1 Introduction

This book has been written as an introduction, to explain and demonstrate some of the possibilities which discourse analysis offers for contemporary social research. It is for novices as well as experienced researchers in the social sciences and related disciplines who want to read about other people's discourse analytic research and perhaps conduct their own similar projects. The two major themes of the book are as follows: discourse analysis does not refer to a single approach or method, and its varied forms cannot be distinguished without an understanding of their premises. The aim is therefore to help readers understand the connections between the theoretical assumptions which a discourse researcher makes about the social world, the research topic or problem being investigated, the data chosen for analysis and the aspects of the data which are studied. Any research project represents a unique combination of these features, and indeed part of the attraction of discourse analysis is the wide range of possibilities which it encompasses.

Chapter 1 develops an initial definition of discourse analysis and then outlines the content of the subsequent chapters, with some suggestions for using the book effectively as a practical guide, and building on its content.

What is discourse analysis?

This question is difficult to answer succinctly because the term 'discourse analysis' refers to a range of approaches in several disciplines and theoretical traditions. Discourse analysts in sociolinguistics, sociology and social psychology, to mention just a few possibilities, are likely to differ in the sources they refer to, and also, to some extent, in the problems and research questions which they set out to investigate. This variety is potentially confusing, but also positive in that it expands the possibilities for new researchers and projects. This book provides an overview of discourse analytic research as a rich and interdisciplinary field which continues to

change and develop in new directions. Later chapters will discuss some of the theoretical background and examples of research studies. This section begins a discussion on the meaning of the term discourse analysis.

One starting point is that discourse analysis usually refers to a research approach in which language material, such as talk or written texts, and sometimes other material altogether, is examined as evidence of phenomena *beyond the individual person*. To understand this, imagine looking at some old letters, written several decades or even centuries ago. Each letter will of course be interesting for what it conveys about the writer's situation, opinions and feelings. However, it can also provide more general evidence of society at that earlier time. For instance, passing references may suggest what is taken for granted, including the priorities and values shared by members of society. Some of the words used may even be offensive to a contemporary reader, for instance, because they are linked to assumptions about class or gender or race which have since been questioned. In addition, some of the writing may seem 'old-fashioned' in its style and level of formality because there have been changes in the directness with which people express opinions or state disagreements. If letters between both parties to the correspondence have survived, they will provide further insights into how people communicated at that time, including the conventions which operate in particular relationships, business or personal. In short, each letter, however private its original purpose, is potentially of interest as evidence of social phenomena, in a way that the writer could not have anticipated. This is the level of interpretation employed by a discourse analyst.

To explain the variety of discourse analytic research, it is useful to distinguish two lines of academic work. They do not encompass all the variations in discourse analysis and in practice, they tend to converge particularly around the study of difference and inequality and the workings of power in society, as some of the studies discussed later in the book will indicate. Nonetheless, the distinction is helpful as a starting point.

The focus of the first line of academic work is the nature of language. Traditionally, linguistics, or 'linguistics proper', can be defined narrowly as 'the study of "grammar" in a broad sense: the sound systems of language ("phonology"), the grammatical structure of words ("morphology") and of sentences ("syntax") and more formal aspects of meaning ("semantics")' (Fairclough, 2001a, p. 5). However, sociolinguists and many other academics consider language as inseparable from its social contexts. Among many

other aspects of language use, they study differences in how people speak (and write) which are linked to class and other social categories, or to a particular activity, situation, role and purpose. Summarized somewhat crudely, this line of writing and research can therefore be said to have extended from the concerns of 'linguistics proper' to explore features of language linked, again, to social phenomena. Discourse analytic research in this line includes investigations of the details of how language varies across contexts and can mark social difference, and how children acquire competence in language use and, again, how that competence is linked to identity and social difference.

The second academic line can be said to have originated in the study of society and people as social beings, especially in sociology and social psychology, and then developed to incorporate a focus on language. In other words, the move has been in the opposite direction, from social phenomena to language. For example, discourse researchers have analysed public and private language use as a way of accessing the collective, though not necessarily coherent, 'world view' of a society. Some aspects would be the ways in which people and their activities are categorized, valued and located in relationships of dominance and subservience. Language use may also be analysed as one activity or practice (some would say, the most important practice) which people engage in as part of their ongoing social lives and relationships. Through the analysis of language and language use, the researcher therefore builds up a picture of society and how it functions.

The variety in discourse analytic research is also partly given by the kinds of data used by researchers. Discourse analysts can study other forms of representation from language, such as pictures and film, or consider language use alongside other practices, but most work with some kind of language data (the focus of this book). Some researchers investigate historical material, like the old letters already mentioned, but most take as their data contemporary material related to language and communication. As already noted, this is analysed following the principle that language provides evidence of social phenomena. For example talk, perhaps from focus groups or people participating in interviews, will be of interest not (just) as straightforward reporting, like witness statements. (Many analysts will also avoid interpreting it as a direct report of the speaker's inner thought processes and feelings.) Instead, the analysis may focus on how the interaction of speakers is shaped and constrained by its social contexts, from the

immediate conversational interaction to the larger situation of the place, time, state of the nation and so on. The analysis may explore the styles of speaking, and the 'to and fro' of the talk. It may consider the details of how the talk is constructed, including grammatically, and the implications of the choice of one possible word or structure over an alternative. It may consider the functions of the talk, or examine the assumptions which apparently underlie what is said. Words, expressions and arguments may be analysed as social and cultural resources associated with certain social groups and contexts, recycled and modified by individual language users in particular instances of communication. The analysis may explore more dramatic aspects of the talk, for instance, when someone speaks 'as' a certain character or role (a concerned parent, an authoritative expert) or appears to repeat a well-rehearsed anecdote, or address an audience beyond the immediate situation. Some of these foci are associated with particular named approaches to discourse analysis, but in many or even the majority of studies, the features to be studied will be decided according to the priorities of the research, drawing on the wide range of possibilities given by previous published work.

The remainder of this book looks more closely at some of these possibilities. To assist the exploration, it will be useful to give an initial answer to the question 'What is discourse analysis?' as follows: *Discourse analysis is the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and social life.* Later chapters of the book return to this definition and extend it.

The chapters

Chapter 2, 'Theories and common concerns', presents an overview of the main theoretical traditions relevant to discourse analysis in the social sciences. Although the focus is on key ideas, not individual theorists, the chapter does introduce some of the 'names' readers may encounter in their reading of other sources. It is intended as a starting point for further reading which researchers can build on as they follow their own interests and develop new projects.

Chapter 3, 'Four examples of discourse analysis', discusses four recent articles published in academic journals, each of which presents findings from a discourse analytic study. The examples have been chosen to demonstrate the variety of discourse analytic approaches and also of

the kinds of research problems they have been used to address. Together, the four articles refer to a range of subject fields, project designs and types of data. The first article, by Kirsten Bell, is based on a study conducted with people attending cancer support groups; the second, by Jovan Byford, on an investigation of political rhetoric; the third, by Elizabeth Stokoe, on a close analysis of talk from neighbours engaged in disputes; and the fourth, by Ruth Wodak, Winston Kwon and Ian Clarke, on a study of meetings in a business organization. The four articles variously discuss racism and prejudice, health, risk and personal responsibility, morality and gender, and leadership and consensus. The chapter provides an overview of each research project, its theoretical grounding, the empirical work and the data which were analysed, and the discourse analytic or discursive approach which the researcher has adopted.

Chapter 4, 'The usefulness of discourse analysis for social science researchers', begins with a general discussion of the reasons for using this form of research and for analysing language data. The chapter also discusses two 'half-reasons' which are based on a partial misunderstanding of the premises of a discourse analytic approach. The chapter then describes some of the different kinds of data which can be analysed discursively and considers practical aspects of obtaining discourse data. The chapter includes sections on the collection of new data, the selection of already existing or 'found' material as data and the production of transcripts.

Chapter 5 considers some of the problems or challenges faced by the discourse analyst. These include deciding on the right discourse analytic approach, and beginning to analyse data and develop an interpretation and argument. The discussions of interpretation and analysis continue the practical guidance provided in Chapter 4.

Every research approach has its critics and Chapter 6 addresses some common criticisms of discourse analysis. For example, the chapter answers the challenges sometimes made that discourse analysis is out of date as an approach or is 'just' about words, or that it does not take enough account of people or has limited practical applications. The chapter also discusses some more specific criticisms, such as that discourse analysts should not collect data through interviews.

Chapter 7 summarizes the key points covered in previous chapters and presents a list of suggestions and references for readers who would like to build on the practical introduction to discourse analysis which is presented in this book. The book also includes a glossary of key terms.

Using this book

Like other text books, 'What is discourse analysis?' has been written as a guide and reference tool. Readers are likely to turn to chapters and sections which seem pertinent to their immediate concerns and practical problems. However, the book has also been written to be read from start to finish. The concepts and terms which are introduced in Chapter 2 are referred to in the very detailed discussions of empirical studies presented in Chapter 3. The discussions in Chapters 4 and 5 refer back to those studies, and to previous chapters, and the arguments presented in Chapter 6 presume some awareness of theories and concepts introduced earlier in the book. Readers are therefore recommended to work through the chapters in order, at least initially. It will also be useful to refer to the glossary of key terms at the end of the book.

Summary

Chapter 1 has introduced the topic of the book, offered an initial answer to the question 'What is discourse analysis?' and outlined the contents of the remaining chapters.

2 Theories and common concerns

Introduction

Chapter 1 proposed a definition of discourse analysis as 'the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and social life'. This chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings of discourse analysis and some of the main concerns of researchers, including the different terms they use. The first three sections will discuss theories which establish a connection between language and social phenomena and therefore inform discourse researchers' arguments for the status of language data as evidence. The fourth section discusses some relevant terminology, including different definitions of the key term 'discourse'. The fifth and sixth sections introduce some of the most important concerns which underlie discourse analytic research in different traditions, and the seventh section outlines the links between discourse analysis and social psychology.

To introduce the first two sections, it may be useful to return to the example of letters, introduced in Chapter 1. The discussion there of course assumed that readers understand what is meant by 'a letter', even though the use of letters is increasingly superseded by electronic communications. A formal dictionary definition, from the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (1965), is that a letter is 'a missive in writing, an epistle', a definition which might prompt further consultation of dictionaries. A simpler definition is that a letter is a communication on paper which is conventionally sent through a postal system. This probably explains the 'meaning' of a letter sufficiently for someone to understand what the word refers to, for instance, in order to translate it from one language to another. However, it does not encompass the kinds of meanings which might be of interest to a social researcher. Consider, for example, the difference between using a letter or an email. A letter would probably seem more appropriate to an invitation for a special occasion. Similarly, in a personal relationship, especially one in its early stages, a love letter would probably carry greater significance than