, emphasizing power dynamics and societal norms.

a. Normalization of Criminal Behavior

The chats reveal a tendency to normalize criminal behavior through linguistic choices, such as informal vocabulary, laughter markers, and slang. For example, Jung Joon Young's suggestion to commit rape followed by "kekekekeke" minimizes the gravity of the act by framing it humorously. The metaphorical comparison, "우리 이거 영화야" ("It's like we're in the movie"), trivializes their actions by associating them with fiction rather than reality. Fairclough's concept of ideational meaning highlights how these linguistic patterns obscure the seriousness of the crimes and foster societal acceptance of illegality within specific social groups.

Socially, these interactions reflect the hegemonic discourse of a privileged group using language to normalize their behavior and justify their actions, maintaining a power dynamic that downplays accountability.

b. Influence of Group Dynamics and Peer Pressure

The chats demonstrate how group dynamics and peer pressure shape participants' attitudes and actions. Lexical choices such as "그러네" ("That's right") and repetitive laughter markers (e.g., "ㅋㅋㅋ") function as linguistic tools to reinforce mutual agreement. This aligns with Fairclough's notion of discursive practices, where repeated language patterns in social interactions create a shared understanding that legitimizes criminal activities.

From a social theory perspective, the reinforcement of group norms reflects social capital, wherein participants feel validated and emboldened by their collective behavior, reducing individual accountability. These group dynamics perpetuate a cycle of normalization and participation in illegal acts.

c. Desensitization to Violence and Lack of Empathy

Participants exhibit a lack of empathy and desensitization to violence, evident in their casual language and metaphoric expressions, such as "살인만 안했지" ("We only have not committed murder"). The grammatical structure downplays the severity of their actions, implying that lesser crimes are acceptable. This linguistic strategy reflects Fairclough's relational meaning, where the choice of words and tone shapes interpersonal relationships and societal attitudes.

Socially, this desensitization mirrors a broader cultural issue where violence is trivialized, perpetuating an environment of indifference toward victims. The participants' language reflects their position of privilege, where empathy is replaced by a utilitarian view of consequences.

d. Desensitization to Sexual Violence

The chats also highlight a linguistic pattern of trivializing sexual violence. Phrases like "강아 했네 ㅋㅋ" ("You rape her, lol") combine humor with explicit acts, further desensitizing the participants to the gravity of their actions. Such linguistic choices align with Fairclough's analysis of textual practices, where language is used to mitigate the perceived severity of an act.

From a social perspective, this behavior reflects patriarchal dominance, where language is employed to normalize and justify gender-based violence. The absence of victim-centric discourse reinforces the social marginalization of survivors.

e. Perception of Drug Use as Normal

The casual tone used to discuss drug use, such as “수면제 먹이고 XXX 하다가” (“Gave them sleeping pills and did XXX”), reflects a normalization of illegal substance use. Linguistically, this phrase employs ambiguity (“XXX”) to obscure the specifics of the crime while maintaining a casual tone, a tactic Fairclough identifies as creating textual opacity to avoid direct accountability.

Socially, this normalization signifies a disregard for legal norms and public health implications, embedding criminal activities into the group’s routine.

f. Avoidance of Accountability

Avoidance of accountability is evident in the participants’ use of euphemisms, humor, and metaphors. For instance, statements like “구속 감 xx 많아” (“We have done many things that can get us imprisoned”) reflect linguistic detachment, where humor masks responsibility. This aligns with Fairclough’s concept of intertextuality, where language draws from broader cultural narratives to diminish personal culpability.

Potential Crimes

The chat evidence provides explicit evidence of potential criminal activities that warrant serious consideration and further investigation: It is based on the chat records that there is affirmative evidence of potential criminal activities that cannot be dismissed out rightly or ignored but called for more investigations.

a. Prostitution Arrangements

Directives like “창녀들 2명 오면... 호텔방까지” (“When the two prostitutes come, lead them to the hotel room”) use imperative structures to emphasize command and control, reflecting a hierarchical relationship. Socially, these statements indicate the commodification of women, reinforcing systemic gender inequality.

b. Drug Use and Distribution

Statements like “수면제 먹이고 XXX” reflect the use of ambiguous language to obscure culpability. Linguistically, this is an example of modality, where the certainty of actions is downplayed. Socially, it highlights how language is used to facilitate and conceal illegal drug activities.

c. Sexual Violence and Assault

Comments such as “강어 했네ㅋㅋ” trivialize rape, with laughter serving as a linguistic marker of desensitization. Socially, this reflects a culture of impunity, where gender-based violence is normalized within certain social circles.

d. Voyeurism and Distribution of Illicit Content

Phrases like “기절이니까 플래시 켜고 찍은 거지” (“She fainted, so I can take the video using flash”) illustrate how participants justify voyeuristic acts. Linguistically, the use of causal conjunctions (“because”) rationalizes their actions. Socially, this behavior underscores the erosion of privacy rights.

e. Police Bribery

Statements like “입 막아줬더니” (“Bribed them to keep quiet”) illustrate how language is used to discuss corruption openly. Socially, this reflects systemic issues of power abuse and a culture of bribery within law enforcement.

2. Discussion

The chat evidence in the Burning Sun case highlights how language serves to naturalize and minimize illegality, exacerbating the normalization of violence and a culture of impunity. This phenomenon is observed in the way group members trivialize serious crimes, turning them into ordinary and even humorous occurrences. This casual treatment of illegal acts is a form of cultural violence, as

described by Galtung (1990), where language perpetuates harmful ideologies by justifying deviant behaviors. The group's use of humor and euphemisms effectively downplays the severity of actions such as rape, drug use, and bribery, which aligns with the findings of Presser (2013) on the use of humor in offender narratives to reduce the seriousness of criminal behavior. Through mutual affirmation and group dynamics, the members create a shared environment in which criminal activities are normalized. This supports Cohen's (2001) theory of "states of denial," where collective rationalizations make illegal actions appear as acceptable, even inconsequential.

A particularly concerning aspect of the case is the group's desensitization to sexual violence, which is presented in a trivialized manner, as evidenced by the casual conversations about drugging and raping women. This issue parallels Kitzinger's (1995) research, which explores how societal and media narratives often minimize the gravity of sexual violence. By laughing off rape and objectifying women, the Burning Sun group perpetuates harmful gender norms and the normalization of sexual violence. This trend is further explored in Lazar's (2005) feminist critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes how language reinforces patriarchal structures. The group's behavior reflects a broader societal issue that necessitates legal reforms and a rethinking of gender relations.

Moreover, the normalization of drug use within the group signals a deeper cultural acceptance of illegal activities. This casual approach to drugs mirrors Reinerman and Levine's (1997) findings on how cultural narratives downplay the risks and legal consequences of substance abuse. In this case, the group's discussions about drugging victims are indicative of a lack of awareness or concern for both legal repercussions and health impacts. Sykes and Matza's (1957) concept of techniques of neutralization is also relevant, as the group's use of euphemisms and humor allows them to evade accountability, further fostering a culture of impunity.

The severity of criminal actions within the group is exemplified by the range of offenses discussed in the chat records: prostitution, drug use and distribution, sexual violence, voyeurism, and bribery. These activities align with Levi's (2008) work on organized crime, which emphasizes how criminal networks often engage in multiple, interconnected illegal activities. The interconnectedness of these crimes in the Burning Sun case highlights the need for comprehensive legal and societal measures to address such systemic issues.

By comparing the findings of this research with existing literature, it becomes clear that this study contributes a unique perspective on the role of language in perpetuating criminal behavior. While existing studies have explored themes of cultural violence and desensitization, this research adds value by focusing on how these issues manifest in digital communication. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this study connects linguistic patterns with broader social structures, demonstrating the role of discourse in reinforcing power dynamics and ideologies. This research underscores the importance of multidisciplinary approaches that combine linguistics, criminology, and sociology to address the normalization of crime in digital spaces. Such approaches can inform the development of more effective legal and social interventions, helping to challenge harmful discourses and promote accountability.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant scandals that emerged at the beginning of 2019 was the Burning Sun, which unveiled various criminal operations involving K-pop singers, businesses, and police officers. This research focused on the role that language plays in the perpetration and cover-up of unlawful acts within these networks, employing both critical discourse analysis and linguistic analysis.

The findings revealed that respondents frequently used informal and humorous language to describe serious crimes such as drug trafficking, drug use, and rape. This linguistic choice was largely fueled by peer pressure, as members supported one another in committing crimes, thereby normalizing deviant behavior. The data also highlighted a troubling dehumanization of victims and a pervasive lack of empathy, indicating serious cultural issues within the group.

Thus, the inferences drawn from the Burning Sun chat evidence demonstrate that language is instrumental in shaping the character and persistence of criminal activity within organized crime networks. This study contributes to our understanding of the attitudes and power dynamics inherent in communication, as well as the complex relationship between criminality, social norms, and discourse. Moving forward, future research could explore the impact of media representation on public perceptions of such scandals, as well as how language evolves in response to shifting societal attitudes towards crime. By examining these aspects, we can further unravel the intricate connections between language, culture, and criminality.

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