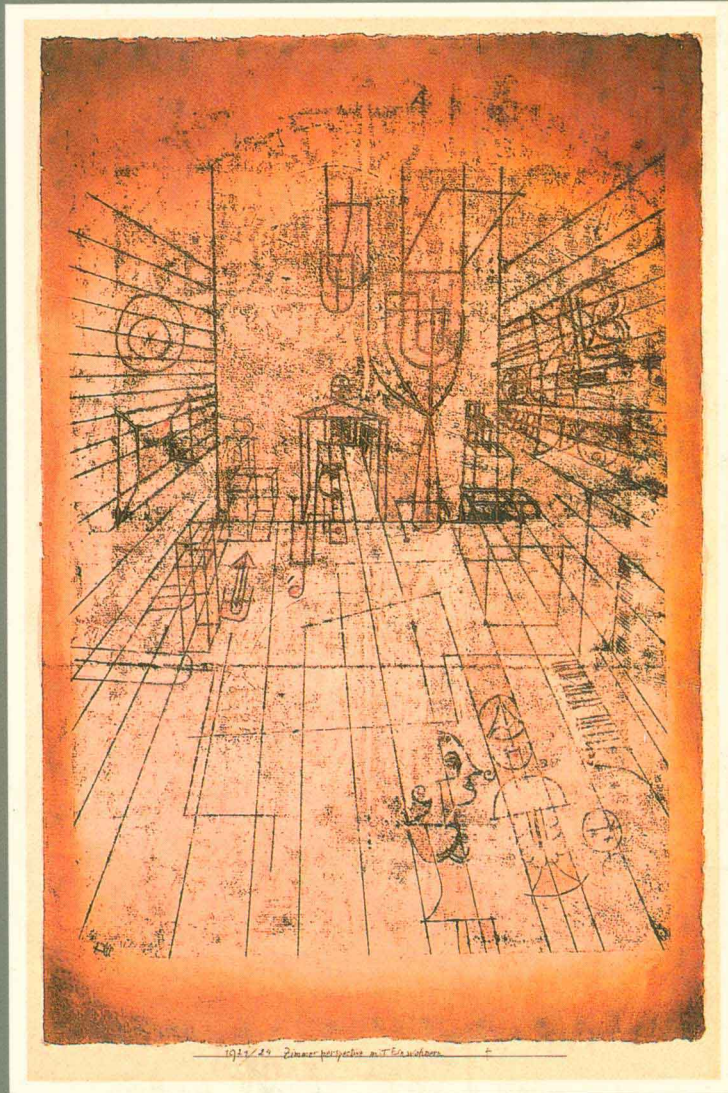


Deborah Schiffrin

# APPROACHES TO DISCOURSE



# Approaches to Discourse

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Deborah Schiffrin



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# *To David*

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# Approaches to Discourse



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## Preface and Acknowledgments

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Although discourse analysis is an increasingly popular and important area of study – both on its own and for what it can tell us about language, society, culture, and thought – it still remains a vast and somewhat vague subfield of linguistics. My goal in this book is to clarify the theories and methods of discourse analysis in such a way that it can continue to deal with a wide range of problems and phenomena of interest to linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists, but can do so in a more systematic and coherent way.

The core of the book is a detailed description, application, and comparison of six different approaches to discourse analysis: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variation analysis. Although these approaches originated in different disciplines (and are relevant to broader topics within each discipline), they all attempt to answer some of the same questions: How do we organize language into units that are larger than sentences? How do we use language to convey information about the world, ourselves, and our social relationships?

Part I of the book provides an overview of the different approaches, outlines the plan of the book, and discusses difficulties in defining discourse – difficulties that are related to the currency of two different paradigms within linguistics. Part II provides a detailed discussion of each approach to discourse – one chapter for each approach. Included in each chapter is discussion of the work of scholars central to the development of the approach, i.e. the central ideas, concepts, and methods of each approach. Also included in each chapter is an extensive sample analysis illustrating how each approach handles specific phenomena and problems of discourse. Although the sample analyses begin with some of the same issues, problems, and data (centered on either question-answer sequences or referring expressions), they diverge sharply once the concepts and methods of each approach are applied (such that the different chapters also provide analyses of phenomena as diverse as participation frameworks, the organization of interviews, existential *there* sentences, and thematic

constraints on pronouns). Part III compares approaches to discourse in a more systematic and abstract way: What does each approach assume about the relationships between structure and function, text and context, language and communication? Although these issues are quite different in some ways, they all require reconciliation of what is often defined as part of “language” with what is not typically defined as part of language. The final chapter searches for a possible synthesis among the approaches.

The issues discussed in this book have been ones that have long occupied my attention. When I was still a graduate student in linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, one of the questions in my PhD exam noted the proliferation of perspectives interested in “language use,” e.g. pragmatics, sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, and ethnomethodology. The question then asked us to compare these perspectives, e.g. did they focus upon the same problems, use the same methods of analysis, and so on. I passed the exam, but the question continued to haunt me. When I began teaching at Georgetown University, I found myself intermittently confronting similar questions through the courses that I taught. Although we sometimes ended up talking about some of the same phenomena (e.g. discourse markers) and issues (e.g. meaning) in different courses, our starting points (and often our final perspectives) were always strikingly different. In 1987, I was invited to teach a course at the Linguistic Society of America Institute, held that year at Stanford University: the Institute organizers suggested a course that would compare approaches to discourse analysis. This course was an exciting opportunity for me to explicitly work through some of the theoretical and methodological differences among approaches to discourse. About a year after the Linguistics Institute, Philip Carpenter (from Blackwell Publishers) approached me with an idea for a book comparing current approaches to discourse analysis. His proposal could not have been more finely timed to coincide with my own thinking. However, it is important to note that the way each approach to discourse analysis has been incorporated into linguistics has, not surprisingly, changed a great deal since I first became interested in discourse analysis. I expect the relationship between discourse analysis and the rest of linguistics to continue to change: I hope that this book will help people think about the way such change can proceed.

Many people have contributed, both directly and indirectly, to the ideas and the analyses in this book. Although such contributions are hardly limited to those who read preliminary drafts of my chapters, the latter include Ralph Fasold, Esther Figueroa, Michael Geis, John Gumperz, John Searle, Deborah Tannen, Sandra Thompson, and Peter Trudgill. None is responsible for the final form or content of the chapters. My students at Georgetown University have always been, and continue to be, a source of challenge and motivation: their contribution to this book has been invaluable. More recently, the opportunity to use a preliminary version of this book during a course that I taught at the University of California, Berkeley, and to be part of a reading group (on narrative analysis) provided me with yet other sources of challenge and

motivation. Material support for preparation of much of the data and analysis reported here was provided by NSF grant BNS-8819845. A sabbatical from Georgetown and a year as a visiting scholar at Berkeley also provided the time and resources needed to complete the work.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my family, especially my husband Louis Scavo, for being a continual source of support and encouragement. Our son David has also contributed in immeasurable ways by giving me good reasons to take time off and for making that time off so much fun: it is to him that I dedicate this book.

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## Part I The Scope of Discourse Analysis

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Since discourse analysis is one of the most vast, but also least defined, areas in linguistics, it is important to begin this book by commenting on the scope of discourse analysis. The two chapters in this introductory section do this in two different ways.

Chapter 1 addresses the vastness of discourse analysis by presenting an overview of the six approaches to be compared in the book: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, variation analysis. This selection seems to represent the diversity of approaches (from very different sources) that underlie contemporary discourse analyses. (Compare Taylor and Cameron's (1987) review of social psychological, speech act, exchange structure, Gricean pragmatic, and ethnomethodological approaches to discourse, or Potter and Wetherell's (1987) review of speech act theory, ethnomethodology, and semiology.) Chapter 1 introduces the approaches through examples illustrating issues that prompted scholars to begin to think about language as "discourse". It also outlines the general direction of the book.

Chapter 2 addresses the vastness of discourse analysis from another direction: how can we define discourse analysis in a way that captures it as a field of linguistics and differentiates it from other studies? I suggest in chapter 2 that two prominent definitions of discourse (as a unit of language larger than a sentence, as language use) are couched within two different paradigms of linguistics (formalist, functionalist).



# 1 Overview

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## 1 Introduction

Discourse analysis is widely recognized as one of the most vast, but also one of the least defined, areas in linguistics (e.g. Stubbs 1983: 12; Tannen 1989a: 6–8). One reason for this is that our understanding of discourse is based on scholarship from a number of academic disciplines that are actually very different from one another. Included are not just disciplines in which models for understanding, and methods for analyzing, discourse first developed (i.e. linguistics, anthropology, sociology, philosophy; see van Dijk 1985), but also disciplines that have applied (and thus often extended) such models and methods to problems within their own particular academic domains, e.g. communication (Craig and Tracy 1983), social psychology (Potter and Wetherell 1987), and artificial intelligence (Reichman 1985).

The goals of this book are to describe and compare several different approaches to the linguistic analysis of discourse: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variation analysis. My aim is not to reduce the vastness of discourse analysis: I believe that at relatively early stages of an endeavor, reduction just for the sake of simplification can too drastically limit the range of interesting questions that can and should be asked.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I view the vastness of discourse analysis not as a weakness, but as a strength, and as a sign of interest and development. What I hope to do, however, is clarify the scope of discourse analysis in such a way that it can continue to deal with a wide range of problems and phenomena – but in a more systematic and theoretically coherent way.

Before describing the ways that I hope to accomplish this goal, I want to briefly introduce each approach with the help of a prototypical example from each perspective (section 2). I then go on to an overview of the book (section 3).



## 2 “Core” examples from different approaches to discourse

The examples in this section reveal some important similarities, and differences, among the approaches to be discussed in the book. I have chosen examples used by those scholars who were instrumental in developing an approach; sometimes these examples also reflected, or led to, controversy that motivated the development of theory and methodology within each approach. Since other kinds of data and other ways of presenting data (including methods of transcription and analysis) have developed within each approach, the examples here might not seem exactly like those from more recent literature representing the different perspectives, e.g. conversation analysts now pay much more attention to transcription than will be illustrated here. But rather than try to reflect current diversity within an approach through these examples, I want to reflect (at least in part) the most salient features, and the conceptual core, of each approach. Finally, as noted above, the examples here are from seminal works in each perspective: thus, they also suggest the sort of data that first prompted scholars to begin to think about language in a different way.

My presentation of approaches to discourse (part II of the book) begins with the *speech act* approach to discourse (chapter 3). Two philosophers, John Austin and John Searle, developed speech act theory from the basic insight that language is used not just to describe the world, but to perform a range of other actions that can be indicated in the performance of the utterance itself. For example, the utterance “I promise to be there tomorrow” performs the act of “promising.” The utterance “The grass is green” performs the act of “asserting.” An utterance may also perform more than one act, as illustrated in (1).

- (1) SPEAKER: Can you pass the salt?  
 HEARER: /passes the salt/

S’s utterance *Can you pass the salt?* can be understood as both a question (about H’s ability) and a request (for H to pass the salt to S). Although these two understandings are largely separable by context (the former associated, for example, with tests of physical ability, the latter with dinner table talk), this utterance has also been labelled an indirect speech act whose illocutionary force is an outcome of the relationship between two different speech acts (e.g. Searle 1975; compare the analyses in Clark 1979; Davison 1975; Ervin-Tripp 1976; Gordon and Lakoff 1975; Green 1975).

The speech act approach to discourse focuses upon knowledge of underlying conditions for production and interpretation of acts through words. In (1), we saw that words may perform more than one action at a time and that contexts