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5 The challenges of discourse analysis

This chapter reviews the problems or challenges faced by the discourse analyst. The content of this chapter also complements the section 'Obtaining data', in Chapter 4, as a practical guide, moving on from the task of obtaining data to the process of analysis and interpretation. The chapter is organized in a question and answer format.

How do I decide the right approach to discourse analysis for my project?

As the previous chapters of this book have indicated, there is no one 'right way' to analyse discourse. Any discourse analytic project establishes its own connections between the researcher's assumptions about the world (theory), the topic being investigated, the interpretation of 'discourse' which is adopted, the materials to be analysed (data) and the relevance of those materials to the topic (such as when talk is analysed as 'identity work'). A new project may build on previous research or it may develop its own unique variant; the resulting project may or may not be labelled discourse analysis. As a consequence, the researcher needs to be aware of the assumptions underlying the methods she or he employs. Most researchers will begin by reading published studies (like the ones in Chapter 3) alongside the work of key theorists (such as those named in Chapter 2). The reference lists for publications can indicate other relevant sources. The broad approach given by previous work can then be revised during the planning of the new project and new analytic concepts may be incorporated when the researcher begins working with the data, but at every stage it will be important to check decisions back against the underlying theory.

How do I decide how much material to analyse?

This is a difficult point. It is certainly possible to have too small a quantity of data. The analytic process outlined in Chapter 5 involves searching for patterns across a data set, and this would not be possible with, say, just one interview or one document. Alternatively, with that amount, it would still be possible to build on the findings of previous research, to note that the new data illustrate patterns and features noted by other researchers. For example, a conversation analyst might label details of a new extract of talk with reference to the canon of conversation analytic studies. There is an assumption operating in this approach that interactions can be described in near-universal terms, but most other discourse researchers would not generalize so widely and so they work with larger data sets.

On the other hand, there are practical limits to the quantities of data which are manageable. For instance, recorded material probably needs to be transcribed, which is a laborious process, as noted in the previous chapter. More importantly, the researcher needs to familiarize herself with all or most of the data, as discussed in the following section.

It might seem obvious that collecting more data will raise the standard of the research and the reliability of the findings, but this is a misconception. First, qualitative research does not and cannot use statistically representative samples; the basis for generalization is different (see later). Second, the research process is not equivalent to drawing a very detailed picture, adding detail to achieve a closer representation of reality. Rather, the researcher is building a chain of argument, linking (i) a theory of how the social world works, and (ii) a second theory (usually called methodology) of how material collected in an empirical study can be treated as evidence of the workings of that world, to (iii) the selection and presentation of particular material (data) as the evidence to support a new claim. Adding more and more data does not inevitably strengthen the links; the more important point is how they are theorized.

How do I manage and 'process' my data?

Most researchers work with a combination of electronic files, for easy storage, and hard copy printouts, for easy reading, re-reading and marking up. The software packages which are rather misleadingly referred to as CAQDAS (computer assisted qualitative data analysis software) cannot

analyse discourse data, or any other qualitative data, because the researcher will always need to familiarize her or himself with all of the material and interpret it, a process which inevitably involves decision-making. However, software is extremely useful as another medium for marking up data like transcripts, and for appending comments and sorting material into new files, especially when there is more than one researcher working on the project.

How do I begin the analysis?

The process of analysing discourse data is not linear but exploratory and iterative. In other words, the analyst's task is not one of straightforwardly 'translating' or 'decoding' the data, one item at a time; rather, analysis involves reading and re-reading an entire data set, comparing, noticing and marking points of possible interest and returning to them later. (The analysts whose work is discussed in Chapter 3 all worked 'across' their data sets, as noted in the section 'Concluding comments'.) This is a time-consuming process and most novices do not allow enough time for it. The analysis phase of a discourse analysis project may overlap with both the data collection and the writing up and will take longer than either. It cannot be accomplished in one or two sittings.

Without computers (and many analysts do prefer to work with hard copies of transcripts and other data), starting the analysis may involve marking selected sections of the data, perhaps with different coloured pens; assembling piles or files of 'like' material; scribbling notes and making lists of possible points for follow up, often working from features and concepts noted by previous researchers. Many analysts now use software to facilitate the same operations. A standard word-processing program can be used to copy and paste sections of data into new files and mark up points of interest. So-called qualitative analysis software facilitates all of these operations and is particularly useful for coordinating the work of a team of researchers. Some software, such as the corpus analysis programme used by Wodak et al., searches out particular word sets. However, as noted above, most software is designed as a tool for data *management* rather than analysis. The hard work of exploring, thinking and decision-making still has to be done by the analyst.

As the analyst becomes familiar with all of the data, one activity will be to mark connections between different pieces of material, even though in

the first instance the significance of the connection may not be apparent, and then to assemble subsets or collections of material. This operation is often referred to as 'coding'. Initially, the codes may be very broad (e.g., 'work', 'home', 'finance') and they will not be exclusive: the same piece of material may be coded several ways. Coding cannot be done mechanically, without active thinking, although it is often possible use a computer search function in order to find potentially relevant material, for example, by looking up key words relevant to a code. Coding can be a useful 'way in' to a large data set but it is not the inevitable starting point.

For interview data, another starting point can be to compare different participants' answers to the same or similar questions. When the same participant has been interviewed more than once, there can be comparisons across the interviews. Since the talk is situated, it is not likely that someone will say exactly the same thing on different occasions, but both the difference and the similarities can be surprising. In a narrative-discursive analysis, one point of interest is the similarities which follow from the rehearsed nature of many accounts, so that previous versions, for example, of a speaker's life history, become resources for her own subsequent talk: Taylor and Littleton call these 'local resources' (2006, p. 33; 2012, p. 42).

More generally, similarities across interviews (whether in the actual wording, the images or broad ideas, or the style or form of talking) can usefully be grouped together for a later decision about how to relate the material to analytic concepts such as discursive resources. A different starting point will be to consider the talk as action: What is it doing in this specific interaction and more generally? It may be useful here to think about rhetorical work, of the kind discussed by Byford. This is talk or writing which makes an argument, sometimes by anticipating a challenge or criticism ('I'm not prejudiced but ...'), indicating the argumentative and dialogic nature of talk (Billig, 1987; 1999). The relevant analytic concepts will be given, at least initially, by the approach which the researcher has chosen (see question 1, 'How do I decide the right approach to discourse analysis for my project?'). As the analysis proceeds, new concepts may be taken up. For example, an investigation of how participants resist dominant discourses (as in Bell's study, discussed in Chapter 3) might focus attention on the uses of humour. The researcher would then return to the data looking for jokes, laughter and so on. New questions arise: Are there different kinds of laughter? What is the significance of speakers laughing together or

one person laughing alone? This point would suggest new features to be included in the transcription, and so on.

The researcher's interpretation is based on evidence obtained through a rigorous data analysis, but this analysis remains hidden to a great extent. One reason is that the quantities of data involved cannot be presented, for practical reasons of length and also, of course, to protect the anonymity of participants. Discourse analysis is therefore an interpretative analytic approach grounded in the evidence provided, for example, from transcribed talk. The previous painstaking exploration of multiple interviews has to be taken on trust. (This is not very different to the 'off-stage' work involved in most kinds of qualitative research.)

A discourse analyst detects a pattern in the data and eventually labels it for the purposes of the particular discussion. Clearly, this is a loose process of labelling rather than a right/wrong identification. For example, what one researcher calls a narrative, that is, a construction of sequence and consequence, often with a link to temporality, could be a part of what another analyst would call an interpretative repertoire.

The remainder of this section presents two examples of the beginning of the analytic process, one of a researcher working alone and one of collaborative analysis between two researchers. Although many discourse analytic projects are conducted by a single researcher, there is a sense in which no academic researcher is working entirely alone because she or he is necessarily engaging with others by reading their work, listening to conference presentations and presenting papers to journals and conference audiences for feedback. Discourse analytic researchers are also likely to seek opportunities to present data or work in progress in seminars and research groups. Other people's suggestions can provide an invaluable stimulus for an analyst who is struggling with a large data set.

Example 1

A researcher is analysing interview and observation data which she has collected in a project working with young people. Her first task is to re-read her field notes and interview transcripts and notes, at least twice over for each. She does this over several days in a number of sessions, some of them quite short (even as little as half an hour). As she reads, she tries to keep an open mind, putting aside, temporarily, her own views of her participants and their lives and her knowledge of other research and of theories. This is sometimes referred to as 'bracketing': the purpose is to approach the

data *as* data without thinking too much about the speakers themselves or the situations or events which are referred to. A group discussion and brainstorming of a sample of data can help the researcher to do this; the views of other people draw her attention to her own assumptions.

She marks sections of the talk which seem interesting for any reason, such as wording which is striking, or a memorable anecdote or interaction. She also notes features which recurred within one speaker's talk (wording, references, accounts), possibly on different occasions, or across the talk of different speakers, or across several kinds of data (e.g., links between what one participant said and what the researcher had observed another participant do).

The researcher then goes back to the marked sections of the data and re-reads those. She re-examines sections of interview data on several levels, asking herself questions.

- The first is the level of the interview interaction between the interviewer and participant. She asks: What function does the talk have as a response to questions and follow-on to previous discussion? Her purpose here is to examine the talk as interaction between the people who were present. A further step is to consider whether there is interaction with other potential or imagined audiences. Are certain features of the talk addressed to people who are not present, such as potential critics? Her purpose here is to consider the rhetorical aspects of talk. For example, negative prefacing comments like 'I'm not saying that ...' are generally seen to be directed, or oriented, in this way (cf. Byford's study in Chapter 3).
- The second level relates to the talk more generally. Possible questions to ask are: What features of the talk itself are noticeable? Are there stories or anecdotes which have a rehearsed feel, or are even repeated? What positive and negative valuing appears? What's mentioned as 'good' or 'bad' for example? Are there instances of implied cause and effect, that is, what's spoken of as leading to or following from something else? What categorization appears in the talk? The purpose here is to examine the talk as a complex changing production which is shaped both by previous talk and ideas (the speaker's own, and other people's) and by its multiple, overlapping functions as communication, with the interviewer and with other audiences associated with particular subject positions (imagined listeners, society in

general, etc.). This contributes to an analysis of the talk in terms of discursive resources.

- The third level is the most straightforward and the one common to other qualitative approaches, like ethnography, which treat the speaker as an informant. She asks: What's happening in the events described in the talk?

She compiles files of some of these features and labels the patterns for reference, but at this point she does not try to explain their importance.

Example 2

Two researchers are analysing 50 interviews which have been conducted for a large project by a research fellow, then transcribed. The researchers have listened to each recording and read each transcript as they received them. They then begin the process of analysis.

- They choose an interview to study closely. Each listens again to the recording and re-reads the transcript, making their own notes.
- They meet. Each reports what she's noticed about the interview and one makes expanded notes which she writes up as a record.
- They repeat this process over different meetings, discussing two or three interviews at each meeting. They start to see similar points recurring in different interviews, or at different points in the same interview. The notes on each interview begin to reflect these patterns, which they label (e.g., 'big money talk', 'a story about childhood', 'competition').
- The researchers continue the process for all the interviews, which takes hours! By the time they have discussed about half their data, they have labelled a number of patterns and are talking about how these fit together, why they might be there (e.g., what functions they might fulfil) and what implications they might have. A useful point can be the examples which depart from a pattern (Taylor and Littleton, 2006, discuss an example of an analysis which builds on a pattern and exceptions). The researchers also consider how these patterns fit with points which other analysts have noted, and with theories. Some ideas and possible arguments begin to emerge in their discussion. The researchers note these but are careful not to close down the process of exploration. They also consider their own preconceptions, discussing what they might be wanting to find or,

alternatively, avoiding seeing. What personal interests are they bringing to the data? Which participants do they feel more or less interest in, and why? Are there any interviews they should read again, putting aside certain assumptions?

- They choose particular patterns which they have noted and return to individual interviews where the pattern appeared, looking again at the pattern within the context of the particular interview.

How do I develop an interpretation and argument?

At this point, the researcher, whether working alone or with someone else, will be very familiar with a large proportion of the data, not just one or two interviews. She has picked out recurring features and compiled collections of examples of these features. The next step is less systematic. The researcher steps back from the data to the larger foci, which are the following:

- the research questions which were the starting point for the whole project,
- the issues given by the theoretical background to the project and by previous related research.

By relating the patterns to analytic concepts (discourses, categories, strategies), the researcher develops an account of what is happening in the talk. This leads on to the questions: What could this be evidence of? What do I want to argue on the basis of this evidence?

The point of a discourse analytic project using talk data is that the theory underpinning the project indicates a particular connection between the talk and the larger question or problem being addressed. The aim is not to analyse the speaker as a person. For researchers working with talk data, it will therefore be useful at this point to try to put aside what is known of the person and focus only on the talk. This is more easily done some time after the occasion of the interview, or with data from an interview conducted by someone else.

The aim now is to build up arguments, from evidence to claims. It will probably be useful to build on similarities and differences compared to the evidence and claims of previous researchers in this area. This thinking process is the most difficult part of analysis and interpretation. It will

almost inevitably involve many drafts of notes and trial arguments. On the way, some arguments, even with evidence, will be put aside, while others will be rehearsed and refined.

The eventual core argument which will be presented in a research text (a paper or a chapter of a dissertation or thesis) will be the outcome of this extended process of development; the process itself and most of the data cannot be presented in full. Discourse researchers are always looking for succinct data extracts which *exemplify* patterns that recurred across an entire data set. Sometimes it is practical to discuss a single case in this way (e.g., Taylor, 2011) but the discussion will make clear how far this case is representative of the larger data set, including the ways in which it is distinctive. Talk or field notes can provide illustrative examples of general features but any example will inevitably be rich in specific details, some of which are particular to one participant or speaker. Part of the task of writing up the analysis will be to draw attention to the general argument and claims being made on the basis of the entire data analysis.

What is the status of the findings?

The findings of a discourse analytic study are an interpretation grounded in a rigorous process of data analysis. Generalization is on the basis of the patterns found in a large body of talk or other language data through the analytic process described above. The broad assumption is that the analysis has discovered social meanings and language-related practices which are a feature of a wider context and population. However, there is no assumption that either the meanings or practices are wholly determining or predictive of future practices, interactions or situations. Social life is assumed to be emergent and highly complex. Consequently, although any example of talk is from an individual speaker, potentially describeable in general category terms (a woman or a man, of a certain age, occupation and so on), the speakers are not discussed or analysed as 'types'.

Summary

Chapter 5 answered some common questions about the challenges of discourse analysis, including the process of analysis.