Universidade de São Paulo – DLM – FFLCH

DISCOURSE STUDIES – 2018/2

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**HOW TO DO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

**Getting technical: discourse analysis in ten steps**

<http://www.politicseastasia.com/studying/how-to-do-a-discourse-analysis/>

**1) Establish the context**

Jot down where the material comes from and how it fits into the **big picture**. You should ask yourself what the social and historical **context** is in which each of your sources was produced. Write down what language your source is written in, what country and place it is from, who wrote it (and when), and who published it (and when).

**2) Explore the production process**

You have already recorded who wrote and published your sources, but you still need to do a more thorough **background check**. Try to find additional information on the **producer** of your source material, as well as their institutional and personal background: Who are the author and the editorial staff, what is the general political position of the paper, and what is its affiliation with other organizations? Are any of the people who are involved in the production process known for their journalistic style or their political views? Is there any information on the production expenditures and general finances of the paper? Do you know who the general target audience of the paper is?

Once you have established the institutional background, take notes on the **medium** and the genre you are working with. **The medium matters**: reading an article online is not the same as reading it in a printed newspaper, or in a hardcover collection of essays. Make sure to identify the different media types in which your source appeared, and to also be clear about the version that you yourself are analysing.

For instance, the **layout** of a newspaper article and its position on the page will be different in a print edition than in an online edition. The latter will also offer comments, links, multi-media content, etc. All of these factors **frame the meaning** of the actual text and should be considered in an analysis.

**3) Prepare your material for analysis**

In order to analyse the actual text, it is wise to prepare it in a way that will allow you to work with the source, home in on specific details, and make precise references later. Add numbers for lines, headers, paragraphs, figures, or any other features that will help you keep your bearings.

**4) Code your material**

When you **code** data, it means that you are assigning attributes to specific units of analysis, such as paragraphs, sentences, or individual words. Think of how many of us **tag** online information like pictures, links, or articles. Coding is simply an academic version of this tagging process. You need to come up with your **coding categories**.

For instance, you might be analysing a presidential speech to see what globalization discourse it draws from. It makes sense to mark all statements in the speech that deal with globalization and its related themes (or **discourse strands**).

The first step is to outline a few such categories theoretically: based on the kind of question you are asking, and your knowledge of the subject matter, you will already have a few key themes in mind that you expect to find, for instance “trade”, “migration”, “transportation”, “communication”, and so on. A **thorough review of the secondary literature** on your topic will likely offer inspiration. Write down your first considerations, and also write down topics that you think might be related to these key themes. These are your starting categories.

**5) Examine the structure of the text**

Now that you have prepared your materials and have coded the discourse strands, it is time to look at the **structural features** of the texts. Are there sections that overwhelmingly deal with one discourse? Are there ways in which different discourse strands overlap in the text? See if you can identify how the argument is structured.

**6) Collect and examine discursive statements**

Once you have a good idea of the macro-features of your text, you can zoom in on the individual statements, or **discourse fragments**. A good way to do this is to collect all statements with a specific code, and to examine what they have to say on the respective discourse strand. This collection of statements will allow you to map out what “truths” the text establishes on each major topic.

**7) Identify cultural references**

You have already established what the context of your source material is. Now think about **how the context informs the argument**. Does your material contain references to other sources, or imply knowledge of another subject matter? What meaning does the text attribute to such other sources? Exploring these questions will help you figure out what function **intertextuality** serves in light of the overall argument.

**8) Identify linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms**

The next step in your analysis is likely going to be the most laborious, but also the most enlightening when it comes to exploring how a discourse works in detail. You will need to identify how the various statements function **at the level of language**. Here are some of the things you should be on the lookout for:

* Word groups: does the text deploy words that have a common contextual background? For instance, the vocabulary may be drawn directly from military language, or business language, or highly colloquial youth language. Take a closer look at **nouns, verbs, and adjectives** in your text and see if you find any common features. Such regularities can shed light on the sort of logic that the text implies.
* Grammar features: check who or what the subjects and objects in the various statements are. Are there any regularities, for instance frequently used **pronouns like “we” and “they”**? If so, can you identify who the **protagonists and antagonists** are? A look at **adjectives and adverbs** might tell you more about judgements that the text passes on these groups. Also, take a closer look at the **main and auxiliary verbs** that the text uses, and check what tense they appear in. Particularly interesting are **active versus passive** phrases – does the text delete actors from its arguments by using passive phrases? A statement like “we are under economic pressure” is very different from “X puts us under economic pressure”… Passive phrases and impersonal chains of nouns are a common way to obscure relationships behind the text and shirk responsibility.
* Rhetorical and literary figures: see if you can identify and mark any of the following five elements in your text: **allegories, metaphors, similes, idioms, and proverbs.** Take a look at how they are deployed in the service of the overall argument. Once you have checked for the five elements listed above, follow up by examining additional rhetorical figures to see how these frames the meaning of specific statements. Things to look for include **parallelisms, hyperboles, tri-colons, synecdoches, rhetorical questions, and anaphora**, to name only the most common.
* Direct and indirect speech: does the text include quotes? If so, are they paraphrased or are they cited as direct speech? In either case, you should track down the original phrases to see what their context was, and what function they now play in your source material.
* Modalities: see if the text includes any statements on what “**should” or “could”** be. Such phrases may create a sense of urgency, serve as a call to action, or imply hypothetical scenarios.
* Evidentialities: lastly, are there any phrases in the text that suggest factuality? Sample phrases might include “of course”, “obviously”, or “as everyone knows”. A related question then is what kinds of “facts” the text actually presents in support of its argument. Does the text report factuality, actively demonstrate it, or merely suggested it as self-evident? One of the strongest features of discourse is how it “naturalizes” certain statements as “common sense” or “fact”, even if the statements are actually controversial (and in discourse theory, all statements are controversial). Be on the look-out for such discursive moves.

**9) Interpret the data**

You now have all the elements of your analysis together, but the most important question still remains: **what does it all mean?** In your interpretation, you need to tie all of your results together in order to explain that the discourse is about, and how it works. This means combing your knowledge of structural features and individual statements, and then placing those findings into the broader context that you established at the beginning. Keep the following **questions** in mind: who created the material you are analysing? What is their position on the topic you examined? How do their arguments draw from and in turn contribute to commonly accepted knowledge of the topic at the time and in the place that this argument was made? And maybe most importantly: who might benefit from the discourse that your sources construct?

**10) Present your findings**

Once you have the answer to your original question, it is time to **get your results across** to your target audience. If you have conducted a good analysis, then you now have a huge amount of notes from which you can build your presentation, paper, or thesis.

Mind the limitations:

Discourse analysis offers a powerful toolbox for analysing political communication, but it also has its **pitfalls**. Aside from being very **work-intensive**, the idea that you only need to follow a certain number of steps to get your results can be misleading. A [methodology](http://www.politicseastasia.com/studying/whats-methodology/) is always **only as good as your question**. If your question does not lend itself to this sort of analysis, or if many of the steps I list above do not apply to you, then come up with an approach that suits your project. Don’t be a **methodologist**: someone who jumps at a set of methods and applies them to everything in a blind fit of activism. Always **remain critical** of your own work.

This means being mindful of the shortcomings in your approach, so that you do not end up making claims that your material does not support. A **common mistake** is to claim that a discourse analysis shows what people think or believe (or worse: what entire societies think or believe). Discourse analysis is a form of content analysis. It is not a tool to analyse the impact of media on audience members. **No amount of discourse analysis can provide adequate evidence on what goes on in people’s heads**.

What we can learn from a discourse analysis is **how specific actors construct an argument**, and how this argument fits into **wider social practices**. More importantly, we can demonstrate with confidence what kind of statements actors try to establish as **self-evident** and **true**. We can show with precision what **rhetorical methods** they picked to communicate those truths in ways they thought would be **effective**, **plausible**, or even **natural**. And we can reveal how their statements and the frameworks of meaning they draw from **proliferate** through communication practices.