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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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In the study of language, some of the most interesting observations are made, not in terms of the components of language, but in terms of the way language is used, even how pauses are used, as in Jerry Seinfeld's commentary. We have already considered some of the features of language in use when we discussed pragmatics in Chapter 10. We were, in effect, asking how it is that language-users successfully interpret what other language-users intend to convey. When we carry this investigation further and ask how we make sense of what we read, how we can recognize well-constructed texts as opposed to those that are jumbled or incoherent, how we understand speakers who communicate more than they say, and how we successfully take part in that complex activity called conversation, we are undertaking what is known as discourse analysis.

Discourse

The word "discourse" is usually defined as "language beyond the sentence" and so the analysis of discourse is typically concerned with the study of language in texts and conversation. In many of the preceding chapters, when we were concentrating on linguistic description, we were concerned with the accurate representation of the forms and structures. However, as language-users, we are capable of more than simply recognizing correct versus incorrect forms and structures. We can cope with fragments in newspaper headlines such as Trains collide, two die, and know that what happened in the first part was the cause of what happened in the second part. We can also make sense of notices like No shoes, no service, on shop windows in summer, understanding that a conditional relation exists between the two parts ("If you are wearing no shoes, you

will receive no service”). We have the ability to create complex discourse interpretations of fragmentary linguistic messages.

Interpreting discourse

We can even cope with texts, written in English, which we couldn't produce ourselves and which appear to break a lot of the rules of the English language. Yet we can build an interpretation. The following example, provided by Eric Nelson, is from an essay by a student learning English and contains all kinds of errors, yet it can be understood. My Town My natal was in a small town, very close to Riyadh capital of Saudi Arabia. The distant between my town and Riyadh 7 miles exactly. The name of this Almasani that means in English Factories. It takes this name from the peopl's carrer. In my childhood I remmeber the people live. It was very simple. Most the people was farmer. This example may serve to illustrate a simple point about the way we react to language that contains ungrammatical forms. Rather than simply reject the text as ungrammatical, we try to make sense of it. That is, we attempt to arrive at a reasonable interpretation of what the writer intended to convey. (Most people say they understand the “My Town” text quite easily.) It is this effort to interpret (or to be interpreted), and how we accomplish it, that are the key elements investigated in the study of discourse. To arrive at an interpretation, and to make our messages interpretable, we certainly rely on what we know about linguistic form and structure. But, as language-users, we have more knowledge than that.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (or discourse analysis) is a research method for studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context. It aims to understand how language is used in real life situations.

When you conduct discourse analysis, you might focus on:

- The purposes and effects of different types of language
- Cultural rules and conventions in communication
- How values, beliefs and assumptions are communicated
- How language use relates to its social, political and historical context

Discourse analysis is a common [qualitative research method](#) in many humanities and social science disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychology and cultural studies.

What is discourse analysis used for?

Conducting discourse analysis means examining how language functions and how meaning is created in different social contexts. It can be applied to any instance of written or oral language, as well as non-verbal aspects of communication such as tone and gestures.

Materials that are suitable for discourse analysis include:

- Books, newspapers and periodicals
- Marketing material, such as brochures and advertisements
- Business and government documents
- Websites, forums, social media posts and comments
- Interviews and conversations

By analyzing these types of discourse, researchers aim to gain an understanding of social groups and how they communicate.

Receive feedback on language, structure, and formatting

Professional editors proofread and edit your paper by focusing on:

- Academic style
- Vague sentences
- Grammar

- Style consistency

See an example

Shane - Scribbr-editor

If you want to make your writing even stronger, try to avoid "there is/are" constructions; they are considered a bit too imprecise for academic writing. For instance, this could be reworded to "potential exists for large-area inkjet electronics fabrication."

How is discourse analysis different from other methods?

Unlike linguistic approaches that focus only on the rules of language use, discourse analysis emphasizes the contextual meaning of language.

It focuses on the social aspects of communication and the ways people use language to achieve specific effects (e.g. to build trust, to create doubt, to evoke emotions, or to manage conflict).

Instead of focusing on smaller units of language, such as sounds, words or phrases, discourse analysis is used to study larger chunks of language, such as entire conversations, texts, or collections of texts. The selected sources can be analyzed on multiple levels.

Critical discourse analysis

Level of communication	What is analyzed?
Vocabulary	Words and phrases can be analyzed for ideological associations, formality, and euphemistic and metaphorical content.
Grammar	The way that sentences are constructed (e.g., verb tenses , active or passive construction, and the use of imperatives and questions) can reveal aspects of intended meaning.
Structure	The structure of a text can be analyzed for how it creates emphasis or builds a narrative.
Genre	Texts can be analyzed in relation to the conventions and communicative aims of their genre (e.g., political speeches or tabloid newspaper articles).
Non-verbal communication	Non-verbal aspects of speech, such as tone of voice, pauses, gestures, and sounds like “um”, can reveal aspects of a speaker’s intentions, attitudes, and emotions.
Conversational codes	The interaction between people in a conversation, such as turn-taking, interruptions and listener response, can reveal aspects of cultural conventions and social roles.

How to conduct discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a [qualitative](#) and interpretive method of analyzing texts (in contrast to more systematic methods like [content analysis](#)). You make interpretations based on both the details of the material itself and on contextual knowledge.

There are many different approaches and techniques you can use to conduct discourse analysis, but the steps below outline the basic structure you need to follow. Following these steps can help you avoid pitfalls of [confirmation bias](#) that can cloud your analysis.

Step 1: Define the research question and select the content of analysis

To do discourse analysis, you begin with a clearly defined [research question](#). Once you have developed your question, select a range of material that is appropriate to answer it.

Discourse analysis is a method that can be applied both to large volumes of material and to smaller samples, depending on the aims and timescale of your research.

You want to study how a particular regime change from dictatorship to democracy has affected the public relations rhetoric of businesses in the country. You decide to examine the mission statements and marketing material of the 10 largest companies within five years of the regime change.

Step 2: Gather information and theory on the context

Next, you must establish the social and historical context in which the material was produced and intended to be received. Gather factual details of when and where the content was created, who the author is, who published it, and whom it was disseminated to.

As well as understanding the real-life context of the discourse, you can also conduct a [literature review](#) on the topic and construct a [theoretical framework](#) to guide your analysis.

You research factual information on the politics and history of the country and on the businesses you are studying. You also research theory on democratic transitions and the relationship between government and business.

Step 3: Analyze the content for themes and patterns

This step involves closely examining various elements of the material – such as words, sentences, paragraphs, and overall structure – and relating them to attributes, themes, and patterns relevant to your research question.

You analyze the selected material for wording and statements that reflect or relate to authoritarian and democratic political ideologies, including attitudes toward authority, liberal values, and popular opinion.

Step 4: Review your results and draw conclusions

Once you have assigned particular attributes to elements of the material, reflect on your results to examine the function and meaning of the language used. Here, you will consider your analysis in relation to the broader context that you established earlier to draw conclusions that answer your research question.

Your analysis shows that the material published before the regime change used language that emphasized the quality and necessity of its services and products, while the material published after the shift to a democratic regime emphasized the needs and values of the consumer. You compare the results with your research on the ideology and rhetoric of the political regimes, and [infer](#) that the shifting political context shaped the communication strategies of national businesses.