Taylor, Stephanie. "Criticisms of discourse analysis." *What is Discourse Analysis?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 77–86. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472545213.ch-006>>.

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6 Criticisms of discourse analysis

This chapter will be presented in the form of ‘critical statements’ followed by discussion.

‘Discourse analysis is just about words’

This criticism encompasses several different issues. A statement like this is usually part of a larger complaint that discourse analysis does not take account of something else, such as non-verbal communication, body language and emotions, visual representations, or objects, space and the material world, including people’s bodies. A number of points can be made in response. In addition, the criticism can refer to how discourse analysts discuss their participants: this is explored as a separate statement in the section ‘Discourse analysis doesn’t take enough account of people’.

The first point to make here is to agree that, yes, for some discourse analysts the approach *is* about words and language. They investigate how texts and talk in certain contexts contribute to the exercise of power. Parliamentary speeches, news reports, official statements and other forms of public communication, such as advertisements, can all be analysed with this focus. The interest is in how language is used to reinforce norms, legitimate existing social structures, subtly obscure or rationalize inequalities, play down problems and perpetuate an interpretation of society which supports some interests and obscures others. Analysts aim to expose these effects and in doing so, to challenge established orders and elites. The analysis of the texts may extend beyond the words themselves to the visual elements of a text, such as the organization of a news page with headlines and pictures. However, the main focus will almost certainly be on the language. The approach known as Critical Discourse Analysis, associated with Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun A. van Dijk among many others, is particularly known for this kind of research.

A second reason why some (but not all) analysts would agree with the above statement is that words and language have a special status in society. When people talk to each other their language use may incorporate gestures (such as a nod of the head) and sounds which are not words ('Mm' or similar as an acknowledgement or agreement) but these are meaningful within a communication system which is primarily verbal. There are special cases in which an entire 'conversation' can be conducted without words, but they are rare exceptions. Communication through language use is a vital, rule-governed social practice in which people necessarily become skilled in order to function as members of society. Talk and language are therefore obvious forms of data for a social scientist who wants to study society. In an analysis of such data, a researcher can draw on her or his own expertise as a language user, as well as on previous findings about the conventions of conversation. The importance of this argument can be underlined by comparison with a research project in which the participants are asked to draw a picture or take a photograph. They are being asked to engage in an unfamiliar practice with few or no conventions. (Of course this may not be quite the case if they are skilled artists or photographers, and the analyst shares those skills, but that would be an exceptional situation and highly unusual in social research.) The consequence will be that neither the participants nor the analyst will be able to 'do' things with the media or interpret what is produced as either a communication or a socially meaningful activity. Alternatively, the researcher may invite them to talk about what they have produced, so that the analytic focus becomes, again, language.

However, some discourse analysts would disagree strongly with the statement that 'Discourse is *just* about words'. Their argument, broadly, is that there is no neat separation between the meanings in language and in the social world more generally. To talk about people, things and the material world is to bring them into language (and therefore 'into culture' in the words of Edwards et al., 1995). Even if people and things are not specifically named and described by a research participant, they inevitably function within larger systems of meaning. Previous chapters have discussed examples of the connections between certain named or nameable identities (a good learner, a healthy eater), the values and knowledge which makes the identities available, the institutions through which the knowledge is established and disseminated and so on. Some of this complex formation may operate without being explicitly brought into language: indeed, one

purpose of the research may be to identify and name what has previously been invisible and unacknowledged. Words and language are inevitably linked with the social world and its ongoing activities. In this view, to say 'discourse analysis is just about words' is to ignore the social meanings which are attached to language and words yet not confined to them.

These issues arise partly because of the range of data and analytic approaches encompassed within the category 'discourse analysis'. Researchers who are interested in the difficult experiences of people who have been socially marginalized may feel that a focus on words and language amounts to a trivialization of their participants' difficulties. To study details of wording, grammar and punctuation may seem inappropriate, even offensive, and a turning away from vital, apparently non-verbal aspects of their participants' lives such as feelings, their poor health or physical injuries, bad living conditions or incarceration. A further motivation here may be a wish to look at the 'whole'. It may seem disrespectful to investigate only small details of an account.

One counter-argument is that the apparently non-verbal aspects of communication are generally connected to language, so language data can provide appropriate evidence. Another counter-argument is that all research involves the selective reduction of a complex social world to data. For example, a census or survey reduces people and their situations to categories and statistics, yet it can prompt help and improvement of their welfare. Discourse analytic research has always had a strong connection with social issues. As the previous chapters have indicated, discourse researchers have challenged prejudice, racism and other injustices. The analysis of words and language, often at the level of fine detail, is their starting point for doing this.

A final point to note here is the issue of emotions, more recently linked to the study of affect. Some psychosocial researchers have suggested that discourse analysis 'leaves out' emotion. The assumption here is that the taking up or contesting of a subject position is a verbal or intellectual action which is separate from feelings. This argument is possibly a consequence of an artificial separation of language data from the continuum of meanings, lived experience and so on with which it is implicated, as outlined earlier. A similar separation appears in the common contrasting of the rational with the emotional. A counter-argument would be that the types of discursive resources discussed by many analysts are laden with values and other affective associations so that the kind of identity

work which may be investigated and discussed in terms of transcripts is, again, not just about words (see Taylor and Littleton, 2012).

‘Discourse analysis doesn’t take enough account of people’

Much of the discussion in this book has referred to the analysis of talk data from interviews and other interactions. For novice researchers in particular, there can be a tension between forms of data which appear to push attention towards the individual speaker, understood in commonsense terms as agentic and expressive, and an analytic approach which challenges this conception of the person (see Chapter 2) and makes claims about social phenomena rather than particular people. Researchers who collect their own data are likely to have a strong impression of speakers as driven by emotions and intentions, yet discourse analysis is concerned with meanings and practices which are primarily social, albeit impacting upon and constitutive of individuals and often investigated through their particular practices, including talk practices. (This is a reason to avoid giving participants pseudonyms or prefacing their discussions of data extracts with mini biographies of the speaker or writer: see Taylor, 2012.)

This tension is seldom directly addressed in published accounts of analyses or in research methods texts. Harvey Sacks, the originator of conversation analysis, famously said about people and their talk: ‘Don’t worry about how fast they’re thinking.... don’t worry about whether they’re “thinking”. Just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off. Because you’ll find that they can do these things’ (Sacks in Jefferson, 1992, p. 11). This is another way of saying that the focus is on talk as a practice, a form of doing which (like body movements) is seldom pre-planned or consciously performed. As a consequence, analysts tend to avoid using language which implies a two-stage process of thinking and speaking. This is a subtle point, not least because, first, speaking can shift from a practice which is performed without intention to one which the speaker is very conscious of planning (e.g., in unfamiliar interactions), and second, because of course some analysts do investigate material which has been planned with great care and attention, such as political speeches on sensitive topics (as in Byford’s research, discussed in Chapter 3).

Nonetheless, discourse analysis remains an approach primarily used for investigating collectively held meanings and collective practices. The additional issues of how these may be constitutive of the talk of an individual and, further, constitutive of the person as an individual are ones addressed by some social psychologists (e.g., Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Wetherell, 2003; Taylor, 2011; 2010) but are not necessarily part of discourse analysis. This territory is one which is increasingly discussed as the concern of psychosocial research. For novice researchers, the important point to keep in mind is that discourse analysis is an approach for social research. It analyses language data but does not attempt to make claims about the characters and personalities of the people who produced the language, written or spoken. Discourse analysis is not about obtaining the kind of insights into individuals which are commonly associated with confession or therapy.

'Interviews are not an appropriate source of data'

Some discourse analysts oppose the use of interviews. They are mainly discursive psychologists who work in the tradition of conversation analysis (e.g., Potter and Hepburn, 2005). They argue that an interview is not a natural form of talk because the interviewer is imposing the topic on the participants and leading them to talk about things they wouldn't otherwise talk about. One counter-argument is that an interview is a familiar situation in which people 'naturally' produce a particular kind of talk, interview talk. A second, which rather contradicts the first, is that the talk in interviews is not completely different to talk in other contexts but will inevitably overlap in many respects, for example, in the ways in which speakers follow conventions or present new versions of previously rehearsed accounts (who I am, where I come from, where I work, a funny thing that happened to me, etc.).

A somewhat different defence of interviews is that the term 'naturally occurring' invokes a research paradigm which most discourse analysts would reject, that is, one associated with an objective researcher who discovers universal truths in a research situation which is 'uncontaminated' by the researcher's intervention or the expectations of the participants. This is generally referred to as positivism (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The contrasting position favoured by most social researchers is that no form of data collection is 'natural' or 'unnatural' and any data analysis,

including discourse analysis, is inevitably interpretive, shaped to some extent by the researcher, even though she or he will attempt to be rigorous and systematic to limit personal bias. An analysis is always partial, and incomplete.

This alternative position draws attention to data collection and analysis as situated activities which occur within the context of the project, including its socio-historic and cultural context. This suggests that the researcher needs to take account of the expectations that participants may bring to an interview or any other form of participation in research, including to the 'naturally occurring' situations. It suggests too that both the data collection and the data analysis will have meanings particular to the time, place, participants, and so on. For example, the particular reference and associations of a word or image may go unrecognized if the researcher is not familiar with these larger contexts. A practical implication of this interpretive position is that the discourse researcher needs to collect additional material as part of the process of familiarizing her or himself with the context. This material will inform the analysis even though it will not be data. Chapter 3 noted the collection of such background material within the four studies discussed.

'Discourse analysis just produces interpretations, not facts'

This criticism relates to some of the points made above. It is linked to an assumption that facts and interpretations can be distinguished, and therefore to a notion of truth (see Chapter 2). Statistics, for example, seem to be uncontroversial because the counting can be checked. They are not, it seems, just one researcher's interpretation but an objective measure of the world as it is. However, a closer examination of the assumption will show the distinction to be unfounded. As just one point, what is counted must previously be defined, which involves interpretation and value judgements. A simple example, discussed by Raghuram (2009), is that official statistics on immigrants vary considerably depending on which people are deemed to be immigrants. The same will apply to other categorizations of people.

A further issue of particular concern for discourse analysts derives from the arguments of Schegloff (1997). His concern was that analysts would bring their own interests to talk data and freely interpret the talk as being 'about' that. Against an analyst who would look at a conversation between a man

and a woman and decide that it is inevitably 'about' gender, Schegloff argued that a close analysis on CA principles could show whether or not gender was relevant, or salient, by revealing what the speakers themselves 'orient to' or 'make relevant'. This is also an argument against 'reading off' certain behaviours as gendered. If a man speaks at the same time as a woman, is this inevitably evidence of interruption and a performance of a gendered identity of dominance? Might it not be an example of overlapping talk as a common form of agreement in the talk of people who position themselves as equals?

Schegloff's arguments are a useful challenge to the over-free interpretation of data. Given that any two speakers can be categorized in terms of multiple differences (e.g., gender, age, sexuality, nationality, place of birth, occupation, religion, body features such as height, education), how reasonable is it to claim that their conversation is relevant evidence for a study of any particular category? On the other hand, there seems no reason to assume that people may not 'orient to' several different issues at once simultaneously, so that talk may be 'about' gender as well as its ostensible topic. Theorists of intersectionality (e.g., Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006) argue that categorization is always complex; for example, the relevant identification will be as a raced, classed, gendered person of a certain age group. Discourse research on prejudice and racism has shown how categories may merge, so that 'culture' becomes synonymous with 'race'. More subtly, the conventional categories of research may be overtaken by new lived categories of identity and difference, such as the 'postcodes' currently invoked in conflicts between some young people in London. A discourse analyst needs to be alert to all of these possibilities, to be alive to the possible differences between participants' views and her own, and to pause repeatedly to interrogate the assumptions and concerns she brings to the research.

These further issues can be followed up in the sources listed in the recommended reading list at the end of the book. The more general point to note is that yes, discourse analysis is interpretive *as is other research*, qualitative or quantitative. Part of its theoretical foundation consists of challenges to the notion of a simple, objective truth.

'Discourse research doesn't have practical applications'

Again, this is a common criticism of qualitative research in general. As with some of the other criticisms discussed above, it rests on two incorrect, or

at least debatable, assumptions about other kinds of research: that they can produce factual, non-interpretive knowledge about the social world and people's behaviour, and that they can uncover 'rules' which enable prediction and therefore interventions to produce desirable outcomes. The first point concerns interpretation and was discussed earlier. The second concerns models of the social world.

A useful starting point is that all research is partial, involving selection and abstraction. Research findings which have practical applications are generally based on a predictive model. This reduces complexity to establish fairly simple cause-effect relationships, often with significant success (e.g., in many medical treatments). It is appropriate for some, but not all issues. One way to understand this point is to think about different levels. For example, a thousand people in a street could be studied as separate biological organisms, or separate 'feeling' beings with their own personal histories, or, going up a level, as a group functioning *as* a group (e.g., in response to an event which creates panic), or, up another level, as located within an urban or national environment, as part of a population and so on. The difference here is partly a matter of scale, as if a camera were moving outwards and upwards, but also of the aspects of the person which are being considered. How much heat and carbon dioxide do a thousand bodies radiate? How many, going by population-level statistics, are likely to be female, or under 25, or unemployed, or overweight? These kinds of questions have answers which could, potentially, provide a basis for practical applications, for example, about environmental impact or the provision of street furniture or policing or facilities like public toilets.

In contrast, discourse researchers embrace complexity and assume that social phenomena and social worlds are emergent, as discussed in Chapter 2. They are likely to ask different questions. What do these people believe, for example, about staying healthy? How does that behaviour discriminate against (some) others? What different expectations do they place on women or men? They often explore what a predictive model omits. Unlike researchers who set out to develop predictive models which enable practical interventions, discourse researchers are interested in exploring complex aspects of society and social life which in the first instance are more likely to enhance understanding than interventions. The answers to their questions may have applications, but ones which are less straightforward. For example, Bell's research, discussed in Chapter 3, might usefully indicate why some people would resist lifestyle discourses, even

if they were informed relevant cause–effect relationships that have been established, perhaps between improved nutrition and lower recurrence of cancer. (Note: this cause–effect relationship is cited as a hypothetical example only, not a reference to research findings.) In general, the practical applications of discourse analytic research often relate to public education and opinion-forming.

‘Discourse analysis is out of date’

The term ‘discourse analysis’ is probably no longer as widely used as it was a decade or two ago. This is partly because in some areas of the social sciences, the theoretical focus on Foucault’s work, strongly associated with the term ‘discourse’, has been succeeded by attention to other theorists. However, as the previous chapters of this book have shown, related methodological approaches remain and continue so one reason why discourse analysis may appear less prominent is that it is now often conducted under different labels. Within social psychology, for example, research in the areas of discursive psychology and rhetorical psychology is a development from the sources which originally referred to discourse analysis. Some narrative analysis similarly builds on discourse analysis (e.g., the narrative-discursive approach used by Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton, 2006; 2008). Other social researchers incorporate an analysis of discourse into a differently named research approach, such as ethnography or psychosocial research. Discourse analysis, as it has been presented in this book, is an approach to talk and text data which derives from certain premises: language is constitutive, meanings are socially derived and also situated, negotiated and co-constructed and language use is a functional social practice. These notions will continue to underpin the work of many researchers, even if they do not label their work ‘discourse analysis’. This book has argued that its value as an analytic approach lies in its breadth and flexibility.

Summary

Chapter 6 has addressed some common criticisms of discourse analysis.