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4 The usefulness of discourse analysis for social science researchers

The previous chapters have introduced theories and issues associated with discourse analysis, and discussed examples of published discourse analytic research. This chapter is the first of two which offer more practical guidance for researchers planning their own projects. It begins with a discussion of some of the reasons why researchers use discourse analysis. It then describes some of the different kinds of discourse data. The final section discusses briefly how to obtain data although, given the focus of the book on analysis, this cannot be a full guide to conducting empirical research. The section includes advice on collecting new data, selecting already existing or 'found' material as data and producing transcripts.

Reasons to use discourse analysis

This section discusses four possible reasons to adopt a discourse analytic approach in a research project, and then two more which have been labelled 'half-reasons' because there is often confusion about their relevance for discourse analysis.

Reason 1: To work with interesting data

Many aspects of research are enjoyable. Researchers become closely involved in the problems which they investigate. They work with theories which present them with new insights and questions. They have the satisfaction of producing findings which contribute to the further development of those theories, add to general understandings of the social world and also have direct practical applications. Discourse analytic research is also notable for the intrinsic interest of the material which researchers work with. As previous chapters have indicated, this can include conversations and interviews, observations of what people do and texts which have been produced for a wide range of purposes.

Reason 2: To investigate the practices and interactions of ordinary social life

The research projects outlined in Chapter 3 show how language data can be analysed in investigations of ordinary talk: between disputing neighbours or people attending a support group or colleagues in a work meeting, and by politicians using language in ways which are familiar from newspapers, media interviews and party political broadcasts. Discourse analysis enables researchers to explore these everyday situations and practices as part of larger processes and social phenomena, such as a contemporary political project to construct a new nation; the racism which potentially excludes certain people from the nation; the leadership practices which facilitate the running of a large business organization; the social norms linked to gender identities which function to exclude and stigmatize certain people in more local contexts and interactions; and a society's beliefs about health and illness which may function to encourage lifestyles, for example, in relation to exercise and diet, but also to blame people for becoming ill. The main argument for approaching talk and language data as evidence of the practices and interactions of ordinary life comes from ethnomethodology, discussed in Chapter 2.

Reason 3: To investigate a particular culture

Investigations of culture through texts of different kinds (images as well as writing) often draw on discourse analytic approaches, although they may not always be described as such. As Chapter 2 discussed, any study of culture raises issues of definition. Because this book is primarily concerned with social research, it is less focussed on art, music and literature, sometimes described as 'high culture', than culture in the more anthropological sense of lifestyle and shared customs and beliefs. The problem then becomes the limits of the culture which is being referred to. Are the research findings applicable to a national population as if that were bounded and uniform? A further problem here can be that different languages can be assumed to relate to distinct cultures, which logically is not the case (Bell's study, discussed in Chapter 3, collected data from two language groups *within* the same nation-state, Canada). In short, the boundaries of any so-called cultural group are inevitably porous. The researcher must therefore decide whether any claims from the research have a broad reference, for example, Western culture, or a narrower one such as one age group in one country, or one kind of organization.

Most discursive researchers would probably make claims about a more local and specific cultural environment but they would also understand culture as complex and divided. An example of this position comes from Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell (1995) in their research on masculinity. They said: 'The cultural environment in which people live is not coherent and integrated ... but embodies a whole range of differences and contradictions.' Following Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, they suggest that 'society's common sense' is 'a fragmented body of ideas and practices, littered with the "sediments" or "deposits" of age-old ideas and theories' and 'an established stock of taken-for-granted understandings (which) can always provide the raw materials for the construction of markedly different world views' (p. 165). In the terms presented in this book, this common sense can be analysed in terms of discourses or discursive resources. The Membership Categorization Analysis which Elizabeth Stokoe employs (see Chapter 3) similarly refers to categories and connections which are taken for granted and can be understood to be part of common sense.

Common sense can therefore be understood as the shared possession of a whole society but it does not provide a single coherent cultural viewpoint for everyone in that society; its fragmented and mixed up character (with sediments from the past) can provide a basis for different and even conflicting arguments and perspectives. Discourse analysis informs the investigation of that kind of complexity, including its contradictions and conflicts, rather than any generalized claim about a society or cultural group. Analysts may investigate the conflicts and associated contests around power through an analysis in terms of 'ideology', as in the study by Jovan Byford. A key source for this approach is the work of Michael Billig (1996; 1999).

Reason 4: To research identity

Researchers may employ discourse analysis to investigate 'big' categories of identity, such as national or gender identities, or they may begin with a narrower focus, such as illness or neighbour disputes or creative work, and then find in the course of the analytic process that identity becomes relevant. Some theoretical issues around identity were discussed in Chapter 2. Discourse analytic research on identities may focus on identities in context, as they are variously claimed, conferred, rejected and modified in ongoing talk, for example, between school pupils (Edley and Wetherell, 1997) or between people in a counselling situation (Edwards, 1998).

Another approach is to consider the identities associated with a particular life situation or problem, as evidenced in language data from many different people in that situation, such as cancer patients and their partners (Seymour-Smith et al., 2002; Bell, 2010), or people who live in one country but claim the national identity associated with another (Scully, 2009; 2010), or people at a similar point in their lives (Reynolds, 2006; 2008; McAvoy, 2009). The second approach may be linked to a theorization of identity or subjectivity which would not be described wholly or exclusively as discursive. Psychosocial research is broad-ranging but in some versions brings together an analysis of discourses and an interpretation using concepts associated with psychoanalysis (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Narrative-discursive research considers the resources and contingent constructions of sequence and consequence in people's talk, including their constructions of biographical narrative (Taylor and Littleton, 2006; Taylor, 2010).

Half-reason 1: To obtain practical information about people's lives and experiences

This is probably the commonest purpose for which researchers collect language data, including talk, but it is labelled here as a 'half-reason' because it is not a priority for most discourse analysts.

Research for information tends to assume that language is referential or transparent; it is a channel or medium for carrying information from one person to another. Journalists make this assumption when they interview eye witnesses or experts, asking them to describe or explain something that has happened. However, most discourse researchers start from a different premise; they are interested in talk or language use as functional and constitutive.

The distinction can be confusing for two reasons. The first is that the same data can be employed for studies with both purposes; the difference is in the analysis, not the data collection. (The same language data can of course be repeatedly analysed in different ways: see Van Den Berg et al., 2003) The second is that although it is usual to make this distinction, between language as transparent and language as functional or constitutive, in practice the approaches are difficult to separate entirely. Using an interpretive or constructionist approach like discourse analysis does not exclude the use of talk as information. Moreover, even the writers who argue that language is constitutive also use language referentially in their

own work, for example, when they describe what they did and present arguments and findings. An analysis will normally treat participants' accounts at least partly as information and in most research it is possible to accept these accounts as broadly truthful and reliable. As Martyn Hammersley has argued: 'No knowledge is certain, but knowledge claims can be judged in terms of their likely truth' (1998, p. 66).

Half-reason 2: To explore people's opinions

Social psychologists, and especially those who employ discourse analytic approaches, have criticized the kinds of research which employ language data in order to investigate attitudes and opinions. They reject research which treats people's talk (or writing) as evidence of what they will say or do in future. They point out, for example, that an expression of prejudice is not necessarily proof that in some future situation the speaker will act in a prejudiced way (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In particular, discourse analysts criticize any assumption that a stated opinion is the straightforward expression of an attitude, as if this were some fixed mental state. They therefore avoid research which employs questionnaires or interviews with the purpose of collecting opinions or measuring or evaluating attitudes.

This rejection of conventional opinion polls and attitude research follows from two arguments associated with discourse analysis. The first is the argument that language is not transparent, as discussed above. What someone says will be shaped by the immediate context, including by what has come before. It is not direct evidence of the workings of the person's thoughts or mind. This links to the second argument, concerning the nature of the person. As discussed in Chapter 2, discourse analysts and discursive psychologists would reject the whole model of the person as a kind of container for inner states or processes.

What are the practical consequences for discourse analytic research? Discourse analytic research may investigate the ideas and ways of talking which function to exclude certain groups of people in society (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). This is likely to involve an exploration of discursive resources. They may consider the functions of (apparently) prejudiced talk in a specific context (Condor, 2011). Jovan Byford's research, discussed in Chapter 3, illustrates both these points. In summary, discourse analysis explores ideas which are commonly held across society or particular social

groups or contexts, but they generally do not investigate or make claims about the opinions of individuals.

Different forms of data

Discourse analysts work with many different kinds of language material. The research projects discussed in Chapter 3 illustrated the most common types. Kirsten Bell interviewed participants and also compiled field notes in her role as a participant-observer in cancer support groups. Jovan Byford conducted interviews, which he recorded, and also collected a range of texts which were publicly available, for example, in newspapers. Elizabeth Stokoe arranged for mediation sessions to be recorded and also collected recordings of television interviews. Wodak et al. recorded meetings and other events taking place within a business organization. Discourse studies can also analyse data which are not linguistic. For example, a study of nations and national identity might consider the ways in which flags are displayed (Billig, 1995), research on gender might discuss still or filmed images in advertisements (e.g., Gill, 2008).

Discourse analysts work with written language, for example, in the form of official documents, news articles and online material from web pages and forums. They analyse audio and video recordings. Although some researchers do work directly with the recordings, listening and watching repeatedly, the recordings are usually converted to written form through selective copying of what is said. This process of transcription is discussed below.

In summary, we can distinguish two categories of data. The first is new material which is collected specifically for a research project, such as interview and focus group recordings, and the second is already existing material (TV and radio programmes, newspapers, etc.). A researcher who collects *new* material may need to recruit potential participants, with all the steps this involves, including appropriate ethical procedures. The discourse analyst will not always be the interviewer or focus group leader. For example, Bell's data included recordings from a focus group conducted by someone else and Taylor and Littleton's research on creative work and creative careers (Taylor and Littleton, 2008) used interviews conducted by someone else, employed because she had particular interviewing skills. A possible intermediate category of material is the recording of talk and

interactions which would have taken place anyway, whether or not the researcher was involved. Examples of this were Stokoe's mediation sessions and Wodak et al.'s meetings. This kind of data is often referred to as 'naturally occurring'. It is favoured by researchers working in the tradition of conversation analysis but is also used by other discourse researchers, as in Wodak et al.'s CDA study.

The material which discourse researchers work with does not automatically acquire the status of data. It needs to be collected and selected and often transformed in other ways. The next section discusses some of the processes involved. It provides practical guidance on obtaining data for discourse analysis. However, note that this is not a general guide to setting up and conducting an empirical project so it does not include advice on project design, obtaining access and contacting participants, implementing appropriate ethical procedures and other necessary aspects of any research project.

Obtaining data

This section will discuss the practical side of discourse research, specifically issues of data collection and data processing, including transcription and selection.

Planning any research project, whatever the data to be used, involves establishing a theoretical and empirical starting point. This is given partly by key theoretical sources and previous empirical research. Both of these will shape the particular problem or research questions which a new project addresses. The researcher will need to decide what a data analysis might contribute, what specific analytic approach to use and what data are appropriate to it. (As just one example, a conversation analyst would probably not use interview data.) These decisions will help the researcher either to devise an appropriate method of data collection, such as setting up interviews or focus groups, arranging to record naturally occurring talk, observing and recording in a situation in which the researcher is also a participant, or to select the already existing data which are relevant to the project.

The studies discussed in Chapter 3 referred to data which had been obtained in several different ways: 'found' data (the different kinds of news material analysed by Byford, and the television interviews analysed by

Stokoe), new data obtained through interviews (by Byford, Bell and Wodak et al.), ‘naturally occurring’ data (the recorded mediation sessions analysed by Stokoe and the meetings analysed by Wodak et al.), and observation data obtained through participation (by Bell and her co-researcher, and by Kwon and Clarke, recorded in field notes). The last mentioned form of data is associated with ethnographic research. This is a research approach in its own right so it will not be covered here. The remainder of this section will address three questions: ‘How do I select “found” data?’ ‘How do I collect data through interviewing?’ and ‘How do I obtain naturally occurring data?’ The section leads into the discussion of the process of analysis in the next chapter.

How do I select ‘found’ data?

A researcher who decides to analyse already existing material might appear to have an easier task than one who collects new data. However, there will still be a number of steps to follow before available material can be approached as research data. A major problem with found data is usually to narrow down the available material to a manageable quantity. Newspapers (now mostly available online), web forums, advertisements and official documents are all potentially excellent research material, as are existing sound and visual recordings from the web (again), television and radio but the researcher will almost certainly obtain more material than can be analysed. The problem will be to make a manageable and appropriate selection.

A further issue is to decide what material potentially constitutes data and what provides background information: as the studies in Chapter 3 illustrated, the distinction may not be clear. In general, the data for a discourse analytic study will be explored in terms of one of the analytic concepts associated with the approach, such as strategies, discourses, subject positions, dilemmas and Membership Categorizations.

How do I obtain naturally occurring data?

As already noted, ‘naturally occurring’ usually refers to talk which would have happened anyway, whether or not the researcher had been there. One way to obtain this is to analyse talk which has already been recorded for another purpose, which is a form of found data. An example would be when the researcher chooses to analyse television or radio programmes, or online material. The practical advantages of using already recorded

material are obvious; the disadvantages are that there may not be sufficient information available about the context (e.g., when the recording took place). The material may have been edited. There may also be some ethical issues involved about who has the rights to the material and, in some cases, whether it is appropriate to discuss speakers who cannot remain anonymous, for instance, because they were recorded for television or radio and named in the programme.

Alternatively, the researcher may arrange to obtain new data of this kind; for example, Wiggins (2004) invited families to record their meal-time conversation and many other researchers have placed recording equipment in schools and universities (of course with permission). Some of the most famous conversation analytic research has used recorded telephone calls (e.g., in the work of Harvey Sacks; see Jefferson, 1992). A study which seeks to obtain new data of this kind will of course involve the same steps (planning, obtaining ethical approval, calling for volunteers, etc.) as other research projects involving participants. These steps are not detailed in this book since it focuses primarily on analysis.

How do I collect data through interviewing?

The most popular way to obtain data for discourse analysis is probably through interviewing. There are many published texts on research interviewing and this section will not attempt to provide a general guide but will focus on points relevant to interviewing for a discourse analytic project.

The first point to note is that the data which will be used are the talk, not the speakers. It is always tempting to attempt to 'understand' the person behind the talk but this is not the aim of most discourse analyses. The purpose of the interview is therefore an occasion for the collection of talk data. Because an interview is a form of interaction, a further purpose will be for the interviewer (who may not be the same person as the researcher) to engage in an interaction with the interviewee. There are many different types of interviews, from television interrogations of politicians to job recruitment interviews to consultations between medical doctors or therapists and their patients. A research interview is different from any of these but can occasionally take on aspects of all of them, especially if the researcher has not thought through the purpose and nature of the interview as an occasion. Most discourse analysts will aim for an interview which is something like a friendly conversation, that is, courteous, informal

and two-way, with the interviewer acknowledging what is said, contributing responses and perhaps some thoughts and experiences of her own.

The interaction between researcher and participant begins well before the interview. Because discourse theories emphasize the situated nature of talk, it will be relevant for the researcher to pay careful attention to the way the project is presented to potential participants and the expectations which may be established, for example, in how the interview is set up and what they are invited to talk about. Most research participants volunteer or agree to be interviewed because they have some interest in the general topic of the research. However, they may also have misunderstood the topic, however carefully they have been briefed, and even the purpose of the interview, making assumptions, for example, about the kind of information or details which are required.

The researcher has a responsibility towards the participants. Ideally they will enjoy the interview: it is a situation in which they are receiving attention and interest. Occasionally they may be involved because they disagree with the researcher's position, so that the interview is a form of contest (this might have been the case with Byford's interviews, referred to in Chapter 3). In either case, the researcher is the beneficiary, receiving vital contributions to her or his research project, and the interviewee deserves to be treated with courtesy and, if at all possible, not caused distress or offence.

Many discourse researchers prefer to conduct their own interviews but others work from the recordings and transcripts of interviews conducted by someone else. The research data will include both the answers provided by the participant and the questions and other contributions from the interviewer since these are all part of the interaction. The most common type of interview is a semi-structured interview, that is, one in which the interviewer has a prepared list of questions which is used as a general guide but not a rigid template for the interview. For instance, the interviewer may omit or rephrase questions or vary the order, depending on what has already been said.

An important premise in discourse analytic research is that the talk is prompted by the questions but not produced by them. The talk is co-constructed in the interaction: this is part of its situated nature. It is also shaped by the discursive resources which are available to speakers. In addition, depending on the topic of the interview, much of the talk is likely to be rehearsed, produced on this occasion as a situated version of

what has been said before. These various assumptions suggest different approaches to analysis (discussed in the next chapter) and also have implications for the researcher planning an interview. There is an argument that an interview cannot 'fail' because any talk, or even an absence of response, can constitute data and be analysed (see Jones, 2003, for an analysis of an interview which went wrong). However, for novice researchers in particular, it will be preferable to have more talk rather than less, so ideally the interview questions will be easy for the participant to understand; they will be open-ended and interesting, inviting extended answers, and they will encourage a flow from one topic or area to the next without any abrupt change of focus to interrupt the interview as a conversation.

The researcher will of course need to decide how many interviews to conduct. Since the aim is to analyse talk data, not participants, a discourse analytic study seldom involves just one or two interviews. A fairly substantial data set or body of interview material is appropriate. For a researcher working alone, 15 to 20 interviews are probably the minimum. These might be obtained from 20 participants, or 10 who are interviewed twice. Repeat interviews, associated with a longitudinal study, can enable interesting comparisons across different occasions of talk (see Taylor, 2012), as can data from different sources, such as group discussions and one-to-one interviews.

Regardless of the number of interviews conducted, they will almost certainly be recorded for later transcription and analysis. Most researchers in this field use audio recordings but video can provide useful additional information, for example, about exactly who is speaking in a group interview or focus group.

Producing transcripts

In its simplest form, transcription is the process of converting talk to written language by writing down what was said. It is part of the analytic process (Ochs 1979; Hammersley, 2010) but it is only the beginning. As the next chapter discusses, the process of analysing interview transcripts requires protracted and iterative re-reading and comparison, across different interviews and different parts of the same interview. The initial purpose is to find patterns in the data and this provides a useful, general guide for transcription. The details to be transcribed will be those in which the analyst seeks to find patterns. For example, if the interest is in discursive resources, such as discourses, interpretative repertoires or narratives, then the most

important content of the transcript will be the words. If the analyst is studying interaction, for example, in a conversation analytic study, then the transcript will need to record details of the interaction, such as the pauses or overlaps between successive turns of talk from different speakers. Researchers have devised systems of 'notation' for recording various details (hesitation, intonation, emphasis) and particular studies may devise new symbols to indicate particular points of interest. Chapter 3 showed an example of a detailed transcript from the article by Stokoe.

Transcription is not a purely technical process because it is always selective: it involves interpretation. There is almost no limit to the details which can potentially be included, depending on the researcher's interest, so it is never possible to transcribe 'everything'. Some analysts do all of their own transcription, regarding this as a necessary part of the process of familiarizing themselves with their data. Others employ a professional transcriber to produce a first version and in the near future, this may be done using voice recognition software. However, the analyst generally needs to check such transcripts against the original recordings and correct and add details. Some researchers begin by working with recordings and part-transcripts, then produce final transcripts of selected sections of the data rather than attempting to transcribe the entire data set. Whatever choice is made, transcription is a laborious and time-consuming task.

There are three further points to be made about transcripts. The first is that a transcript is primarily a working document for the researcher. Research publications such as reports, articles and monographs will include transcript extracts but, as with other data, the discourse researcher will always have analysed more material than can be presented to readers. A transcript can seldom be published in full, partly for this reason of length, partly because there will too much detail which is irrelevant to the arguments of the researcher and partly because there will be details which breach anonymity. (For example, a single reference to a detail like a participant's occupation or age or place of residence will probably not enable others to identify her, but if at various points in her talk she discloses several of those details, then taken together they may enable other people to recognize her or find out who she is.) This therefore becomes an ethical problem, since participants are usually promised anonymity.

The second point is that even the simplest transcription of talk will be different from written language because the grammar of talk is different

from the grammar of writing. This is a linguistic point which does not need to be explored here, except to point out that people do not speak in 'correct' sentences. Newspapers sometimes present interviews as if these have been directly transcribed, but the talk has generally been quite extensively edited into the form of standard written language, in full sentences (indicated with capital letters, full stops and commas). Unedited talk always contains repetitions, incomplete utterances, false starts, hesitations and self-corrections, so transcribed talk generally includes at least some of these regularities. A 'found' transcript may provide suitable material for analysis, but the analyst will need to be aware of how it has been edited and what may have been omitted, or added.

A third point which sometimes concerns researchers is whether or not they should ask participants to check the transcripts of interviews. It is usual to offer people a transcript of their own interview but it is important to be clear why this is done. First, it is a courtesy. Second, it may also be done for ethical reasons, for example, to offer participants an opportunity to ask for certain details to be removed, although that is not usually necessary if participants have been promised anonymity. A third reason, in a longitudinal study, is that a participant may be given a transcript as preparation for a subsequent interview, to remind them of what was said. An argument against this is that remembering is selective (i.e., it always involves forgetting) so that participants may be surprised and even distressed to read in a transcript what they said on a previous occasion, especially some time ago. A different reason for not returning a transcript is that people are often disconcerted by the irregularity of transcribed talk because they are not aware that this is different from written language, as noted above. More prosaically, transcripts are very long so the participant is being given quite a substantial reading task. If a reminder is really needed, then it is probably more appropriate for the researcher to prepare a short summary of key points covered in the previous interview.

Some researchers, such as oral historians, do give back transcripts as part of a process of negotiating a factual record. The participant is encouraged to revise what was said. However, a discourse analyst is interested in the situated nature of talk and would not expect people to give identical accounts in different interviews. If a participant amends a transcript (e.g., by adding details) what results will be a composite of several versions from different occasions. Such a composite is not a transcript in discourse

analytic terms so is not appropriate as data for the kind of analyses discussed in this book.

Summary

Chapter 4 has discussed some reasons to use discourse analysis for a research project, the kinds of data which can be analysed and the commonest ways of obtaining data.