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7 Summary

This book has introduced discourse analysis as a social research approach which involves the close interpretation of language data and language practices. It has shown that there is no one way of doing discourse analysis. The common feature of the various forms discussed in the book is that language data, like talk or documents, is not considered simply for the information it conveys through description. Instead, an analysis considers how language works as communication, its situated functions – what is ‘done’ by talk or written language in a particular context – and the larger systems or formations of meanings which pre-exist, enable and constrain any instance of language use. These aspects can be explored in different ways, deriving to some extent from different theories and academic disciplines. Chapter 1 introduced discourse analysis and Chapter 2 discussed some of the theories and issues associated with it. It also introduced some of the key concerns of discourse analysts and outlined work in social psychology which has contributed to the popularity of discourse analysis as an empirical research approach.

In Chapter 3, four examples of published discourse research were discussed in detail to show alternative possibilities for analysis. The functional nature of language use can be investigated in terms of construction. The researcher might ask: What is the effect of talking about a problem or issue in terms of certain images or cause–effect relationships, such as when ill health is talked about as the consequence of unhealthy living? (This question is addressed in one of the studies discussed in the chapter.) Function can also be explored in an analysis of talk as interaction. A question here might be: How do people complain? How is complaining ‘done’ in order to sound plausible and appropriate? And how is this accomplished in conversation, between speakers? Or how is leadership enacted? What leadership practices are effective in a common workplace situation like chairing a meeting? Function can also be linked to a certain kind of argument and rhetoric. Possible questions here might be: How does language function to

include or exclude certain categories of people? How does such language have effects beyond words? How is racism 'done', for example, in political talk?

Researchers who analyse larger systems of meaning may discuss these in different terms, for example as discourses, Membership Categorization Devices or discursive resources like interpretative repertoires. Some of these terms are associated with distinct named approaches to discourse analysis, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis or critical discursive psychology. This book has not attempted to separate these completely. Instead, the aim has been to show the assumptions and foci operating in different studies, regarding these as variants on discourse analysis as it was defined at the start of the book, that is, as 'the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and social life'. Researchers developing their own projects are likely to follow the example of previous work but also shape their own approaches as appropriate to their topics and investigations.

Why might they use discourse analysis? Chapter 4 set out a number of possible reasons. For many researchers, the attraction and interest of discourse analysis derives from the data. The chapter discussed different types of discourse data and the most common ways to obtain them. It noted that some analysts work with already existing 'found' data while others collect new material. The procedures for data collection are not necessarily different to those entailed in other forms of social research which use language material. Indeed, there is considerable overlap between discourse analysis, ethnography, narrative analysis and other qualitative approaches. (Some of this overlap was discussed in previous chapters.) Because so many researchers are interested in working with interview material, the chapter discussed some potentially distinctive features around interviewing for a discourse analytic project. It also presented an introductory guide to transcription.

Any empirical research presents challenges. Chapter 5 discusses some aspects of discourse analytic research which are likely to concern a novice researcher. In particular, the chapter presented a detailed guide to the process of analysis, from beginning to work with the data to developing an interpretation and argument. This section included accounts of the steps followed on two actual projects, by a researcher working on her doctoral project and two researchers collaborating on a relatively large project employing a research assistant.

Discourse analysis has been a popular form of research for several decades. During that time it has been subject to criticisms, for instance, that it is 'just' about words and that it fails to take account of some other aspects of people and society. There has also been criticism of the most common form of data collection associated with it, interviewing. Chapter 6 addressed these points and others, arguing against the criticisms and showing the continuing relevance of discourse analysis for social research.