

DOING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

METHODS FOR STUDYING
ACTION IN TALK AND TEXT

语篇分析实探

话语和文本行为研究的方法

LINDA A. WOOD 著
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Introduction

What most people do most of the time is talk a lot. To do anything—to build a boat, to launch a rocket, to start a war, to begin a love affair, to initiate a divorce—requires talk and, often, texts. And then more talk. Talk is what moves the world, both in the private and public spheres. “Darling, I love you” moves events along, sometimes with fateful consequences, such as divorce and custody battles. Almost all we do is accomplished by talk. To punch another person out is to regress to uncivilized conduct. War has been described as the continuation of diplomacy by other means; it, too, is a retreat from civilized conduct. It is sometimes said that talk is cheap but talk is always better than pushing and shoving. Talking protects us from the often horrendous consequences of aggressive physical action. Physical moves can also be good, as in romantic encounters, but they too are often brought about and accompanied by talk.

Nevertheless, we still know relatively little about talk. Historically, the social sciences have concentrated on correlations between abstract social conditions and isolated aspects of the behavior of groups or individuals (e.g., suicide, aggression, prejudice). Until very recently, little attention has been given to what people actually say or do in particular everyday circumstances. What they do is to talk, often incessantly—about the world, about work and play, about others (parents, spouses, friends, bosses, colleagues, etc.) and their relations with them. And, in talking, they do things. That was Austin’s (1962) revolutionary insight into an aspect of language that had not been fully recognized, the pragmatic function of language, what language does to make social life as we know it possible. Before Austin, social scientists had concentrated on the descriptive or literal function of language, how

it transmits information. That function has its own importance, but it is not the whole story.

The story involves a fundamental shift in the social sciences that started some time ago (principally, with Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology and language in the 1950s), although this shift had a major impact on the practice of the social sciences only in the 1980s. This change promises an advance in our understanding of the human condition, comparable to other turning points in intellectual and cultural development. The shift we are talking about has been called "the turn to language" in recognition of what is most uniquely human, the power of language and the possibilities it affords in the understanding of social life. It amounts to a celebration of what is uniquely human as opposed to the biological grounding of human nature: the contrast between the fully realized cultural being (Harré, 1979) and the "social animal" (Aronson, 1992).

The turn to language, or to *discourse*, as it has come to be known (Kroger & Wood, 1998), has had the salutary effect of breaking down the artificial barriers between the various social science fields concerned with the analysis of everyday social life. Investigators and students have come from communication research, social psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, English literature, political science, and other disciplines. They have come to meet at joint international conferences, and they publish in both specialized and interdisciplinary journals to forge a new area of inquiry.

The turn to discourse has been accompanied by the development of new methods, and these methods are primarily what this book is about. The methods are designed for the close analysis of talk and, of course, writing. The methods are sometimes called *discourse analysis*, but discourse analysis as we view it is not only about method; it is also a perspective on the nature of language and its relationship to the central issues of the social sciences. More specifically, we see discourse analysis as a related collection of approaches to discourse, approaches that entail not only practices of data collection and analysis, but also a set of metatheoretical and theoretical assumptions and a body of research claims and studies (Potter, 1997). Data collection and analysis are a vital part of discourse analysis, but they do not, in themselves, constitute the whole of discourse analysis.

The reader may well ask: Do we need yet another set of methods? The social sciences already have a wide variety of methods. Most are mundane because of their very pervasiveness (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, surveys, multivariate analysis), and some are highly esoteric in being confined to a small circle of specialized practitioners (e.g., the Rorschach inkblot). The short answer to our question is a resounding "yes"; a longer answer necessarily takes us a bit farther afield, to a consideration of discourse analysis as a conceptual enterprise. The turn to language has also involved changes in the conceptual framework underlying contemporary inquiry into human behavior. We pause here to look briefly at these changes and their implications for the modes and methods of inquiry.

SCIENCE: NATURE AND CULTURE

We are persuaded by Hampshire's (1978) argument that psychology and, by extension, adjacent disciplines face two essentially different tasks requiring different forms of explanation and different forms of method. Hampshire's proposal has the virtues of being thoroughly grounded in the contemporary philosophy of mind and of being in tune with postpositivist developments. It deserves an extensive quotation:

Human beings, while studying themselves and their own kind, must pursue at least two irreplaceable types of inquiry because of their own nature as embodied and self-conscious thinkers. One is an inquiry aiming at a purely theoretical understanding of their own physical functioning, in which human beings are seen as objects that conform to universal laws of nature; the other is an inquiry aiming at an understanding of their own thinking, and the thinking of others, in various normal social settings and in different languages. (p. 67)

The first project formulates the objects of inquiry as *res naturam*, natural things located in the realm of nature. In the natural realm, human beings may be taken to be no different from the objects studied by the physical and natural sciences (the particles of physics, the elements of chemistry, the cells of biology). Specifically, the study of human beings as physical beings involves the calibration of our biologically based capacities as a species (how we see, hear, taste, smell, etc.). In short, this line of inquiry concerns our relationship to the physical world. It is classically located in the study of sensation and perception, psychophysics, brain and behavior, and similar endeavors. Conceptually, studies in *res naturam* are amenable to the kinds of causal explanations that have worked so well in the older sciences. The researchers who pursue this line of inquiry need not be troubled, in their day-to-day practice, by philosophical doubt. They are on safe ground, unless they begin to believe that their mode of inquiry and their mission embrace all science, including the social sciences, and that they can reduce human beings to mere physical beings, governed by their genetic endowment and by chemical and electrical processes in the brain, important as these are. Such reductionist accounts have once more been rendered suspect and indefensible by recent theoretical developments (Bickhard, 1992).

The second project concerns *res artem*, events constructed in the realm not of nature but of culture and, as such, wholly enmeshed in the complexities of language. The study of human beings as social beings is concerned with our relations to the symbolic world, not to the natural world. Such study involves examining how we acquire and use language; how we solve problems; how we manage to live with others; and how individual differences, both normal and abnormal, are created and perceived. This line of inquiry is historically connected with the humanities; with certain subfields in psychology, such as social, developmental, abnormal, and psycholinguistics; and with other social

sciences, such as anthropology, communication, and sociology. Conceptually, human activities as *res artem* are not amenable to explanation in terms of causes, in the natural science sense, but in terms of the ways in which they are produced and recognized as intelligible and sensible (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997).

These projects entail a shift in the ontological basis of the social sciences.¹ In *res naturam*, the nature of the entities under study is that of material things located in space-time producing a world locked together by causal relations. In *res artem*, the nature of the entities is that not of material things but of conversational acts located at people points or in interactive encounters (Harré, Clarke, & De Carlo, 1985). People points are the nodes of interaction created by people as social beings who must act in concert with their fellow social beings; in so doing, they create a world that is locked together not by causal relations but by conventions, shared rules, story lines, and narratives. The rich fabric of social life is woven not by physical beings whose actions are caused by mental entities harbored under their skulls, but rather by social beings who, by virtue of their capacity for language, are engaged in an endless "conversation" and so create and maintain their relations with each other (Harré & Gillett, 1994). It is in this realm that discourse analysis finds its home.

Consider how we look at the death of a person. There are two ways to do so. As a matter of *res naturam*, we have a dead body. Pathologists and forensic experts can establish the "cause" of the death by the procedures of the natural sciences, and the cause of death will be stated in terms of disease, gunshot wounds, and the like. This is not problematic, except sometimes in a purely technical sense, as when the accuracy of some biological test is questioned. But we also look at the dead body as an item in the social world, in *res artem*. For example, we need to decide whether the firing of a gun that results in a deadly wound should be considered an accident, suicide, manslaughter, or homicide; we make this decision through the procedures of the social sciences and of jurisprudence in an institutional, social context involving police, lawyers, judges, and juries. There may be disagreements, but these disagreements are of a different sort than those involved in determining the cause of biological death. Their resolution requires discourse *par excellence*. It is through talk, through discussing biological assays, chemical tests, and the like that we come to an agreement. Death as a social matter is purely a matter of discourse, in terms both of the construction of the death and of how we accomplish that construction.

SCIENCE: ONE METHOD OR MANY?

A book about new methods cannot skirt more general questions about methods in science. In this area, we have accumulated both certain illusions about science (Boulding, 1980) and a panoply of myths or misconceptions about the

nature and the methods of science (Bickhard, 1992). We have gained a good deal of understanding about these misconceptions through the work of the sociologists of scientific knowledge who look at what successful scientists actually do to see how science is done (Knorr-Cetina, 1996; Latour, 1987). But the illusion endures that there is a single scientific method, "a touchstone that can distinguish what is scientific from what is not" (Boulding, 1980, p. 833). Shorn of its shibboleths, scientific work is a form of problem solving that in its essentials is no different from the problem solving used by ordinary folk, even though it is highly refined and technical in its particular applications. Even the most exalted of scientific methods, the experiment, reduces to a common procedure. Etymologically, to experiment means to test, to try something to see how it works. It is as simple as that. The only difference between the problem-solving methods of the plumber, of the politician, and of the scientist is that scientists do their problem solving under the special social conditions imposed by the scientific community, which include, foremost, its stringent rules for veracity. In the cathedral of science, to lie, to fudge, or to plagiarize is to commit a mortal sin, punishable by excommunication. It is the ultimate sin, because scientists must be able to rely on the record created by others if they are not to be forced into recreating the wheel in each generation. Boulding (1980) puts the matter of scientific method succinctly:

Within the scientific community there is a great variety of methods, and one of the problems which science still has to face is the development of appropriate methods corresponding to different epistemological fields. . . . There has to be constant critique and evaluation of the methods themselves. Perhaps one of the greatest handicaps to the growth of knowledge in the scientific community has been the uncritical transfer of methods which have been successful in one epistemological field into another where they are not really appropriate. Furthermore, many scientific methods are not peculiar to science. The alchemists had experiments, the astrologers had careful observation, the geomancers and diviners had measurement, the theologians had logic. These methods are not peculiar to science and none of them define it. (p. 833)

If anything in general can be said about methods in science, it is that they involve imagination and fantasy (to form expectations or theories) coupled with testing. Testing entails logic, observation, and the records of others. As Boulding (1980) puts it, "Without fantasy, science would have nothing to test; without testing, fantasy would be unchallenged" (p. 832). Science is neither Baconian—the endless perusal of facts unleavened by leaps of the imagination—nor can it be science fiction—the unbridled deployment of fantasy unchecked by empirical constraints and rigorous testing.

Perhaps one of the most misguided transfers of method from one field to another is the introduction of the laboratory experiment into social psychology for the simulation of aspects of culture. An outstanding example is Milgram's

(1974) attempt to study in the laboratory the kind of obedience to authority made infamous by the Eichmanns of the Nazi regime. Apart from more general ethical and methodological issues, the failure of the traditional experiment to simulate aspects of culture in the laboratory with any degree of verisimilitude lies in its inability to take into account the pragmatic functions of language, what is being “done” through the talk of the experimenter and the subject. Traditional experimenters take language literally, unaware of its performative, discursive functions. But if the talk within experiments is not fully understood for what it is and for what it does in the pragmatic, discursive sense, the results become contaminated and opaque, and the interpretation of the results becomes ambiguous. The culture-simulation experiment may be good for studying the actions of undergraduates in the peculiar setting of the psychological laboratory, that is, their coping with the rules and conventions of that setting, but not for much else (see Harré et al., 1985; Harré & Secord, 1972, Chapters 1 and 2 for critique).

For all of these reasons, it may be time to examine the possibilities inherent in discourse-analytic methods that fit the epistemological requirements of social inquiry in the postpositivist world.

PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION

There is no question that there is growing interest in discourse analysis. However, this interest is also accompanied by a good deal of confusion. What exactly is discourse analysis? What are the methods of discourse analysis? One of our goals in writing this book is to acknowledge the extensive variety of discourse-analytic perspectives current in the field. But our main purpose is to consider those approaches that we find most useful from our perspective as social psychologists working within a social-constructionist, discursive framework. And although our focus will be on discourse-analytic methods, we also want to stress, along with other authors (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992), that discourse analysis is not simply another methodological tool but a perspective that needs to be understood within a wider epistemological context. Nevertheless, concerns about theoretical issues must go hand in hand with concerns about methodological precision.

Our general purpose then is to identify a limited set of discourse-analytic perspectives and to explicate the methodological procedures we see as most central to the concerns and projects of newcomers to discourse analysis. We will consider examples of discourse-analytic research, but, as befits a text on methodology, our emphasis will be on methodological detail, not on results and findings. We do not intend to provide a critique of empirical studies with respect to their interpretations or to the approach they have taken, although we do try to point out the advantages and disadvantages of specific strategies. We hope that the book will serve foremost to present a range of possibilities. We

believe that it is as yet premature to close off judgment or to be overly prescriptive, in terms of both the spirit of discourse analysis and the stage of its development. We also believe that the overall tone of an introductory book should be positive. Nevertheless, discourse analysis encourages reflectivity and reflexivity, so we shall shun neither relevant critiques nor constructive disagreements. The notion of reflexivity is a complex one and is intimately tied to the nature of discourse. Put simply, talk is not only about actions, it is part of those actions—because actions involve talk, and talk about talk is talk about itself. Handel (1982) provides a helpful concrete example: “The first few pages [of his book on ethnomethodology] serve as an introduction to ethnomethodology and are also about introductions. That introduction, then, describes itself. It is reflexive” (p. 35; see also Potter, 1996).

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 addresses fundamental assumptions about the nature of discourse and identifies the major features of the discursive perspective. Chapter 2 briefly identifies selected varieties of discourse analysis and then focuses on some general methodological issues. In Chapter 3, we present some examples of discourse analysis that we hope will give readers a taste of what is involved before they wade into the formalities. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 address questions about the nature of discourse data and cover basic procedures of data collection and of preparation for analysis. Chapters 7 and 8 concern analysis and are the methodological core of the book; we examine a variety of specific analytical techniques and overall analytical strategies. Chapter 9 presents examples of research on identity that exemplify different sorts of analysis of different sorts of data. In Chapters 10 and 11, we discuss issues related to the evaluation of discourse-analytic research (reliability and validity) and offer suggestions for the writing of research reports. The last chapter offers suggestions for the development of discourse-analytic skills and considers selected methodological and theoretical issues in the practice of discourse analysis. Appendix A presents the system of transcript notation used in the book. Appendix B discusses those versions of discourse analysis on which we draw most centrally. Finally, we provide a Glossary of various terms (and sample readings) used in relation to discourse analysis, some of which describe work similar to work we have discussed under other headings and some of which refer to forms of discourse analysis to which we give little or no attention.

NOTE

1. We can comment only briefly on the suitability of the term *science* for *res artem* projects. The German term *Wissenschaft*, or disciplined knowing, avoids the value-laden connotations that have accumulated around the English term *science*. In the German language, everyone who engages in the disciplined pursuit of knowledge is a *Wissenschaftler* or “scientist,” whether she pursues literature, anthropology, or physics.

Boulding (1980) distinguishes between secure and insecure sciences partly in terms of the completeness of their knowledge bases. Thus, geology and paleontology are insecure sciences, because the record of the past is fragmentary and may be altered at any time by new discoveries. In contrast, the study of literature constitutes a relatively secure science because of the relative completeness of the record. Boulding's criteria would obliterate in part the vexatious distinctions between the humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences. A more neutral term would forestall a good deal of needless rhetoric and misspent emotion. This would seem to be particularly true for psychology, where invidious comparisons between the "hard" and the "soft" parts of the discipline contribute more to rancor and status wrangling than to useful cooperation and understanding.

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PART I

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

