



Researching Discourse. A Student Guide

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London: Routledge, 2020, 230 pages. ISBN: 978-1138551084

The study of discourse becomes increasingly important in a range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. It helps applied linguists and pragmatians to achieve a contextual understanding of the linguistic features of language-in-use above the sentence level, and it also enables social scientists in the field of communication, anthropology, and sociology to examine the construction of significant aspects of social lives, such as gender, power, and ideology. Although the common interests in discourse analysis mean researchers have some rough consensus on basic issues like the definition of discourse, the relationship of discourse and grammar, and the social significance of discourse studies, they may employ different methods including corpus, metaphor, systemic linguistics, etc., to answer questions emerging from different social and cultural practices. The present book attempts to provide an accessible introduction to nine main methods of analysing discourse and a number of established scholars are invited to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of these methods with reference to their own studies conducted in diverse organizational, institutional, and professional contexts.

The whole book consists of ten chapters. The beginning chapter (“Introduction to Discourse: Definitions, Debates, and Decisions” by Alison Sealey) sets the scene by summarizing the three widely-acknowledged ways of theorizing discourse (discourse as text, discourse as language-in-use, discourse as social practice) and the three key strands of a typical discourse analytical project (discourse data, the producers of discourse, discourse reception). The nine methods introduced in the following chapters may be categorized into two groups. The first group (chapters 2, 3, 7 and 9) presents four independent approaches which are popularly utilized by discourse analysts with a variety of theoretical concerns. Greg Myers, in chapter two (“Conversation Analysis”), discusses the complementarity of the socially-originated conversation analysis (CA) and the linguistically-based discourse analysis, and corrects the common misunderstandings related to the

characteristics of the CA approach. He explains that the seemingly complicated protocols of data transcription are the very instrument for CA researchers to conduct the moment-by-moment analysis of semiotic details (pause, overlap, discourse markers, intonation contour, etc.) that conversationalists invoke to keep their interaction going. The meticulous examination of narrow stretches of talk (sometimes, lasting for a few seconds only) may generate insights into conversationalists' strategies of positioning self, categorizing others, and negotiating interrelations.

Karin Tusting's chapter three ("Discourse Analysis and Ethnography") then describes the procedure of doing discourse analysis from an ethnographic perspective. As a mature research method in anthropology, ethnography is characteristic of "an up-close intensive long-term holistic study of small-scale communities" (p. 37). Ethnographers are usually required to live in the researched site for an extended period of time, and this may help to generate an in-depth understanding of multiple layers of context in linguistically oriented discourse projects. Regular visits to communicative settings and text-based interviews with inside specialists are both effective tools when discourse researchers intend to explain text/talk as literate practices sensitive to a number of contextual elements, i.e., stance, gender, identity, knowledge, power, and ideology.

Paul Baker, in chapter seven ("Corpus-assisted Discourse Analysis"), points out the necessity of combining statistical techniques and analysts' qualitative inspections in corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Computer software can implement algorithms and statistical tests to count the patterns of words, word types, and word collocations in large sets of textual data. However, researchers always need to invoke their analytical capacities to solve fundamental questions before embarking on the technical details, e.g., how to choose a research question, which type of text is available, how large an intended corpus is possible, and how to describe the patterns discovered. Baker illustrates how his own personal experience in British public housing helps him identify an illuminating topic (how council estates/social class are represented in the British media) in his recent publications. Johann Unger in chapter nine ("Digitally Mediated Discourse Analysis") discusses the similarity of digital discourse and non-digital discourse and introduces three approaches to investigating communication in digital contexts (computer-mediated discourse analysis, discourse-centred online ethnography, digitally mediated discourse studies).

Chapters 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10 are closely linked to the critical discourse analysis (CDA) agenda of “extend(ing) linguistic analysis to engage with social questions around power and ideology” (p. 41). Chapter four (“Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics” by Veronika Koller) shows the promise of doing CDA through the angle of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). As the general aim of CDA is to explain how language is used to frame social problems and identities, it demands a detailed linguistic methodology to investigate the textualization of social meanings. Although traditional formal grammar is capable of providing a reliable description of language use across contexts, but such a description fails to account for social actors’ situational motives. In terms of transitivity, the formal grammatical notions (subject, verb, object) see little difference in active and passive clauses except the reverted syntactic structure. On the contrary, when SFL theorizes the formal understanding of transitivity into complex function-oriented grammatical systems, i.e., participant roles, process types, and circumstance types, the acquired functional inventory of social actors is capable of revealing the text producer’s hidden ideological viewpoints. Continuing the discussion of CDA, chapter five (“Analysing Metaphor in Discourse”) isolates one particular discourse technology (metaphor) and investigates how it can be deployed by text producers, namely people in power, to impose the intended versions of reality upon the recipients.

Chapter six (Christopher Hart’s “Cognitive Linguistic Critical Discourse Analysis”) presents cognitive linguistics as another option for expanding the methodology of CDA. The concentration of traditional CDA approaches on text and its immediate interactional contexts is sometimes criticized “for not taking cognition or the reader into account, and for being too ad hoc in its analyses” (p. 97). Thus, cognitive linguistic critical discourse analysis (CL-CDA) goes beyond the description of linguistic structures (phonological, lexical, syntactic, etc.) and examines the conceptual structures that a text may be understood in the cognition of text recipients. A number of main cognitive frameworks (cognitive grammar, conceptual semantics, frame semantics, conceptual metaphor theory, etc.) may be applied in examining the interchange of conceptual operations and ideological discursive strategies in political and business contexts.

Chapter eight (“Multimodal Discourse Analysis” by Christopher Hart) reports discourse researchers’ efforts to include non-linguistic resources in the analysis of the semiotic construction of realities. As a broad methodology, multimodal discourse analysis employs both traditional and

newly developed analytical approaches (conversation analysis, ethnography, systemic functional linguistics, visual grammar) to investigate the function of multimodal resources in discourse representations. Its analytical focus varies from the role of one particular mode in the discursive work of persuasion, positioning and legitimacy to the interchange of multiple modes in a multimodal text. Chapter ten (“Experimental Methods in Discourse Analysis”, Christopher Hart) presents Hart’s and colleagues’ pioneering experiments for studying the effects of textual choices on audience cognition. Here, research findings from previous qualitative discourse studies are reformulated as scientific hypotheses and then tested experimentally. These studies add solid statistical evidence to discourse analysts’ speculative explanation of the persuasive effect of linguistic features (lexical choice, metaphor, and syntactic structures) on the mindset of recipients (attitudes, emotions, judgements, and actions).

The carefully arranged content makes the book an accessible research guide for students and junior researchers in discourse analysis. Firstly, although the chapters draw on different models of linguistic inquiry and description, the contributors to this book organize their illustration of these methods according to one structure. Moreover, they frequently refer to other chapters and compare the strengths and weaknesses of related methods, which clearly displays the interdisciplinarity of discourse analysis. Secondly, this book provides step-by-step guides to doing discourse analysis. The itemized instructions for formulating research questions, collecting data, analysing data, and publishing findings show that discourse analysis is about processing authentic data in ways sensitive “to the local geography of contexts and practices and also to the devices through which the discourses are effectively realised” (Potter et al., 1990, p. 209). Thirdly, the textbook-like elements make the book a good self-teaching material for students of discourse analysis. “Issues and limitations” in each chapter lead readers’ attention to other significant issues that are not addressed because of the limited scope. “Further reading” provides a comprehensive list of essential and extended readings, in case readers need more focused advice for their follow-up studies.

In conclusion, this book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on discourse. The step-by-step instructions written by experienced researchers are useful for research students working on their dissertations and for junior researchers planning their first independent studies, while the

interdisciplinary perspective promotes a reflexive attitude towards important notions, principles, and analytical practices.

Received 09 August 2022

Accepted 11 August 2022

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