An Introduction to Discourse Analysis

Theory and method

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1 Introduction

1.1 Language as action and affiliation

Many people think that the primary purpose of language is to "communicate information." However, language serves a great many functions and giving and getting information, even in our new Information Age, is by no means the only one. If I had to single out a primary function of human language, it would be not one, but the following two closely related functions: to support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups, and institutions.

Of course, these two functions are connected. Cultures, social groups, and institutions shape social activities and identities: there are no activities such as "water-cooler gossip sessions" or "corridor politics," no identities such as water-cooler gossip or corridor politician, without an institution whose water cooler, social arrangements, and corridors are the sites of these activities and identities. At the same time, though, cultures, social groups, and institutions get produced, reproduced, and transformed through human activities and identities. There is no institution unless it is enacted and reenacted moment-by-moment in activities, and the identities connected to them, like "water-cooler gossip sessions," "corridor politics," meetings, and numerous other sorts of social interactions, all of which partly have a life of their own apart from larger cultural and institutional forces. Groups and institutions render certain sorts of activities and identities meaningful; certain sorts of activities and identities constitute the nature and existence of specific social groups and institutions.

This book is concerned with a theory and a method for studying how language gets recruited "on site" to enact specific social activities and social identities. By "identities" I mean different ways of participating in different sorts of social groups, cultures, and institutions, for example ways of being a "good student," an "avid bird watcher," a "mainstream politician," a "tough cop," a (video) "gamer," and so on and so forth through a nearly endless ever-changing list. In the process, we will see that language-in-use is everywhere and always "political."

But what do I mean by "political"? We've got to be careful here: By "politics," I don't mean "Democrats" and "Republicans" or national policy concerns. By "politics" I mean how *social goods* are thought about, argued over, and distributed in society. "Social goods" are anything that a group of people believes to be a source of power, status, value, or worth, whether this be "street smarts," academic intelligence, money, control, possessions, verbal abilities, "looks," age, wisdom, knowledge, technology, literacy, morality, "common sense," and so on through another very long list.

So how does "politics" in this sense get into language-in-use? When we speak or write we always use the grammar of our language to take a particular *perspective* on what the "world" is like. Is this combatant a "freedom fighter" or a "terrorist"? Is Microsoft Windows "loaded with bugs" or did Microsoft "load it with bugs"? Is the glass "half full" or "half empty"? This grammatical perspective-taking process involves us in taking perspectives on what is "normal" or not; what is "acceptable" or not; what is "right" or not; what is "real" or not; what is the "way things are" or not; what is the "ways things ought to be" or not; what is "possible" or not; what "people like us" or "people like them" do or don't do; and so on and so forth, through another nearly endless list. Being "normal," "acceptable," "right," "real," "the way things are," "the ways things ought to be," "possible," or "what people like us do," as opposed to their opposites, are often themselves social goods and all have deep implications for how we believe or wish potential social goods are or ought to be distributed. They have deep implications, as well, for how we act in regard to those beliefs and wishes.

There is nothing special then about politics. Politics is part and parcel of using language. But this does not mean that analyzing language is just an invitation to pontificate about our political views. Far from exonerating us from looking at the empirical details of language and social action, an interest in politics demands that we engage with such details. Politics, in terms of social relations where social goods are at stake, has its lifeblood in such details. It is there that "social goods" are created, sustained, distributed, and redistributed. It is there that people are harmed and helped.

Let me give a brief example of how language details lead to social activities, identities, and politics, far beyond "giving and getting information." My example here will involve a written text, though most of the examples later in this book will come from speech. Consider the following sentences, chosen at random from Paul Gagnon's book (Gagnon 1987). I have bolded some aspects of the text that I will discuss below:

> **Also secure, by 1689**, was the principle of representative government, as tested against the two criteria for valid constitutions proposed in the previous chapter. **As to the first criterion**, there was a genuine balance of power in English society, expressing itself in the Whig and Tory parties. **As narrowly**

> **confined to the privileged classes as these were**, they nonetheless represented different factions and tendencies. Elections meant real choice among separate, contending parties and personalities.

In his book, sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, the Education Excellence Network, and Freedom House, Gagnon speaks to what he thinks ought to be the "essential plot" of Western history as it should be taught in our schools. In the sentences quoted above, Gagnon uses certain aspects of English grammar as a resource with which to "design" his sentences in a way that will make them do the social work he wants them to do.

In English, the subject of a sentence is normally placed at the beginning of the sentence, as in "Elections meant real choice," where "elections" is the subject of the sentence. Gagnon uses the resources of English grammar to see to it that the *subject* of his sentences is not in its "normal" place at the beginning of the sentence, except for his last sentence, whose subject ("elections") is at the beginning. I have bolded the beginnings of the other sentences, none of which is the subject of those sentences. It is clear that Gagnon's use of English grammar to design his text in this way creates connections in his text, allowing it to flow from sentence to sentence in a rather artful way. However, Gagnon's use of English grammar does much more than this.

The subject of a sentence, usually the first thing in the sentence, is the topic we want to say something about. Sometimes, however, we place material that is not the subject/topic of the sentence in initial position, rather than the subject, as in "At least in Italy, elections mean real choice," where the phrase "at least in Italy" has been placed at the front of the sentence. Such "fronted" material – material that is at the front of the sentence, but is not the subject of the sentence – functions as a *background context* and launching off point against which other later information is *foregrounded* as the main or focal point. Thus, in our example ("At least in Italy, elections mean real choice"), the main focal claim "elections mean real choice" is contextualized within the background assumption that we are talking about or limiting our claim to "at least in Italy."

Thus, in Gagnon's text, material such as "Also secure, by 1689" and "As to the first criterion" is background material, launching off points and context from within which later more focal information is to be viewed and evaluated. Placed where they are, these phrases allow Gagnon to "flow" to his main foregrounded information in each sentence (i.e., to representative government as he has defined it earlier and the balance of power represented by the Tories and Whigs), while providing the contextual scaffolding needed to frame his main points (or, as we will see below, "cushion" them).

Having used such "backgrounding–foregrounding" devices twice (and several times earlier), Gagnon does it again in the sentence "**As narrowly confined to the privileged classes as these were**, they [the Whig and Tory parties] nonethe-

less represented different factions and tendencies." This allows him to treat the fact that the Whig and Tory parties were confined "to the privileged classes" as connecting tissue and background information, a mere concession, despite the fact that some other historians might see this as a focal piece of information. His final sentence about elections can now be issued with no "background." The major reason to contest that these were meaningful elections has already been relegated to the background.

In other words, Gagnon has relegated to a "background consideration" what some other historians would have placed in the foreground of their arguments. These historians would see narrow class privilege as calling into question the nature of elections based on such privilege. They would have designed their language to background and foreground things differently. Perhaps they would have written something like "Though the Whig and Tory parties differed on some issues [background], they were narrowly confined to the privileged classes and represented only their interests [foreground]." These historians and Gagnon differ not over facts, but over what should be at the center or focus of our attention. We can really only understand Gagnon deeply and critically if we understand his ways with words in relationship to the different ways with words of other historians, historians who might claim, for instance, that elections are not meaningful or democratic if confined to elites.

Am I accusing Gagnon of using English grammar for "political purposes"? If by this we mean that I am saying that Gagnon is using the resources of English grammar to create a *perspective* with implications, the answer is most certainly "yes." But it could not be otherwise. The whole point of grammar, in speech or writing, is in fact to allow us to create just such political perspectives. Grammar simply does not allow us to speak or write from no perspective at all.

Is Gagnon "just" communicating information? Hardly. He is engaging in a very real social activity, a project, an attempt to create new affiliations and transform old ones over who will teach and what will be taught in the schools, and over what is and what is not "real history" or "correct history." This, too, could not be otherwise. To read Gagnon without regard for the way he recruits grammatical features for his social and, yes, political purposes is to have missed most of the action. In fact, we can hardly have a discussion with Gagnon, engage with his views, if we have missed this action.

Gagnon is also, in and through language, enacting a specific social identity as a particular type of historian (against other types of historians), a historian who connects history, citizenship, patriotism, and schools together in a certain way. We might call him a "traditional" or "conservative" historian. Furthermore, his text is only a part of a larger project in which he was engaged, a project in setting standards for school history and fighting the "history wars" against those who hold radically different perspectives on the nature, purposes, and goals of history, schooling, and society than he does.

Note, too, by the way, that a historian who wants to "rise above" debates about standards in public schools and "history wars" and write as an "objective" and "dispassionate" scholar, simply retelling the "facts," will only have designed a text whose language enacts a different set of perspectives and a different politics. That text will be designed to render texts like Gagnon's "unprofessional," "mere politics," "just about schools," not "real history." Writing as if all you have to offer are "the facts" or "the truth" is also *a way of writing*, a way of using language to enact an activity and an identity, too.

This does not mean that "nothing is true" or that "everything is equally good." No, for better or worse, physicists' bombs do go off and astrologists' don't. Rather, it means that "truth" (which I would define as doing better, rather than worse, in not getting physically, socially, culturally, or morally "bitten" by the world) is a matter of taking, negotiating, and contesting perspectives created in and through language.

What I want readers to get from this example is that speakers and writers use the resources of grammar to *design* their sentences and texts in ways that communicate their perspectives on reality, carry out various social activities (e.g., in Gagnon's case, trying to enforce the teaching of certain sorts of history in schools), and allow them to enact different social identities (e.g., in Gagnon's case, being a certain type of historian). We are all designers – artists, in a sense – in this respect. Our medium is language.

1.2 About this book: theory and method

Now it is time to turn to some "truth in lending" disclaimers. These are all the more appropriate here, as this book is meant to "lend" readers certain tools of inquiry, fully anticipating that these tools will transformed, or even abandoned, as readers invent their own versions of them or meld them with other tools embedded in different perspectives.

This book is an introduction to *one* approach to discourse analysis (the analysis of language-in-use). There are many different approaches to discourse analysis (see, for example, Schiffrin 1994; van Dijk 1997a,b; Jaworski and Coupland 1999; Wodak and Meyer 2002; Fairclough 2003; Tannen *et al*. 2003; Rogers 2004), none of them, including this one, uniquely "right." Different approaches fit different issues and questions better or worse than others. And, too, different approaches sometimes reach similar conclusions though using different tools and terminologies connected to different "micro-communities" of researchers.

Furthermore, the approach to discourse analysis taken in this book is not "mine." No set of research tools and no theory belongs to a single person, no matter how much academic style and our own egos sometimes tempt us to write that way. I have freely begged, borrowed, and patched together. If there is any quality in my work, it is primarily in the "taste" with which I have raided others' stores and in

the way I have adapted and mixed together the ingredients and, thereby, made the soup. Some will, of course, not recognize the ingredient they have contributed, or, at least, not want to admit they do after they taste my soup. If there are occasional inventions, their only chance for a full life is that someone else will borrow them and mix them into new soup.

A note on the soup: the approach to discourse analysis in this book seeks to balance talk about the mind, talk about social interaction and activities, and talk about society and institutions more than is the case in some other approaches. So some may think my approach too "cognitive," others may think it too "social" (for my work on language and learning in social and cognitive terms, see Gee 2003, 2004). However, I believe we have to get minds, bodies, social interactions, social groups, and institutions all in the soup together.

This book is partly about a method of research. However, I hasten to point out that the whole issue of research "methods" is, as far as I am concerned, badly confused. First of all, any method always goes with a *theory*. Method and theory cannot be separated, despite the fact that methods are often taught as if they could stand alone. Any method of research is a way to investigate some particular domain. In this case, the domain is language-in-use. There can be no sensible method to study a domain unless one also has a theory of what that domain is. Thus, this book offers, as it must, a theory about the nature of language-in-use.

People with different theories about a domain will use different methods for their research. The reason this is so is because a research method is made up of various "tools of inquiry" and strategies for applying them. Tools of inquiry are designed to describe and explain what the researcher takes to exist and to be important in a domain. Thus, when theories about a domain differ – for instance, a theory about what language-in-use is or about what evolution is – tools of inquiry will differ as well. For example, if your theory is that evolution works at the level of cells, you will use different methods of research in biology than if you believe it works at the level of genes. You will have different methods again if you believe it operates at the level of species.

Besides seeing that methods change with theories, it is important, as well, to see that research, whether in physics, literary criticism, or discourse analysis, is not an algorithmic procedure; it is not a set of "rules" that can be followed step-by-linear-step to get guaranteed results. There is no "scientific method," even in the "hard" sciences, if by this we mean such a set of rules to follow. Rather, research adopts and adapts specific tools of inquiry and strategies for implementing them. These tools and strategies ultimately reside in a "community of practice" formed by those engaged in such research.

Such tools and strategies are continually and flexibly adapted to specific issues, problems, and contexts of study. They are continually transformed as they are applied in practice. At the same time, new researchers in an area are normed by examples of research that more advanced researchers in the area take (for the time)

to be "prototypical" examples of that area's tools and strategies in operation (see Mishler 1990, a now classic paper). Methods are through and through social and communal.

This book will introduce various tools of inquiry for what I will call "D/discourse analysis" and strategies for using them (and in a moment I will say why the odd "D/d"). It will give a number of examples of the tools in action, as well. But the reader should keep in mind that these tools of inquiry are not meant to be rigid definitions. Rather, they are meant to be "thinking devices" that guide inquiry in regard to specific sorts of data and specific sorts of issues and questions. They are meant to be adapted for the reader's own purposes. They are meant, as well, to be transformed as the reader adapts them to his or her own theory of the domain. Of course, if the reader's theory gets too far away from my theory of the domain, the tools will be less and less easily or sensibly adaptable and useful.

The distinction between "Discourse" with a "big D" and "discourse" with a "little d" plays a role throughout this book. This distinction is meant to do this: we, as "applied linguists" or "sociolinguists," are interested in how language is used "on site" to enact activities and identities. Such language-in-use I will call "discourse" with a "little d." But activities and identities are rarely ever enacted through language alone.

To "pull off" being an "X" doing "Y" (e.g., a Los Angeles Latino street-gang member warning another gang member off his territory, or a laboratory physicist convincing colleagues that a particular graph supports her ideas, or, for that matter, a laboratory physicist warning another laboratory physicist off her research territory), it is not enough to get just the words "right," though that is crucial. It is also necessary to get one's body, clothes, gestures, actions, interactions, symbols, tools, technologies (be they guns or graphs), values, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions "right," as well, and all at the "right" places and times.

When "little d" discourse (language-in-use) is melded integrally with non-language "stuff" to enact specific identities and activities, then I say that "big D" Discourses are involved. We are all members of many, a great many, different Discourses, Discourses which often influence each other in positive and negative ways, and which sometimes breed with each other to create new hybrids. When you "pull off" being a culturally specific sort of "everyday" person, a "regular" at the local bar, a certain type of African-American or Greek-Australian, a certain type of cutting-edge particle physicist or teenage heavy-metal enthusiast, a teacher or a student of a certain sort, or any of a great many other "ways of being in the world," you use language and "other stuff" – ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing, and using various sorts of objects, symbols, tools, and technologies – to recognize yourself and others as meaning and meaningful in certain ways. In turn, you produce, reproduce, sustain, and transform a given "form of life" or Discourse. All life for all of us is just a patchwork of thoughts, words, objects, events, actions, and interactions in Discourses.

So, this book will introduce tools of inquiry with which to study discourse in Discourses. Finally, let me say that in D/discourse analysis we are not interested in specific analyses of data just in and for themselves. A D/discourse analysis must have a point. We are not interested in simply describing data so that we can admire the intricacy of language, though such intricacy is indeed admirable. Rather, we are interested, beyond description, in two things: (a) illuminating and gaining evidence for our theory of the domain, a theory that helps to explain how and why language works the way it does when it is put into action; and (b) contributing, in terms of understanding and intervention, to important issues and problems in some "applied" area (e.g., education) that interests and motivates the researcher.

Thanks to the fact that D/discourse analyses must have a "point," this book will have relevance to "applied" issues throughout, though these issues are not always in the foreground of attention. In D/discourse analysis, any idea that applications and practice are less prestigious or less important or less "pure" than theory has no place. Such a notion has no place, because, as the reader will see, the theory of language in this book is that *language has meaning only in and through social practices*, practices which often leave us morally complicit with harm and injustice unless we attempt to transform them. It is a tenet of this book that any proper theory of language is a theory of practice.

1.3 About this book: readers and reading

This book is directed at three audiences. It is meant to introduce students and researchers in other areas to one form of discourse analysis that I hope they can use and experiment with as they learn other forms of discourse analysis and come up with their own ideas. It is meant, as well, for people interested in language, culture, and institutions, but who have not focused their own work on discourse analysis. Finally, it is meant for my colleagues in discourse studies, so that they can compare and contrast their own views to those developed here, and so that, together, we can advance our common enterprise of understanding how language works in society to create better and worse worlds, institutions, and human relationships.

The book is structured in a somewhat odd way. The "method" is fully sketched out in Chapter 7. Each of Chapters 2–6 discusses, with many examples, specific tools of inquiry that are part of the overall method and strategies for using them. These tools and strategies are fully embedded in a theory of language-in-use in culture and society. Thus, that theory is also laid out in Chapters 2–6. Chapter 7 briefly recapitulates our tools of inquiry and places them in the framework of an overall approach to D/discourse analysis. I also discuss the issue of validity for D/discourse analysis in this chapter.

Chapter 8 deals with some linguistic details (various aspects of grammar and discourse) that play an important role in D/discourse analysis. Here issues about how speech is planned and produced are taken up. These linguistic details will, hopefully,

make more sense once the "big picture" is made clear in Chapters 2–7, and will give readers some additional tools with which to deal with the empirical details of discourse analysis. Chapters 9–11 are extended examples of D/discourse analysis using some of the tools and strategies developed earlier in the book. These chapters are by no means meant to be any sort of step-by-step "how to" manual; they are simply meant to exemplify in practice a few of the tools discussed in this book.

My analyses throughout this book do not assume any specific theory of grammar or, for that matter, any great depth of knowledge about grammar. However, readers may want to supplement their reading of this book with some additional reading about grammar, preferably grammar as it functions in communication and social interaction. The best known such "functional" approach to grammar is that developed by M. A. K. Halliday (1994). Good introductory secondary sources exist on Halliday's approach to grammar (e.g., see Martin *et al*. 1997; Thompson 2004). For readers who want a quick overview of technical matters about how grammar works in communication and social interaction, I have given a brief introduction to this topic as an appendix to this book. Different readers may want to read this appendix at different points in the reading of the main material in the book.

Since this book is meant to be an "introduction," I have tried not to clutter up the chapters with long lists of interpolated references. The downside of this policy is that I will have to leave out references to the more specialized work of many colleagues whose work I value greatly. The upside is that people new to discourse analysis may actually read some of the material I cite and will have good places to start their further investigations. The material I do cite is, in most cases, replete with further references to the literature. Some chapters end with a note containing further references to the literature. Otherwise, I have eschewed footnotes.

Since the word "method" so triggers in our minds ideas of a "step-by-step" set of "rules" to follow, I want to stress, once again, in closing, that that is not what "method" means here. Rather, it means sets of "thinking devices" with which one can investigate certain sorts of questions, with due regard for how others have investigated such questions, but with adaptation, innovation, and creativity as well. "Validity" is communal: if you take risks and make mistakes, your colleagues will help you clean up the mess – that's what they're there for. The quality of research often resides in how fruitful our mistakes are: that is, in whether they open up paths on which others can then make more progress than we have.

Finally, having repeatedly used the term "D/discourse analysis" above to make the point that we are interested in analyzing language as it is fully integrated with all the other elements that go into social practices (ways of thinking or feeling, ways of manipulating objects or tools, ways of using non-linguistic symbol systems, etc.), we can now dispense with this cumbersome term. It will just clutter up the text and the point is now made. Throughout this book I will usually simply use the phrase "discourse analysis," but will mean by this phrase analyses that deal with both "little d" discourse and "big D" Discourse.