

Discourse and Social Life

Srikant Sarangi and Malcolm Coulthard

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ISBN 978-1-138-15882-5



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ROUTLEDGE

DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL LIFE

Edited by
SRIKANT SARANGI
AND
MALCOLM COULTHARD

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2000 by Pearson Education Limited

Published 2014 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

First issued in hardback 2016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN 13: 978-1-138-15882-5 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-582-40468-7 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Discourse and social life / edited by Srikant Sarangi and Malcolm Coulthard.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-582-40468-1 — ISBN 0-582-40469-X

1. Discourse analysis—Social aspects. I. Sarangi, Srikant, 1956– .

II. Coulthard, Malcolm.

P302.84.D573 2000

401'.41—dc21

99-089711

Set by 35 in 10/12pt Palatino

Discourse and Social Life



DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL LIFE

is dedicated to

Chris Candlin

on the occasion of his 60th Birthday

in order to celebrate his major contribution to the discipline of Applied Linguistics.

Chris has contributed significantly in two ways – firstly, as the editor of several major book series of inestimable importance, and secondly, as an individual and team researcher. For this reason we chose *Discourse and Social Life* as the title of this book both to echo that of his Longman Series 'Language in Social Life', and as an appropriate label for much of his own very varied research output.

Over the past three decades Chris has played a significant role in building the bridge between discourse study and its social relevance, while at the same time being a forceful leader in the move to extend the remit of Applied Linguistics beyond language education and into professional settings. For him, discourse analysis is essentially a socially relevant enterprise and his unfailing endeavour to keep to this brief is clearly reflected in his very successful series editorships at Longman and in the establishment of Centres for Language and Social Life at both Lancaster University, UK and Macquarie University, Australia. His initiatives have fostered quality research and significant teaching provision in the broad area of Discourse and Social Life in three continents.

It is a great privilege for us to have been ratified participants on two levels – playing a role in his discourse crusade and being part of his rich social life. On behalf of both the contributors to this book and the production and commissioning team at Longman,

We wish Chris a very fruitful and social future.

This dedication, like the book itself, would be incomplete without an expression of appreciation to Sally Candlin for the various discourses she had to devise and perform 'back-to-back' (including the Text pretext and the Inspector Morse script) in order to succeed in preserving the Candlin social life, while at the same time acting as midwife during the gestation and delivery of the project.

31 March 2000
Cardiff

Srikant Sarangi
Malcolm Coulthard

Contributors

Sally Candlin is Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Western Sydney. Her professional experience in nursing informs her research activities in discourse analysis. Her major publications focus on the transcultural aspects of nursing practice, and on the issue of power relations in nurse-patient encounters. She is currently working on *English for Nurses* (with K. Keobke).

Malcolm Coulthard is Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Birmingham. He is best known for his work on spoken and written discourse. His current research is in the area of Forensic Linguistics. He was founding President of the International Association of Forensic Linguists and is editor of the journal *Forensic Linguistics* where two recent publications 'A failed appeal' (1997) and 'Tools for the trade' (1998) appeared.

Justine Coupland is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University. Her research interests are in social interaction, discourse analysis and interpersonal communication. She has an edited book on *Small Talk* (2000) and has recently published papers on dating advertisements as texts of identity in *Discourse & Society* and the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

Nikolas Coupland is Professor and Director at the Centre for Language and Communication Research, Cardiff University. He is founding editor of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (with A. Bell). He has recently co-edited *The Discourse Reader* (1999, with A. Jaworski).

Norman Fairclough is Professor of Language in Social Life at Lancaster University. He is the major articulator of Critical Discourse Analysis. His most recent books are *Discourse in Late Modernity* (1999, with L. Chouliaraki) and *New Labour, New Language* (2000). He is currently working on the theme of language in the new capitalism.

Ruqaiya Hasan is Professor Emeritus at Macquarie University in Sydney. Her areas of interest are stylistics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, with particular emphasis on semantic variation and ideology. Two of her recent publications are 'Speaking with reference to context' in *Text and Context in Functional Linguistics* (1999, edited by M. Ghadessy) and 'The disempowerment game: Bourdieu and language in literacy' in *Linguistics and Education* (1999).

Robert B. Kaplan is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics, University of Southern California. He is best known for his research in the broad area of contrastive rhetoric, intercultural communication and cross-linguistic text analysis. His work has been extensively applied to foreign language teaching and language education policy.

Geoffrey Leech is Research Professor of English Linguistics at Lancaster University. His interests range from advertising and stylistics through pragmatics and semantics to English grammar. He is probably best known for his contribution to the *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* and his most recent publication is the mould-breaking *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999, with D. Biber, S. Johansson, S. Conrad and E. Finegan).

Yon Maley is Honorary Associate in Linguistics (formerly Senior Lecturer) at Macquarie University in Sydney. She has published widely on various genres of legal language, both written and spoken. With Chris Candlin, she has published several papers on discourse of mediation and alternative dispute resolution in the workplace, most recently in *Talk, Work and Institutional Order* (1999, edited by S. Sarangi and C. Roberts).

Greg Myers is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language at Lancaster University, UK. He is author of *Writing Biology* (1990), *Words in Ads* (1994), and *Ad Worlds* (1999), and is now working on a study of the expression of opinion in interaction.

Celia Roberts is Senior Research Fellow at Kings College, London. Her research interests are in interactional sociolinguistics and institutional and urban ethnography. Her major publications are *Language and Discrimination* (1992, with E. Davies and T. Jupp), *Achieving Understanding: Discourse in Intercultural Encounters* (1996, with K. Bremer et al.), and *Talk, Work and Institutional Order: Discourse in Medical, Mediation and Management Settings* (1999, with S. Sarangi).

Srikant Sarangi is Reader in Language and Communication and Director of the Health Communication Research Centre at Cardiff University. His recent publications include *Language, Bureaucracy and Social Control* (1996,

with S. Slembrouck), *Talk, Work and Institutional Order: Discourse in Medical, Mediation and Management Settings* (1999, with C. Roberts). He is currently editor (with J. Wilson) of *TEXT: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse*, and series editor (with C. N. Candlin) of *Advances in Applied Linguistics*.

Ron Scollon is Professor of Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics and Asian Sociocultural Research Projects at Georgetown University, Washington DC. His research interests are mediated discourse, the sociolinguistics of literacy and new literacy studies, and multimodal discourse. He is author of *Mediated Discourse as Social Interaction* (1998) and *Intercultural Communication* (1995, with S. Wong Scollon).

Henry Widdowson is Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Vienna. His major publications are in the areas of linguistics stylistics and the theory and practice of language teaching. In a number of recent publications, he has turned his attention to the work of critical linguists and while acknowledging the social significance of their work, has questioned their procedures of analysis and interpretation.

Theo van Leeuwen is Professor of Language and Communication at Cardiff University. His main research interests are media discourse, critical discourse analysis and multimodality. His books include *The Media Interview: Confession, Contest, Conversation* (1994, with P. Bell), *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996, with G. Kress) and *Speech, Music, Sound* (1999).

Ruth Wodak is Professor of Applied Linguistics and Discourse Analysis at the University of Vienna. Her main areas of research are organizational discourse and the discursive construction of identities along the lines of gender, race and anti-Semitism. Her most recent books in English are *Disorders of Discourse* (1996), *Gender and Discourse* (1997), *Communicating Gender in Context* (1997, with H. Kotthoff) and *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (1999, with R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl and K. Liebhart).

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Discourse as topic, resource and social practice: An introduction

Srikant Sarangi and Malcolm Coulthard

Our purpose in organising this collection was to offer a mapping of the current field of discourse studies by inviting leading 'discourse practitioners' to situate themselves in this growing intellectual landscape and to illustrate their concerns with data of their choice.¹ All contributors, working within their chosen tradition, mark their points of departure and indicate how they legitimate their choice of theory, data sites and analytic preferences. They share, explicitly or implicitly, a view of discourse as social practice, and make it their topic of study. We do not propose, in this introduction, to detail the complex web of similarities, nor all the fruitful contrasts and/or conflicts, between the individual contributions – rather we invite you the reader to make those links and to draw the parallels.

It is important to emphasise that this volume is not about discourse as such, but rather about the relationship between discourse and social life. The book's cover design, an original painting by Donald Friend,² entitled *Conversations*, captures these two key concepts. What combines the two, and the conjunction *and* is crucial, is the focus on interaction and dialogism. It aligns with a broad view of discourse succinctly summarised by Candlin (1997: viii):

Discourse is a means of talking and writing about and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices within these worlds, and in so doing both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social-discursive practices, constrained or encouraged by more macro movements in the overarching social formation.

At first glance, all the characters in the painting seem to be engaged in localised 'social-discursive practices'. Given the complexity of the action sequences, we can see how some of the characters appear disoriented, thus cueing different 'participation frameworks' (Goffman 1981): we see someone posing as a bystander at one point and as a ratified participant at another point in the interactional routine. Even without cues from talk bubbles giving partial insight into topics, we can label some of these as two-party, some as multi-party interactions and some as more focussed than

others (as suggested through extralinguistic markers such as posture and gesture). In general, the painting alludes to the fact that social encounters lubricate our relational positioning in society. By a similar token, they can bracket off people on the basis of dominant or subtle categorisations. In a given society, over time, certain social formations achieve normative status, and thus become constraining for one group while encouraging another as far as participation is concerned. The birds in the picture, cast as onlookers, not only provide a contrastive backdrop, but also serve to emphasise that social interaction is multi-faceted. To repeat the words of Simmel (1950: 54) from Myers' chapter in this volume: 'The more profound, [and] double sense of "social game" is that not only is the game played in society (as its external medium) but [also] that, with its help, people actually "play" "society"'. This 'playing of society' equates with our view about the interrelationship between discourse and social life. Put differently, discourse becomes the means through which social life is played out.

It is not only people, in the everyday sense, who play society. Over the years, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have made everyday social life a focus of their study. Let us begin with a brief overview of linguistics and then chart the discursive turn in our neighbouring fields, in particular, philosophy, anthropology, history, sociology and psychology. A detailed historical account is beyond the remit of this introduction, but we will try to indicate when and where linguistics was a borrower from, and where a lender to, other disciplines.

The discursive turn in linguistics

Within linguistics, the view of discourse is not only diverse; it even has an anti-discourse beginning. Historically speaking, Saussure ([1916] 1966: 14) proposed a distinction between *langue* ('the social side of language, outside the individual') and *parole* ('the individual side of language, the individual act'), and called for linguistic activity to concentrate on *langue* and not *parole*. For him, the primary task of linguistics as a new discipline was 'to delimit and define itself'. But as early as 1935, Firth anticipated how conversation (i.e., *parole* in Saussure's terminology) would become central to a linguistic enterprise, although he himself did not deal with any conversational data in his work:

Conversation is much more of a roughly prescribed ritual than most people think. Once someone speaks to you, you are in a relatively determined context and you are not free just to say what you please. We are born individuals. But to satisfy our needs we have to become social persons . . . it is [in] the study of conversation . . . that we shall find the key to a better understanding of what language really is and how it works. (cited in Stubbs 1993: 19)

Chomskyan linguistics (e.g., Chomsky 1957), based on Saussure, however, further undermined the study of performance, conversation or otherwise,