Learning and Doing Discourse Analysis

an introduction with examples from talk and text on immigration (and other political issues).

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Structure

During this talk you will be:

1. Learning about the **orientation** and **purpose** of discourse analysis (in psychology)

2. **Identifying** discourse devices and understanding their effects

3. **Understanding** the broader functionalities and implications of DA research in this field

   • **Thinking** about how to combine these ideas to do a good write-up of your analysis

Look out for these yellow boxes – they will guide you and ask you questions!
Take a step back

• “Language has **power**. The language we use in public political discourse and the way we talk about events and people in everyday life **makes a difference in the way we think and the way we act about them**...when we make meaning, the world is changed as a consequence. This power is subtle. It does not hit like a hammer or first. It is **mysteriously ambiguous**” (Mehan, 1997:250)

• Discourse analysis (DA) (in most **if not all** its varying forms) takes seriously the powers inherent within language use:
  ➢ ‘I hereby name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’; ‘I do’ (cf. Austin, 1962)
  ➢ ‘well he would say that, wouldn’t he’ (Edwards & Potter, 1992)
  ➢ ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up’ (Sacks, 1972)
  ➢ I’m not racist, but (van Dijk, 1992)
  ➢ Zoe: “You ain’t my mother”     Kat: “YES I AM!”  

• Instead of seeing language as reflecting reality, DA seeks to study how language is used to **construct reality**

Can you think of examples where what someone’s said was vague, ambiguous, or leading? What about a time when you were conscious of saying *that* instead of something else because it sounded ‘less harsh’? Or perhaps times where something that someone said offended you, caused a ruckus, or ruined a relationship? These are anecdotal displays of how powerful discourse is in how it sustains and transforms social relations.
What is discourse?

• Discourse “refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements, and so on. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event (or person or class of persons)...If we accept...that a multitude of alternative versions of events is potentially available through language, this means that...there may be a variety of different...way[s] of representing the world.” (Burr, 1995:48)

• Discourse researchers commonly use a constructionist epistemology

✓ An epistemology is a theory of (1) what counts as (valid) knowledge, (2) prescribed methodology, and (3) conventions for methods/data used

✓ Constructionism generally entails that
  ➢ a critical stance is taken towards taken-for-granted / ‘commonsense’ knowledge
  ➢ knowledge is culturally and historically specific
  ➢ knowledge is sustained by social processes (talking, writing, reading, listening)
  ➢ knowledge and social action go together” (Burr, 1995:2-5)

We don’t all talk or think the same; our everyday reality is actually under constant reinterpretation. Accordingly many constructionists argue that our conception of knowledge should reflect this point (e.g. Gergen, 1985).
So what about everything else?

• “Clearly language, or discourse, is not all that there is in the world, not all that psychology and society are made of, and not the same thing as experience, or reality, or feelings, or knowledge. It is just language, discourse, or talk-in-interaction: not those other things. But it is the primary work of language to make all those ‘other’ phenomena accountable. That includes not only what participants say, but what theorists and analysts write about what participants say, including what people (purportedly) think or feel but do not say” (Edwards, 2006:42).

• DA is focused on how realities are constructed - including all of its everyday objects.

DA is concerned with understanding how reality might come to be seen in particular ways... Everyday topics are therefore constructed in and through language (and not reflective of actual states, events, etc.)
NOTE

• DA is therefore **very distinctive** in psychology

• It is opposed to traditional **positivistic psychology**, which construes that:

  1. Social/psychological phenomena have **objective natures** that exist independently of our own perceptions, interpretations, or representations of them

  2. Truth/knowledge about them can be attained by studying the underlying **essences** embedded in the phenomenon’s occurrence

  3. These ‘essences’ form part of a broader array of **universal laws** that determine reality, and can be discovered by using **natural scientific ideas and methods**

for ‘a gentle’ introduction to these issues, see Potter & Wetherell, (1987); for an applied discussion investigating the psychology of migration, see Chirvov (2009).
The ‘Analysis’ in DA

• DA involves “...analysis of what people do” in talk and text (Potter, 1997:146)

• It investigates how “…versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse.” (ibid)

• “...the analytic task is to examine how participants descriptively construct them.” (Edwards, 1997:48)

• As analysts we acknowledge how discourse will often be heard/read as “familiar and habitual line[s] of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes” (Wetherell, 1998:400)

• Such instances are hearable as ‘common-sense’, and although “fragmented and contradictory”, such ideas are “active, compelling and a persuasive part of the fabric of social life” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992:61)

• Analysis should result in some understanding of the “...processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (and themselves) in which they live.” (Gergen, 1985:266)
Discursive Devices (DDs)

• A variety of resources usable by people when talking or writing
• They are (almost) hidden beneath the meanings being portrayed
• Yet evident when reconceptualising our gaze away from just literal meaning to interactive, consequential and sequential meanings
• Can be viewed as ‘tools’ in a toolkit of possibilities
• Flexibly applied, often towards the needs of the moment e.g. constructing identities, formulating events, ascribing psychologies, reproducing societies and cultures

So when we think about discourse how important might our backgrounds and experiences be in how we see the world? Put another way, what is the relationship between our language(s)? and thought(s)?
## A selection of DDs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Device</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disclaimers</td>
<td>I'm not racist, but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme case formulations</td>
<td>every, all, none, best, least, as good as it gets, always, perfectly, brand new, absolutely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stake/interest exposure</td>
<td>He would say that, wouldn’t he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stake inoculations</td>
<td>Even as a woman I think feminism is pointless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasts</td>
<td>Fox news is crap compared to CNN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagueness</td>
<td>I think its right and wrong at the same time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity</td>
<td>Just under 7% are now unemployed. We’ve made over 1000 jobs a day since 2010.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame</td>
<td>Keith had been annoying Rob all day. It was only a matter of time before he snapped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus/ collaboration</td>
<td>The local MP has agreed to set up a petition, and everyone at work agrees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene-Setting</td>
<td>It was a normal day, really. I was just on my commute when the bomb went off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-part lists</td>
<td>NO NO NO!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership Categorisations</td>
<td>The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Functions of DDs

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Device</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disclaimers</td>
<td>Displays awareness of potential reception(s) of the utterance prior to opposing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme case</td>
<td>Often justifies or imposes a version of events. It often generalises the extent/strength of something.</td>
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<tr>
<td>formulations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stake/interest</td>
<td>Invokes reasons for how accounts are situated within pre-existing interests, often exposing weakness/bias. It is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exposure</td>
<td>usually responded to with competing exposures or denials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stake inoculations</td>
<td>Inoculations attempt to protect the speaker from charges from other speakers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasts</td>
<td>Usually emphasise difference and gaps between two things. They might contrast people (individuals/groups) or situations/events (then vs. now).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagueness</td>
<td>Provides a flexible means of displaying an effect or problem but minimises the possibility of being ‘wrong’. As a result it is also weaker and more prone to stake/interest exposures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specificity</td>
<td>Provides specific, detailed examples (e.g. dates/times, statistics) to emphasise the ‘truth’ of something. Because it is more direct/forceful it is often responded to with other specific examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame</td>
<td>This does several things. It obviously situate blame with a particular group/person for a particular event/effect. But it has sometimes has effects on the speaker; it may elevate the speaker (e.g. brave) or can provoke hostility (e.g. charges of ad hominen, point-scoring).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus/</td>
<td>This involves bringing others into the account – usually supporters. This may be abstract (e.g. principles) or tangible (e.g. friends, other groups).</td>
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<tr>
<td>collaboration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene-Setting</td>
<td>This is a narrative device involving talk about the past, recognisable situations, etc. It puts what follows into some sort of context, prompting particular interpretations of the prior narration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-part lists</td>
<td>Usually emphasises the extent or variability of something in terms of three’s (‘I do X, Y, and Z’). It may put the speaker in good terms, or alternatively emphasise the extent of some thing more broadly, whether good or bad. It often involves repetition of an underlying thematic concept. It sometimes ends with generalised endings (‘and stuff’) if specific examples are not used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>These position individual people/things into broader categories (e.g. boy = son). Such categories relate to other categories, forming collections (e.g. family). Such groups carry with them particular knowledge’s, entitlements, powers, or other characteristics that may be invoked or assumed when referenced. They establish norms of belonging, are always subject to revision, and may be repositioned as situations change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorisations</td>
<td></td>
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Doing analysis

• “The overall goal of the analysis is to explain what is being done in the discourse and how this is accomplished, that is, how it is structured or organised to perform various functions and achieve various effects or consequences. It requires the identification and interpretation of patterns in the discourse, that is, of systematic variability or similarity in content and structure, and the formation and checking of claims...about the functions and effects through a search for evidence in the discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Analysis essentially consists of a detailed and repeated reading of the discourse against the background of the discourse-analytic perspective.” (Wood & Kroger, 2000:95)

Analysis is not just about noticing devices. It is also about identifying the functions and implications of them, not necessarily just in their moment of expression, but as a version of meaning in a broader socio-political cultural context. This can optionally include critique of differing forms.
Analysis therefore involves three steps

- explain 'what is being done' (function) i.e. how does it 'sound'?

- 'how this is accomplished' (device) i.e. what devices are used?

- 'identification and interpretation of patterns' (implications) i.e. how do the different devices construct a more general picture/version?
Orient yourself (Wood & Kroger, 2000:99)

• “The focus of discourse analysis on participants’ meanings, together with the recognition that our own concepts construct the way that we see the world means that analytic activity involves an interplay between the data and our notions about it.

• We thus need to attend to these notions without being overly constrained by them, so we view the concepts that we deploy as sensitizing concepts (Hoonaard, 1997), not as categories to be applied mechanistically to discourse. Analytical concepts can suggest what to look for and help us interpret what we see.

• Concepts may be a wide variety of types and levels; they may relate to content (e.g. accounts); features (e.g. intensifiers); form (direct, indirect; simple, elaborate); structure (hierarchal, e.g. movements-actions; sequential, e.g. turn taking, adjacency pairs); or function (e.g. constructing a motive).”
Questions to ask yourself

- What features that have helped to construct the utterance; (...to be heard in that way?)

- What versions of events it is constructive of; (...what does this compare with/dispute alternatives?)

- How it is situated in interaction/sequence; (...what was said prior, to whom, under what circumstances?)

- How it is bound up (and realised by) actions (...what is the utterance ‘doing’; how is it responded to?)

(From Potter & Wiggins, 2008:84).
Strategies for analysis

• “Discourse analysis requires a particular orientation to texts, a particular frame of mind...The first tack is to recognise that discourse analysis requires the ability to examine discourse creatively in all of its multifarious aspects and an open-mindedness to entertain multiple possibilities.” (Wood & Kroger, 2000:91)

• Wood and Kroger (2000:91-95) provide 15 pointers to aid analysis

1. ...ask yourself how you are reading it and why you are reading it this way.
2. Do not ignore the obvious; it may be important, or at least be a place to start.
3. Assume that a focus on the literal meaning of an utterance of text may be the least helpful strategy; concentrate on what the speaker or writer is doing, how that segment is related to other segments...consider also the possibilities of irony.
4. It is important (although often difficult) to consider what is not there (in terms of both content and form).
5. Similarly, consider whether the critical issue is that something is in included, no what it is (its particular content, etc).
6. Play with the text. Ask hoe it would read if a particular item (word, phrase, etc.) were omitted, phrased differently
7. Look carefully at how the text is structured, shaped, and ordered in both individual segments and overall, because structures are ways of achieving both content and function...
8. Be alert for multiple functions of discourse
9. It can sometimes be helpful to... imagine you are writing an essay for a course in English literature.
10. You will probably find that there are not always appropriate terms available for describing discourse and its functions.
11. Categorisation is not the only activity of the analyst; rather, participants themselves construct and use categories for various purposes.
12. ...adopt a questioning stance... take nothing for granted.
13. The more familiar you are with the language and how it is used, the more sensitive will be the analysis you can do.
14. ...all of the ideas you can muster will constitute your analytical resources.
15. Finally, give yourself permission to be an analyst, that is, to do...interpretive work...in generating ‘results’
Functions of DDs

Devices, when used to talk about vulnerable and/or minority groups, might involve/contribute to:

- “aversions to and fears of the different ‘other,’” particularly the visibly dark-skinned culturally different other, exacerbates anti-immigrant rhetoric, much of which is based in myth, racist stereotypes, and scare tactics.” (McGuire & Canales, 2010:127)
- “...obscuring human motives, the multiple realities of immigrants' lives at home that frequently compel migration” (ibid)
- “...conflating all immigrants, documented or not, citizen or not...into one essentialist, amorphous group.” (ibid)
- “...dangerous and even genocidal policies implemented toward these groups of people.” (p.128)

- A range of devices achieving a common effect/argument might be part of a more generally held cultural discourse
- What version do your devices share between them?

Here we mustn’t forget too that DDs collaboratively and coercively shape the ‘climate’ of social life and the many possibilities for how life may be perceived, experienced, and/or lived by groups affected by them. DA originated from and was inspired by a variety of thinkers as a means of understanding both people and society, and as a potential tool for challenging oppressions and inequalities.
Pitfalls of analysis (Antaki et al, 2003)

1. **under-analysis through summary**: “Transcription prepares the data for analysis. However, it is not analysis in itself.”

2. **under-analysis through taking sides**: “Position-taking – whether analysts align themselves with, or critically distance themselves from, the speakers whom they are studying – is not analysis in itself.”

3. **under-analysis through over-quotation or through isolated quotation**: “Quotation, like summarising, is not discourse analysis in itself. [...] The over-quotation may impede certain forms of discourse analysis by removing utterances from their discursive context.”

4. **the circular identification of discourses and mental constructs**: “the data cannot be left to ‘speak for itself’, as if a series of quotes is sufficient in itself to show the existence of the repertoire, ideology or discourse. [...] The discursive psychologist should resist positing mental entities and should concentrate upon examining the use of psychological language in discourse.”

5. **false survey**: “There is a danger of extrapolating from one's data to the world at large.”

6. **analysis that consists in simply spotting features**: “The recognition of features does not constitute analysis. [...]What is required is to show what the feature does, how it is used, what it is used to do, how it is handled sequentially and rhetorically, and so on. [...] Good analysis always moves convincingly back and forth between the general and the specific.”

basically, make sure you analyse the data, and don't quote excessively - interpret!

See also: [http://littlebigconversation.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/mighty-digests-16-discourse-analysis.html](http://littlebigconversation.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/mighty-digests-16-discourse-analysis.html)
Remember

- “Discourse Analysis is an open-ended, recursive activity, and the analysis of discourse and the writing of the research report are both discursive activities.” (Wood & Kroger, 2000:179)

- “The report[or write-up]...is another analysis, the latest although not necessarily the last version.” (Wood & Kroger, 2000:186)

- As Burman (2003/2014:7) points out: “[a]...final – but perhaps most important – addition...is still worth making explicit: under-analysis through not having a question. The most uninteresting and weak examples of discourse work...encountered [involves] the failure to specify why this analysis is being done, and is worth doing.”

- make sure you identify what your question has been... how you got to your end-point
References


References ctd.


