

### 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of course assumed that readers understand what is meant by 'a letter', even though the use of letters is increasingly superseded by electronic communications.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

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*What is Discourse Analysis?* is an accessible introductory guide to a popular and widely-used qualitative research approach.

Discourse analysts in the social sciences work with many forms of language data, including talk, documents, online material and news media. They investigate interactions and social practices, meaning-making and larger meaning systems, and contests and conflicts around collective identities, social norms and subjectification.

This book offers a coherent and wide-ranging introduction to different theoretical and practical traditions of discourse analysis. Discussions of published studies illustrate how social scientists have used discourse analysis in research on a range of important topics, including nationalism, racism, gender, organizations and leadership and health.

The book introduces the premises underlying different traditions of discourse analysis. It sets out the processes through which discourse analytic researchers produce findings which become evidence for new academic arguments. It provides clear practical guidance on conducting discourse analytic research, including data collection, selection and management and transcription. It also answers some common criticisms of discourse analysis and discusses its challenges. The book concludes with a helpful glossary of key terms.

*What is Discourse Analysis?* has been written for all social science researchers interested in working with language data. It is particularly suitable for new researchers planning to conduct discourse analytic research and for students on research methods courses.

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# WHAT IS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?

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B L O O M S B U R Y

a declaration of love in an email. More negatively, in a correspondence about a dispute, perhaps in a workplace or between neighbours, sending a letter might raise the issue to a new level of seriousness. In short, a letter can carry meanings of formality and occasion (the invitation), commitment and lastingness (the love letter), seriousness and legality (the dispute). These meanings are cultural, made familiar through the many experiences of being part of a society, including seeing the post delivered, receiving letters and sending them, and reading or viewing stories in which letters mark key dramatic points. Additional meanings will attach to details like the quality of the paper, whether the letter is printed or handwritten and whether it is addressed to a named person or merely 'The Occupier'. And there are many other associations, of emotion and of images, such as a bundle of letters tied with red ribbon, a card decorated with balloons and so on.

These meanings and associations are not fixed. They have accumulated over time and may now be fading because of the increasing use of electronic communication. In addition, the meanings of particular letters will depend on their context, including the context of a time (today, 20 years ago or a few years into the future), the purpose of the letter, and the relationship between the sender and recipient(s). The relevant point for this discussion is that a letter is not *just* a letter but potential data for a social researcher. It may provide evidence relevant to the exploration of society and social phenomena such as celebrations, or changes in intimate relationships, or the settlement of disputes, or institutionalized communication or the legal profession: the exact focus will be given by the topic which the researcher has chosen to investigate.

This example need not be elaborated any further but it introduces the three approaches to meaning which will be discussed in the following sections, in relation to language. The first is the exploration of social meanings as systems or aggregates, accrued over time. The second is the study of meaningful practices, such as inviting, declaring, threatening and also writing, signing, witnessing, consulting a lawyer, entering a contract and many more. The third concerns the use of language for the communication of meanings. All three sections adopt a broad approach and at some points juxtapose theorists who are usually associated with separate traditions of academic work. As indicated in Chapter 1, the aim is to introduce the field and enable readers to begin pursuing lines of interest to be followed up in further reading.

### Theorizing language as systems or aggregates of meanings

The example of the letters introduced the notion that there are aggregates or groups of meanings which 'hang together' by association rather than logical links. The theorization of such systems of meaning is strongly informed by the work of the French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1926–84). His work is perhaps less academically fashionable than it was two or three decades ago, but its influence persists, including in work which may not acknowledge it directly. Foucault's writings are too wide-ranging and complex to be summarized easily. His own research was primarily historical in the sense that he attempted to unravel the foundations of contemporary knowledge by tracking connections between ideas back through a variety of documentary sources. For example, in one famous study, he suggested that madness acquired some of the stigma of leprosy partly because of the chance circumstance that the same buildings which had accommodated leprosy sufferers were later used to incarcerate people who were mentally ill (Foucault, 2001). He argued that although the connection was subsequently forgotten, the negative association was transferred from one set of sufferers (lepers) to the other (people with mental illness). It influenced the treatment of the mentally ill and persisted into contemporary thinking, given fortuitously by history yet having important social consequences for social attitudes and practices around mental illness.

This example also illustrates a second premise: such an aggregate of ideas and meanings or, in Foucault's term, 'discursive formation' is a form of knowledge which is inextricably linked to the workings of society. To understand this point in relation to the example mentioned above, consider, first, the difference between the terms 'mad' and 'mentally ill', and second, how the categorization of people as mentally ill inevitably involves a chain of connections. The authority of the experts who can ascribe such categories is linked to a justification for treating supposedly mentally ill people in certain ways, the traditions and institutions which provide the 'knowledge' underpinning the justification and the power structures and institutions through which the treatment is administered. The words and terms used in various contexts, officially and colloquially, are part of the chain; the language is inseparable from the social phenomenon.

The notion of the social world as shaped by historically accrued, partially contingent knowledge and language has further implications. It inverts the commonsense assumption that knowledge, recorded or unrecorded, follows faithfully from the details of the world which pre-exists it, like a description of what 'is'. A classification like 'mad' may even be seen to produce what it purportedly describes (a person different to most others?). This is a challenge to the possibility of objective knowledge and it points to a further premise: people do not necessarily learn by observing. Rather, what they see is largely determined by already existing, socially circulated knowledge. This point undermines the concept of 'truth', changing its status from what 'is' (or was) to what is generally believed and accepted. There can be more than one truth! It also implicates knowledge with power since the workings of the social world will be closely connected to the accepted truths of that world, such as which people 'are' right, or best, or most important, or deserving of reward, and which have the power to dictate or influence the accepted truths. This is discussed further in the section 'Knowledge, Truth and Power'.

This section has indicated one aspect of discourse analysis, that is, the study of language as evidence of a system or formation of meanings and the connections of those meanings to society, including the power relations within society. However, such an analysis can be criticized as static because it maps meanings onto language as if they do not change. This potentially conflicts with two other premises which are particularly relevant to the analysis of talk. The first is that meaning is 'indexical', that is, it depends on and changes with context. A simple example is provided by the reference of a pronoun such as 'her', 'him' or 'it'. The meaning of the pronoun will be given by the surrounding physical environment of objects and people, or by the preceding talk. For example, 'it' may be something which a speaker points to or touches, or something which is not present but has already been made a topic of conversation.

The second premise is that meanings are constituted through what is 'done', that is, through practices and processes. One example would be how information can be made 'official' through processes such as publication or the release of statements. Another would be in talk, the way that a speaker's identity may be indicated not by what is said but by *how* it is said, for example, with authority or obedience. Each of these points opens up further directions for investigation, some of which are illustrated in the studies discussed in Chapter 3. The current chapter continues with a

discussion of theories which have contributed to the study of social activities or practices, and in particular, language use and talk as an everyday practice.

### Theorizing language as social practice

A key writer in this tradition is Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011) who developed the sociological field of ethnomethodology. The following short quotation sets out its main points:

Ethnomethodologists seek to understand how we 'do' social life and how 'the properties of social life which seem objective, factual and transsituational, are actually managed accomplishments or achievements of local processes'. (Zimmerman, 1978, p. 11, quoted in Stokoe, 2003, p. 320)

Ethnomethodology is therefore concerned with the study of practices and processes. In addition, it begins with the study of what is 'local'. It challenges macro-level explanations of social order by explaining the functioning of society as based in micro-level, rule-governed interactions between people. Garfinkel famously encouraged his students to disrupt the order of local situations, for example, by behaving at home as if they were guests rather than members of the family. The purpose was to demonstrate the tacitly understood rules and forms of behaviour which regulate ordinary life practices and become obvious only when they are 'breached'. In this view, as people competently function in each small situation of daily life, drawing on the knowledge and skills they have acquired as members of society, their myriad activities combine to constitute an orderly whole. Society is therefore seen to operate from the 'bottom up', although ethnomethodologists would reject any neat macro–micro hierarchy.

Following from ethnomethodology, talk and spoken interactions can be analysed as orderly social activities. This is the approach of conversation analysis (CA), based on the work of Harvey Sacks (Jefferson, 1992). It is sometimes referred to as a form of discourse analysis and sometimes as a separate field, also known as the study of 'talk in interaction'. Conversation analysts are interested in talk as a social practice and in the meanings which are established within the immediate conversational context. The data they analyse are usually ordinary conversational interactions (often referred to as 'mundane'), such as phone conversations or talk at the

dinner table. These are electronically recorded and then transcribed in close detail, for example, to include emphases, pauses, overlapping talk and sometimes other details like intonation. There is a preference for analysing 'naturally occurring talk' which would have taken place whether or not the researcher (or recording equipment) was present, rather than an interview set up for the purposes of the research. This kind of investigation of talk as a social practice potentially (some would say definitely!) conflicts with the analysis of meaning systems which is associated with the tradition discussed in the previous section. Meanings are assumed to be established within the context of the talk, rather than being given by society and then imported into the situation being studied.

An analysis of talk as a social practice also challenges many established ideas about communication and about people themselves. The analyst studies how talk is shaped to the interactional context, to perform functions within that context. To understand this, consider the kind of talk which might be labelled 'apologizing'. This would often be assumed, by people other than ethnomethodologists, to follow on from some prior mental activity: a person feels apologetic or thinks something like 'I was wrong', and then expresses that feeling or thought in talk. As another example, telling a story about something that happened in the past might be assumed to follow from the mental activity of 'remembering'. However, in the practice-focussed logic of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, apologizing or storytelling talk occurs in response to other talk, as part of a sequence of steps or moves like a social dance. The telling of the story or the apology occurs at the point where it is made appropriate by the ongoing social interaction. It is therefore understandable as part of that interaction. In summary, what a person says can be accounted for only with reference to interactional processes; it is not described or explained in terms of some kind of individual and internal mental or emotional prompt. This view has implications not only for interpretations of language but also for models of people as language users. It has contributed to important debates in psychology, discussed in more detail in the section 'Discourse analysis in psychology'.

A rather different emphasis on talk as an activity, usually associated with the concept of performance, derives from the work of the philosopher J. L. Austin (1911–60). He emphasized the distinction between the label given to an activity and the words used to carry out that activity. Interrupting, for example, may be accomplished using a variety of expressions ('Excuse me', 'Just a

minute', 'But'), not to mention non-verbal sounds and actions (clearing the throat, coughing, raising a hand and so on) but it seldom involves the words 'I interrupt'. This may seem a rather obvious point but Austin's work is important for discourse analysts because it draws attention to the functions of language, especially but not exclusively of talk. These functions can be understood only by considering its use in context.

This section and the preceding one have discussed two different theorizations of language and meaning, in terms of systems and practices. Together and separately they challenge many everyday assumptions about language, including how it works for communication. The next section discusses theories of language as communication.

### Theorizing language as communication

Communication between two people can be represented very simply using a three-part model of sender, communication channel and receiver (Wertsch, 1990). A piece of information which originates in the person who is the sender, perhaps as a thought or observation, is conveyed through the channel to the receiver. If the model is elaborated to include language as the channel of communication, the information is first encoded or translated into language by the sender, then decoded or translated again by the receiver. The model implies that the information is communicated without distortion: neither the encoding and decoding processes nor the transmission in language alters its meaning in any way. The communication process functions so efficiently that it can be ignored. This is the assumption which operates when what someone says is assumed to be entirely intelligible as the utterance and intended meaning of that individual speaker.

However, this model can be challenged. The problems with it become obvious if it is applied to the example discussed earlier, that is, if the communication channel consists of letters. The model would imply that the meaning of a letter originates entirely in the writer and has no additional meanings which are given by its social context. It would therefore discount any meanings which arise as part of the social practices around language, such as the style of the letter, and it would discount too any indexical meanings belonging to the correspondence or communication *itself*. These might include the kinds of emotion- or affect-laden meanings which develop over an extended communication (such as pet names or special occasions referred to by lovers, or a particular grievance which becomes

the charged focus of a dispute between neighbours.) The model would imply, too, that the language of the letter has only one meaning which will not change in different contexts, including different times.

Most, if not all, academic discourse analysts would reject the simple three-part model, as James Wertsch (1990) discusses. The point of presenting it here is to draw attention to this rejection and, in doing so, to indicate some of the interests of academics who study language as communication, particularly sociolinguists. Their 'social view of language' (Kress, 2001, pp. 29–38) can be presented as a rejection of the study of languages as stable, coherent, intact systems of words and grammar which can be understood without reference to the contexts in which they are used, or to the language users themselves. A social study of language would assume that a standard named language, such as English or French, has many different versions and variations. There are the 'dialects' associated with communities defined by geographical location, class, age, multilingualism, among other possibilities. There are the differences in how people use languages in specific contexts and relationships, and for different purposes: these various 'registers' incorporate distinctive vocabulary and grammar (think of the different ways in which children speak to their friends and to their parents or teachers). Most of these variations carry social meanings and values (think of the preferred speaking style for a TV news presenter, or a government spokesperson). Some of the variations are more within the language user's control than others; in a specific situation (the pupil in trouble who is talking to the head teacher) the user will make choices about the language to be used but some variations, such as class and regional dialects, may be relatively inflexible.

The approach known as Critical Discourse Analysis is specifically concerned with the connections between language use and 'dominance' (van Dijk, 1998, pp. 367–93) and the ways in which elite groups use language to exercise power in society. A Critical Discourse Analyst will be interested in how a group influences the kinds of accepted ideas which were referred to in the section 'Theorizing language as systems or aggregates of meanings'. As just one example, those who have access to the media will be in a better position to influence which political arguments are promoted and to establish consensus, even at the level of setting the terms and categories which become taken for granted (as in the example of 'mad' or 'mentally ill') with all the consequences attached to that language.

This short overview suggests further possibilities for the analysis of language use. Looking at a text (a piece of talk or writing or other language use), the analyst might consider the words used and their associations, as discussed in the section 'Theorizing language as systems or aggregates of meanings', in connection to the larger social environment, the power structures and relationships within it and also the position and purpose of the particular language user. Features of pronunciation and grammar might mark dialect, such as a regional accent, or indicate the formality related to a particular situation. The analyst might look at the social values attached to variations. In popular entertainment and drama, these have often been invoked as a basis for rather cruel comedy. For example, dialect can be used to indicate the foolishness of a character such as an upper class twit or country bumpkin, or an immigrant who speaks a heavily accented, grammatically non-standard form of English. Characters can be mocked for using register inappropriately, perhaps by being overly formal in an attempt to look important, or overly colloquial in a situation which requires formality. The humour derives both from how the characters normally speak, based in prejudice against certain groups of language users, and from the social ignorance exhibited when characters are unable to adapt their talk appropriately to a situation and purpose. The examples are crude but they indicate some of the power attached to the variations in a language and to language competence. This point is summarized by the sociolinguist Gunther Kress as follows:

In critical linguistics the social is prior; it is a field of power; and power (and power differences) is the generative principle producing linguistic form and difference. Individuals are located in these fields of power, but the powerful carry the day, and the forms which they produce are the forms which shape the system. (Kress, 2001, p. 36)

## Terminology

The discussion of theories in the previous three sections now makes possible a fuller explanation of the terminology around discourse analysis. Many writers use the term 'a discourse' to refer to the language associated with the kind of system or aggregate of meanings which Foucault calls a 'discursive formation'. For example, a 'discourse of education' might refer to all the terminology, theory and argument associated with education or, more usefully,

with one approach to education, such as a child-centred discourse. In some discussions, the term 'discourse' may not be confined to the language but be extended to encompass the relevant language users, the institutions and so on. Stuart Hall summarizes Foucault's notion of a 'discourse' as

a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic a particular historical moment ... Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But ... since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect. (Hall, 1992, p. 291)

Understood in this sense, a discourse pre-exists any particular occasion of language use and is available to be drawn on or used selectively, according to the situation and purpose. It is a 'resource' for talk. Analysts may refer to discursive resources or, more generally, cultural resources. Some analysts discuss particular kinds of resources, such as a 'narrative resource' or an 'interpretative repertoire'. Critical discursive psychologists (e.g., Edley and Wetherell, 1995; Wetherell, 1998) have preferred the term 'repertoire' to escape the totality of Foucault's notion of a discourse: for example, in research about masculinity, they would be interested in the multiple and often conflicting repertoires in play, rather than in an overarching discourse of masculinity. Even within a specific tradition like this, the definitions of resources are likely to vary and be reviewed for the purposes of a new study.

Somewhat differently, 'discourse' can refer to the use of language as a practice, and especially to talk. For example, Norman Fairclough, who contributed to the founding of Critical Discourse Analysis, defines 'discourse' as 'language as a form of social practice' (2001b, pp. 229–66). Analysts may refer to the discourse of a user or group of users ('politicians' discourse'), and also to the discourse data which are being analysed.

Following from both these uses, discourse analysis refers to the study and interpretation of multiple aspects of talk or language use, as discussed in the sections 'Theorizing language as social practice' and 'Theorizing language as communication'. However, the issue is complicated because some influential writers have developed their own definitions. For example, the sociolinguist James Gee calls discourses 'social practices' (Gee, 1992, p. 107) and then defines them at greater length as follows:

Each Discourse in a society is 'owned' and 'operated' by a socio-culturally defined group of people. These people are accepted as

'members' of the Discourse and play various 'roles', give various 'performances', within it. Each Discourse involves ways of talking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing, as well as the spaces and materials 'props' the group uses to carry out its social practices. Discourses integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.

Discourses are ways of displaying (through words, actions, values, and beliefs) *membership* in a particular social group or social network (people who associate with each other around a common set of interests, goals, and activities). Being trained (apprenticed) as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think and act like a linguist and to recognize others when they do so (not just that I learned lots of facts about language and linguistics). So 'being a linguist' is one of the Discourses I have mastered. (p. 107)

This definition does not limit a 'discourse' to language but includes non-linguistic elements ('ways of acting', 'spaces and materials', 'values and beliefs', 'gestures', 'body positions'). It emphasizes practice but also contains the notion of a discourse as a resource which makes available 'ways of talking, acting' and so on, linked to the performance of an identity associated with a group. That membership will raise issues of power and inequality, for instance, around who is or not included.

Discourse analysis can therefore involve the investigation of language, meanings, resources and practices. It may be associated with critical language study, critical linguistics, sociolinguistics, communication studies, pragmatics, semiotic analysis, discursive psychology and, following Foucault's work, studies of governmentality. These various terms and fields will not be explained in detail (an almost limitless task) but the studies discussed in Chapter 3 refer to some of them. The next two sections of this chapter will summarize some concerns shared by discourse analysts working in the different traditions summarized so far.

### Knowledge, truth and power

Discourse analysis is strongly associated with critical research and many of the issues which researchers investigate relate to the status of knowledge or truth claims. The previous sections have presented arguments that

language is not a neutral vehicle through which knowledge is conveyed from one person to another, because meanings will be created and changed in the process of communication. Additional meanings accrue historically. Because of this multiplicity, communication always involves selection between alternative words, grammatical forms, registers and so on, with each alternative carrying different meanings. A famous example is that the terms 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' might be used to refer to the same person. Clearly those alternatives are linked to different political positions, allegiances and actions, for example, around how the person in question 'should' be treated.

However, many choices are less clear-cut. Michael Billig and others (Billig et al., 1988) have discussed some of the 'ideological dilemmas' around the multiple meanings and contradictory consequences attached to a single notion or situation. These can be illustrated with the example of the nation as, supposedly, a group or community with a common territory and interests. Susan Condor (2011) shows how speakers confront a dilemma around change and continuity in the nation, specifically, whether it is possible to reconcile a positive view of the contemporary, increasingly diverse national community with the narrow shared history which supposedly defines the national character and limits the membership of the nation. Condor's research shows how speakers attempt to resolve the dilemma in order to support diversity *and* the nation.

Obviously multiple accounts of the 'same' phenomenon are possible. 'The nation' is changing *and* stable, diverse and the same, new and old. This kind of inconsistency may appear relatively easy to live with. However, attempts to avoid it in relation to the nation are linked to political ideologies of national purity and historical continuity which continue to be used as a justification for horrendous violence. One concern for discourse analysts is the multiple versions of what is 'known', the contests around them and the power relationships implicated in these contests.

Theorizing multiplicity also brings into question the 'objective' knowledge which is associated with science. In a famous discourse analytic study, two sociologists, Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay (1984), examined scientists' accounts of their experiments. In a conventional view of science, scientists conduct experiments in order to make original discoveries which add to what is already known. The findings can be checked or validated by repeating the experiments and producing the same results. However, Gilbert and Mulkay showed that the scientists' accounts of their work,

especially in informal talk, were not consistent with this conventional view. For example, the scientists' talk indicated a practical conflict between using their time to do original work or to replicate experiments. Originality was more highly valued. The scientists would therefore describe themselves as repeating an experiment in a slightly different way, or developing a different explanation for the effect which has been observed; they emphasized their own originality while suggesting that *other* scientists do the less interesting work of exact replication to check previous findings. The point of Gilbert and Mulkay's research is not to discredit the scientists but to show that even in this supposedly 'objective' field, language has contextualized social functions. 'Scientists employ forms of talk which enable them to accomplish both self-validation and the attribution of originality' (Mulkay, 1985, p. 145).

The psychologist Kenneth Gergen criticized the notion of objective knowledge operating within his own discipline (1985) and suggested that social psychologists should not ally themselves with natural scientists or experimental psychologists. He emphasized the importance of language for shaping meaning, arguing that people understand themselves and the world in terms which are 'social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people' (p. 267). He suggested, therefore, that psychologists should study language as part of 'human meaning systems' (p. 270), rather than the world or the mental events which the language might be purported to represent. This is now a principle of discursive psychology, discussed in the section 'Discourse analysis in psychology'.

Many discourse analysts, including those associated with Critical Discourse Analysis, investigate the versions of knowledge which have become accepted as truth (i.e., as if there is no other version) and which advance the interest of particular groups in society. Their interest is partly in the processes through which 'truth' is established. The analysts may look at how language is used to present and perpetuate a version, sometimes referred to as an ideology, so that it comes to be taken for granted, or how persuasive arguments may be advanced. 'If the minds of the dominated can be influenced in such a way that they accept dominance, and act in the interest of the powerful out of their own free will, we use the term *hegemony*' (van Dijk, 1998, p. 372) One issue here will be, of course, who is doing the arguing and how they can make their arguments heard, for instance, because they have access to news media.



Following Foucault, some researchers have explored the origins and implications of taken-for-granted ideas and categorizations. Such research potentially undermines established authority and institutions. It will be useful here to look at the example of the work of Nikolas Rose (1989; 1996) which employs Foucauldian theory as a basis for research on the history of official interventions in family life in the United Kingdom, including those that have taken place through health and educational policies. For example, he investigated how the discourses of education associated with compulsory schooling gave rise to new identities, such as the identity of a bad learner or child with learning difficulties (Rose, 1989). His work indicates that for a bad learner to exist, there needs to be a framework of norms and expectations about good or normal learning. This in turn rests on a set of institutions, an education system, which defines and monitors such learning, and also on a legal system which makes participation in the education system compulsory. It has implications which extend into other areas of life. For instance, the notion of 'good' parenting expands to involve giving attention to a child's educational success, encouraging children to learn to read and so on.

Rose's work is an example of the study of governmentality, of how power works indirectly in contemporary social worlds, often referred to as neo-liberal democratic societies. The argument is that people have come to govern themselves, regulating their own behaviours in order to achieve outcomes (such as successful school careers for their children) which they have learned to believe are desirable. Rose traces the complex processes through which people come to monitor and modify their own behaviours in order to comply with social norms, and the role of knowledge within these processes. He coined a new term, the 'psy disciplines', to refer to psychology and related fields which formulate the knowledge which drives many of these processes.

### **Culture and identity**

Another important group of concerns for discourse analysts relate to culture and identity. Culture might be defined as the social knowledge which is distinctive to a particular society as a whole, or to groups within it, and is therefore a source of identity. This overlaps with James Gee's definition of a discourse, quoted earlier, which relates a discourse to a group almost as a form of insider knowledge. Extending this idea, the group might be

assumed to share a culture or body of knowledge which confers a specific worldview (e.g., think of the different discourses of settlers and indigenous people in a colonized country: see Dixon et al., 1997, for an analysis which considers these). The group might also share discourses as language practices, such as ways of speaking, which mark them as members, to each other and outsiders. These assumptions indicate several possible directions for research, into the discourses which distinguish particular groups and create identities, the ways in which discourse practices are acquired as part of the process of learning and becoming part of the group and the conflicts which different discourse practices may give rise to, for example, when ways of speaking are misunderstood, or prompt discrimination. However, these assumptions also raise a number of issues which new discourse researchers need to consider.

One concerns the boundaries of cultures. It is easy to exaggerate the distinctiveness of the discourse of, for example, women and men, or young people and old. People do not live in neatly bounded, exclusive communities with their own entirely separate languages and social knowledge. They understand each other and, even more importantly, they are members of multiple groups simultaneously, or, to put it another way, they have multiple identities. It is therefore illogical to interpret language use as direct evidence of group membership. For example, when a woman speaks, she may not be speaking *as* a woman, or as a citizen of her country, or as a daughter, or mother, or member of her profession, even though she has a claim to all of those identities and more. In addition, even if she intends to speak as a woman, she is not necessarily representing the view of all women, or national citizens, or whatever. This is a caution against interpreting a participant as the 'voice' of an identity. Discourse analytic studies of identity have employed several alternative approaches, separately or in combination.

One involves the analysis of the shifting identity positions which are taken up in talk. Within the different situations, interactions and relationships which make up people's social lives, they occupy different 'positions', each with an associated point of view and interests (Davies and Harré, 1990). Some positions are conferred by others, as when a person in authority speaks 'as' the authority, thereby positioning another person as a subordinate. Other positions are more actively taken up or claimed by people themselves. Discourse analysts study 'positioning', defined by Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe (2006) as 'the process through

which speakers adopt, resist and offer "subject positions" that are made available in "master narratives" or "discourses" (p. 139). As indicated by the references to multiple actions (adopting, resisting, offering), this kind of analysis focuses on practices. It might extend to consider other actions including claiming and contesting. The term 'identity work' is often used to encompass these active negotiations around available and aspired to identities.

Identity may also be discussed and analysed in terms of performance. This concept has been mentioned already with reference to the philosopher J. L. Austin. Austin's work is cited by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler who introduced the notion of gender identities as performance. In other words, she argued for a shift from a conceptualization of *being* a gender to *doing* or performing it, 'though *not* a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed' (Butler, 1990, p. 33). In other words, the person does not pre-exist the performance, like an actor playing a part, but is made or constituted through the practice or process of performance. Butler suggests that performance is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment but involves 'a stylized repetition of acts' (p. 179) which constructs someone's gender identity. Butler's primary purpose is political; she is constructing a basis for feminist politics which does not assume that 'women' share a single essential or 'foundationalist' identity (p. 189). Her work is theoretical rather than empirical but the concept of the performance of identity is central to many discourse analyses, including studies of gender. As with ethnomethodology, the focus is therefore on practice, on 'doing' rather than 'being' (a particular kind of person).

A somewhat different discourse analytic focus involves the investigation of the discursive or cultural resources which are associated with a particular identity. These can be considered as setting a range of possibilities for an identity as, for example, a man (Edley and Wetherell, 1995, 1997) or a single woman (Reynolds, 2008). The analysis is usually linked to positioning and the ways in which possible identities are taken up, resisted or otherwise negotiated.

Implicit in all of these accounts is the notion that identities, and social worlds, are emergent. People and their lives do not follow machine-like cycles or repetitions (despite Butler's reference to a stylized repetition). Instead, they are understood to be part of an ever-ongoing flow in which actions and interactions produce novel circumstances and situations. It may be possible to look *back* and trace the pathways which led up to

the present, but the future is always uncertain, unfolding or hatching out of the present in unforeseeable ways. People and their lives are always in the making, never finalized or wholly predictable.

## Discourse analysis in psychology

This section is included because although discourse analysis has been widely used across the social sciences, and in related disciplines such as sociolinguistics, education and gender studies, it has a special status in psychology. Many of the key texts on discourse analysis as an empirical approach have been written by social psychologists. In addition, discourse theories have led to the development of a new sub-discipline, discursive psychology. This final section introduces some of the main debates associated with discourse analysis and discursive psychology.

An early and highly influential text, *Discourse and Social Psychology* by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, first published in 1987, challenged established quantitative and qualitative methods for researching attitudes and opinions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Potter and Wetherell criticized the standard questionnaire design in which the respondent chooses an answer from a scale ('Agree strongly', 'Agree', 'Disagree', etc). They also criticized less structured interviews in which participants are invited to state their opinions on an issue. Their arguments followed from the two broad premises which have already been introduced in this chapter. The first is the assumption that meaning is social, derived from larger discourses or formations rather than reflecting the mental activities of individual speakers. The second is the conceptualization of talk and other communications as orderly social practices, shaped by the communicative situation (e.g., an interview) rather than, again, by the particular individuals who are party to the communication. Following these ideas, Potter and Wetherell rejected the notion of an attitude as somehow fixed and internal to a person, enabling translation into a choice on scale or into a neat statement of opinion. A further premise here is that talk or language (or other representations) cannot be a simple vehicle for an opinion which already exists: the medium inevitably shapes the message, or even creates it.

These arguments, and in many cases Potter and Wetherell's own work, continue to be important for discourse analytic research. They inform investigations of communication and the situated meanings which are constructed, and co-constructed, within the immediate context of an

interaction (such as a conversation) and the action of communicating. Following these arguments, many discourse analysts avoid treating talk as evidence of the fixed opinion or thought processes of individuals. This distinguishes their work from most other social research. Instead, they analyse either groups of meanings as discursive resources (as already noted, these can be labelled in different ways, for example, as 'discourses' or 'interpretative repertoires') or else the social practices through which meaning is constituted, especially the social practices of talk. Many analyses combine these foci.

Potter and Wetherell's work has also made an important contribution to ongoing discussion, within psychology and in the social sciences more generally, about the nature of the person and, relatedly, about identity ('who I am'). This discussion generally rejects what might be called a commonsense theory of the speaker or language user, that is, as an individual container for an internal mental and emotional machinery which emits or expresses outputs into the social world. One project for discursive psychologists has been to re-interpret 'mental' processes as social activities. By considering, say, remembering as a kind of talk rather than as the expression of a cognitive process, discursive psychologists have challenged established theories and understandings of the person.

Discursive approaches also tend to challenge our sense of ourselves as free agents. One contrasting theory is of the person, or subject, as subordinate (or 'subjected') to the workings of power in society. This suggests that the position which a person occupies within the power and knowledge systems discussed by Foucauldian scholars (a 'subject position') determines who he or she is. Identity is therefore given by external circumstances and situations rather than internal aspects of an individual. Nikolas Rose's work, mentioned earlier in this chapter, explores this making or 'subjectification' as a complex and extended process (1989; 1996). In his words, subjectification involves 'apparatuses, practices, machinations, and assemblages' including aspects of organizational and institutional life. He suggests that the process produces an illusion of freedom and agency. People learn to discipline themselves to act in certain ways yet believe that they are freely choosing to do so. As noted previously, Rose has explored the subjectification associated with education together with the resulting forms of behaviour and monitoring through which, as he describes it, people 'govern' themselves. In a more recent example of research which

employs similar concepts, Rosalind Gill (2008), analysing advertisements, has discussed the sexual subjectification by which an identity for a young woman as agentic or empowered is tied to certain demanding requirements, to be 'beautiful ... sexy, sexually knowledgeable/practised and always "up for it"' (p. 35).

A different theory of identity and the subject is associated with social constructionism and (some areas of) discursive psychology. This is the concept of a distributed self, originally proposed by Jerome Bruner (1990). The underlying argument is that people are inseparable from the contexts in which they function, including the contexts of their relationships with others. Visually, this might be represented as a shift from a neat diagram of a person as contained within the outline of the body, to multiple images of the same person in different situations, all superimposed on each other, with the outline of the body blurring into the different backgrounds. The implications for psychology are that the cognitive processes associated with the container model of the person are re-interpreted as occurring across the whole range of social practices which make up a person's life. An example of how this might occur was indicated in the earlier discussion of 'remembering' and 'telling a story'. As one writer summarizes it, in this view the mind is 'immanent in discourse practices' (Herman, 2007, p. 308), 'spread out as a distributional flow in what participants say and do' (p. 312) and located in all of their 'socio-communicative activities unfolding within richly material settings' (p. 308). This striking idea has been hailed as part of a 'second cognitive revolution' (Harré and Gillett, 1994) because it assumes that 'discursive phenomena, for example, acts of remembering, are not manifestations of hidden subjective, psychological phenomena' (p. 27). It can be linked to classic observational empirical studies of work which investigate the combined functioning and capacities of a technological system and the worker within it, as a single unit (e.g., Goodwin, 1994). There are similarities, and some direction connections, to research in the areas of distributed cognition and Actor Network Theory.

Discursive psychological theories of talk as a social practice generally assume that the person is active and to some extent operating independently or agentially, rather than following the dictates of the larger situation or society. As already outlined, a speaker is assumed to be positioned by others and by society as having a certain identity, but also actively to

position her or himself, for example, by choosing between available subject positions (in talk); in other words, identities are assumed to some extent conferred and to some extent actively claimed and contested. This is a key assumption in critical discursive psychology (e.g., Wetherell, 1998; Edley, 2001; Seymour-Smith, 2008).

Working from a different theoretical position, the social psychologist Wendy Hollway has criticized the concept of the subject position as inadequate (Hollway, 1998). She notes that people occupy many different subject positions, yet the identities which these make available do not carry equal importance. Some additional explanation is needed for the emotions attached to some subject positions. Bringing together discourse and psychoanalytic theories, she explains this in terms of 'investment'. Some discourse analysts discuss this issue in different terms. For example, in a narrative analysis it can be interpreted as a question of continuity and why some identities persist beyond an immediate, transient situation (see Taylor 2010). An additional point to note here is that in psychoanalytic theory the term 'subject' is associated with a sense of self and a subjective (i.e., not objective) view of the world, in contrast to the notion of people as 'subjects' because people are shaped by or 'subjected to' the workings of power in society. The work of Hollway, with Tony Jefferson, has contributed to a psychosocial research approach (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

There is no agreement on a resolution to these various problems around a theorization of identity or the subject in discourse theory. However, discursive approaches may be brought together with other theories, as in Hollway and Jefferson's work. As another example, the self-actualizing identity project proposed by theorists of reflexive modernization, such as Anthony Giddens, can be understood and explored in discursive terms (see Reynolds et al., 2007). The original theory proposes that in contemporary or late modern Western societies, a process of individualization operates through which each person shapes 'who I am' as their own ongoing and reflexive identity project. A discursive psychologist approach draws out the multiple possibilities and also the conflicts and constraints and negotiations involved in the process of identification. A further example is the work of Scharff (2008; 2011) which variously brings together discursive psychology with ethnomethodology, and with performativity and affect theory.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed a wide range of ideas in order to provide an overview of the main theories and issues associated with the field of discourse analysis. It is therefore not possible to produce a unified summary, and nor would it be especially appropriate since discourse analysts do not agree on every point or follow a single composite approach. Nonetheless, for the purposes of the book, it will be useful to expand the definition given at the end of Chapter 1, as follows: *Discourse research involves the analysis of language data as evidence of social phenomena, theorizing language as communication, practice or selective constructions derived from accrued social meanings.*

## Summary

Chapter 2 has introduced some of the theories and issues which shape different approaches to discourse analysis.