Discourse Analysis

Bluffer's guide to why and how (not) to analyze discourse

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Critical **A**pproaches to

Discourse **A**nalysis

Across **D**isciplines

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Aims

- Demystify discourse analysis
- Critique the discourse analytical discourse in education and elsewhere
- Dissuade educators from doing discourse analysis

Outline

- Mission impossible
- Definition(s) of discourse(s)
- Kinds of discourse(s) and approaches to discourse analysis (bestiary)
- Crash course on semiotics and critical analysis
- The logistics of discourse (how discourse works)
- Discourse analyst's toolkits:
  concepts, methods, tools
- 5 random observations to guide any future discourse analysts
- Where to go next
- Mission debriefing

- “The understanding and interpretation of texts is not merely a concern of science, but is obviously part of the total human experience of the world.” (p. xi) [Gadamer, H. G. (1975). Truth and method. London, Sheed and Ward.]
- “Linguists merely employ systematically a cognitive faculty that is already in place for everyday linguistics functioning.” (Leonard Talmy, 2007, Lecture notes for ICLC, Krakow)

Definitions of discourse

- discourse = a conversation or text
- discourse = collection of texts or conversations
- discourse = a shared way of talking or creating texts (code)

  (the top depends on the bottom)

- discours**es** = codes, languages, ways of speaking of a topic

A discourse is "a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area."
John Fiske (1987). *Television Culture*. New York: Methuen.

In the social sciences, a discourse is considered to be an institutionalized way of thinking, a social boundary defining what can be said about a specific topic. Discourses are seen to affect our views on all things; in other words, it is not possible to escape discourse. For example, two distinctly different discourses can be used about various guerrilla movements describing them either as "freedom fighters" or "terrorists". In other words, the chosen discourse delivers the vocabulary, expressions and perhaps also the style needed to communicate. (Wikipedia)

“… analysing texts involves much more than attending to whatever is 'in' those texts. … The point … is not to get the text to lay bare its meanings (or its prejudices), but to trace some of the threads that connect that text to others." (MacLure, 2003: 43)

Discourse and language

- Language is only one of the modes of discourse – in this sense – it is only one example of what has been called symbolic systems which are dealt with (usually not well) by semiotics but also by anthropology and ethnography
- Language (or what we imagine we know about it) often serves as a metaphor for other ways of signification and communication

Metaphors (models) of discourse

- Discourse as structure (i.e. sentence)
- Discourse as a tool
- Discourse as a commodity
- Discourse as a medium
- Discourse as a body
- Discourse as narrative
- Discourse as a semiotic system
- Discourse as a community

Types of discourse

- **by medium**: spoken, written, recorded, etc.
- **by (sub)genre**: literary, expository, academic, conversation, etc.
- **by register**: formal, informal, argotic, etc.
- **by context**: classroom, workplace, political, etc.
- **by way of obtaining**: solicited, unsolicited, etc.
- **by power context**: equal, unequal, open, hidden etc.
- **by illocutionary force**: persuading, concealing, etc.
- **by mode/semiotic system**: language, gesture, material goods, art

Types (schools) of discourse analysis (and the names)

- Text linguistics (Halliday, van Dijk, Hoey)
- Ethnomethodology (Saks, Goffman)
- Conversation analysis (Schegloff, Goffman, Schriffin)
- Narrative analysis (Labov, Chafe)
- Semiotics (Foucault, Eco, Lotman)
- Deconstruction (Derrida)
- Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, Wodak, van Dijk)
- Multimodal analysis (Kress)
- Discursive psychology, Social psychology
- Cognitive model/Frame analysis (Lakoff, Tannen)

A crash course in Semiotics

1. Don’t trust anything that says it’s a semiotic analysis
2. Semiotics studies signs which range from iconic to symbolic
3. **Signs** are just what it says on the box: something pointing to something else in some sort of a context (signifier and the signified)
4. **Symbols** are kinds of signs that point to anything the community using them agrees on (as opposed to pointing to things because of similarity or connection like icons and indices)
5. A **symbolic system** means simply a system of signs agreed on by the community
6. **Semiosis** means simply the act of using something as a sign to represent something else – in other words, it means almost nothing!
7. The DaVinci Code has nothing to do with semiotics but it is a lot more fun!

A crash course in Critical Analysis

- Critical analysis recognizes the political dimensions of discourse (mostly to do with power relations)
- It takes a specific political stance – namely that of liberation and tries to achieve that through uncovering “hidden” or “opaque” meanings in text
- Critical analysis is NOT a method and does not come with a method
- Critical analysis IS a stance, a point of view and has nothing to do with being critical of what one reads or even critical thinking
- Beware of using discourse analysis methods as a tool to increase your symbolic power!

Why (not) analyze discourse in Education research?

Do it to …

- Reveal conceptual underpinnings shared by a discourse community
- Identify what speech communities a particular text is trying to belong to
- Understand how teachers/students use language
- Cautiously investigate whether existing power relation are reflected in how a community speaks

Don't do it to …

- Reveal hidden meanings in individual texts (or even lies and misinterpretations)
- Reveal intentions behind the way particular people use language
- Support arguments about education by finding parallels in discourse
- Reveal power structures of a speech community otherwise not available for investigations

Demystifying discourse analysis

"I used to try to read there [academic] journals. Life is too short. There is too much to do in the real world with real teachers in real schools to worry about methodological quarrels or to waste time decoding unintelligible, jargon-ridden prose to reach (if one is lucky) a conclusion that is often so transparently partisan as to be worthless. (Woodhead, 1998, writing in the New Statesman, former Chief Inspector)"

Commentary by MacLure (2003:12): "The Chief Inspector's appeal to the real is a common tactic in the construction of binary arguments about *relevance*, an issue that has a long pedigree as a boundary that constructs educational heroes and villains. The 'discourse of derision' referred to above drew much of its force from the claimed irrelevance of teachers' outmoded views and values. Thus teachers have been constructed as both the enemies and the defenders of relevance.“ […] "A **discourse-oriented educational research** would attend to the **multiplicity of meanings** that attach to (and divide) the people, spaces, objects and furniture that comprise its focus - the teachers, children, classrooms, textbooks, policy documents - and to the passion and politics that are inevitably woven into those meanings. *It would not try to distinguish the 'real' teacher from the rhetorical ones.* But it would be immensely interested in how appeals to 'real teachers' and 'real worlds' *work* as **rhetorical power-plays** that try to **install some version of reality** by disqualifying others."

How does discourse work?

- Participants, background, situation
- **Meaning**
  - Structure
    - Code

Each “level” carries a certain transactional load (logistics of discourse) and we need to be aware of discourse epiphenomena (spandrels)

Discourse analysts vs. discourse participants

- Who does discourse analysis? Ability to do discourse analysis on some level is part of our **general linguistic/communicative competence** (part of language) but that should not be assumed to be sufficient to be used as a method or technique – cf. commentators like Chomsky, Al Franken
- Discourse analysis as a method relies on a systematic theory of language as discourse

Discourse meaning as function

- Ideational
- Interpersonal
  - Identity
  - Relational
- Textual

(Halliday, modified by Fairclough)

Discourse meaning as building blocks constituting code

1. Significance
2. Activities
3. Identities
4. Relationships
5. Politics (distribution of social goods)
6. Connections
7. Sign systems and knowledge

From J.P. Gee's "building blocks of discourse" (2004, pp. 10-20)

Discourse analyst's conceptual toolkit

- text, context, co-text
  - sentence and discourse topic
  - segmental vs suprasegmental units (elements)
- coherence and cohesion
  - cohesive harmony
  - semantic prosody and collocation
  - intertextuality, signs (and all the other semiotic nonsense)
- implicature (pragmatics)
  - speech acts (illocutionary, perlocutionary, performative)
  - Grice's cooperative principle and conversational maxims
  - presupposition, markedness (default states), agency, hedges
- code and code switching
  - genre (tropes, contracts) and register
  - footing, code, speech community,
  - "social languages", situatedness, (and all the other post-modernist nonsense)
- framing: models, scenarios, scripts, foregrounding

Mini discourse analysis

“A woman was raped yesterday morning in Kingsland”

- text, context, co-text
- coherence and cohesion
- implicature (pragmatics)
- code and code switching
- framing: models, scenarios, foregrounding

Discourse analyst's methodological toolkit

- Qualitative analysis
  - close reading
  - context (historical) analysis
  - identify semantic blocks (units of meaning)
  - identify the sequence of discourse elements
  - identify key concepts and how they are represented
- Quantitative analysis
  - identify collocations (compile a concordance)
  - frequencies of words or phrases
  - identifying cohesive patterns (frequency and sequence of links)

On method and discourse analysis

10 stages of analyzing discourse

1. research questions
2. sample selection
3. collection of records
4. interviews
5. transcription
6. coding
7. **analysis**
8. validation
    - coherence
    - participants' observations
    - new problems
    - fruitfulness
9. report
10. application

"**Analysis of discourse is like riding a bicycle** compared to conducting experiments or analysing survey data which resemble baking cakes from a recipe. There is no obvious parallel to well-controlled experimental design and test of statistical significance.“ …

"it is not a case of stating first you do this and then yuou do that. The skills required are developed as one tries to make sense of transcripts and identify the organizational features of documents.“…(p. 169)

from Potter and Wetherell (1988) Discourse and Social Psychology

Discourse analyst's actual toolkit

- Corpus (public, private, general, ad-hoc, genre-based)
- Corpus analysis tools (Google, BNC, national corpora)

  Free online corpora:
  http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk
  http://www.webcorp.org.uk
- Concordance/KWIC software: Wordsmith, MonoConc, SARA/XAIRA etc.
- Qualitative analysis software: NVIVo or Atlas.ti

5 random caveats for any would be discourse analyst

1. There is nothing special about the fact that the act of analyzing discourse is also discourse but it does mean that discourse analysts should expect (nay, demand) to have their weapons turned against them
2. The primary function of language (and discourse) is to leave some things implied (i.e. discourse does not lie, people lie)
3. At any given point, discourse is structured by multiple intersecting codes with fuzzy boundaries fulfilling multiple functions (neglecting some is a frequent cause for misinterpretation)
4. Almost anything that can be found out about a discourse community through discourse analysis (particularly power relations) can also be found through the analysis of other symbolic and material systems (i.e. DA is a part of ethnography)
5. There is no good causal explanation of the effect of a particular way of talking on behavior or beliefs for any one individual or how this cumulatively translates to a group

Final word

Doing discourse analysis for any other reason than to analyze discourse is questionable. Ultimately and inevitably, one becomes engaged in the discourse from which an analytic perspective should have provided some distance and the methodology (such as it is) used is merely one more instrument in the “power-play” of discourse. The ability to name (label) something is a way of having power over it (ask the Ancient Egyptians).

Given all that: my final recommendation is to practice critical educational research that is **“discourse-aware”** (starting with its own discourse) but **not** one that is **“discourse-based”**, unless its purpose is to find out more about educational discourse.

Where to go next

- Structure of discourse and text
  - Halliday and Hasan; Brown and Yule; Hoey; Stubbs
- Conversation analysis
  - Goffman; Schiffrin; Ten Have
- Frames and models
  - Goffman, Tannen; Lakoff
- Critical Theory
  - Fairclough; Wodak
- Discourse analysis in education
  - J. P. Gee; M. MacLure