CHAPTER

1 What Is Discourse?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Learning Outcomes

This chapter has two aims. First, the chapter establishes what it means to do *discourse analysis*. Second, the chapter defines, and identifies examples of, *discourse*.

The contents of the chapter are organized according to the following learning outcomes. After reading this chapter:

1. You will know what discourse analysis is;
2. You will understand that there are many types of discourse;
3. You will understand that discourse is your object of study;
4. You will know how your object of study fits within a research project.

1.1 A Short Guide to This Book

This book is a practical guide to *doing* discourse analysis. The emphasis on the act of doing is important, as discourse analysis is often discussed from a theoretical perspective. This book departs from this tradition by providing accessible and practical overviews and strategies suitable for the novice discourse analyst. Doing discourse analysis requires collecting and analyzing **data**, or what this book refers to as your **object of study**.

Chapters 1–3 are designed to help you identify and analyze your object of study. Chapter 1 helps you identify an object of study by providing examples of discourse. Chapter 2 helps you understand what an analysis is by discussing its internal structure as it would be presented to an audience in written form. Chapter 3 helps you conduct an analysis by reviewing the different analytic perspectives and levels that can be adopted. The structure of an analysis is foundational to understanding how to analyze an object of study, so it is important to read Chapter 2 before Chapter 3.

Chapters 4–6 build on Chapter 3 by showing how context, researcher subjectivities, and theory are central to adding nuance and detail to your analysis. Chapter 7 ends the book by introducing a model for doing discourse analysis which summarizes the themes, issues, concepts, and principles introduced in previous chapters while attending to the issue of research questions.

Summary 1.1

1. This book uses **object of study** as a synonym for **data**.
2. Chapters 1–3 help you identify and analyze your object of study.
3. Chapters 4–6 help you strengthen your analysis.
4. Chapter 7 presents a model for doing discourse analysis.

1.2 Defining Discourse Analysis

Defining discourse analysis is ostensibly simple in concept. The endeavor involves explaining what discourse is and discussing how discourse is analyzed. Take, for example, the definitions taken from two popular introductory books on discourse analysis.

In this book we take a primarily linguistic approach to the analysis of discourse. We examine how humans use language to communicate and, in particular, how addressers construct linguistic messages for addressees and how addressees work on linguistic messages in order to interpret them.

(Brown & Yule, 1983, p. ix).

Discourse analysis is the study of what we humans do with language and how we do it … Discourse analysis is a big field made up of many different relatively small groups, each doing discourse analysis in their own way; each using their own terminology and defending their own theories of language, communication, and society.

(Gee, 2018, p. ix).

Both definitions identify three facets of discourse analysis: humans, language use, and approaches. The first two facets are related to your object of study; that is, humans and language use represent the discourse in discourse analysis. The third facet is related to your analysis. That is, approaches represent the analysis in discourse analysis. Each aspect will be unpacked below for the purpose of defining discourse analysis.

First, discourse analysis entails studying humans. Although this statement may appear self-evident, the "human factor" is incredibly salient to how discourse analysis is put into practice. That is, discourse analysis is more than just describing language. Discourse analysts recognize that humans use language for, and modify their communication according to, a number of social and cultural factors. For example, a school's policy on providing feedback will likely dictate whether and how a teacher corrects students. The human factor additionally represents all aspects of society that influence why and how a particular language feature is used. For instance, a country's popular culture will likely dictate societal preferences for a particular regional accent. Aspects relevant to the human factor are approximate to what Gee (2014) refers to as "big D Discourse."

Learning Activity 1.1 helps you reflect on the human factor in discourse.

Learning Activity 1.1 The Human Factor

In this exercise, the learning objective is to help you become aware of how the human factor influences how we think about and use language. Reflecting on the human factor is an excellent way of identifying potential topics to investigate.

> This learning activity is based on an actual class that was taught by the author at a university in Asia. Approximately fifty students were asked in one in-class assignment to list ten words that they associate with "English speaker." Some of the top answers are listed below. Please think of why many of the students provided these answers. Both the student answers, and your responses to them, are likely to offer examples of the human factor.
>
> *Top Answers Given*
>
> 1. Foreigners
> 2. American
> 3. British
> 4. Global
> 5. White people
>
> What do these five answers say about the students? How does growing up with a particular language, such as English, shape how you think about yourself and engage in communication with others? Are there aspects of your life that influence how you feel about different languages? Your answers to these questions offer some examples of how the human factor influences how we think about and use language.

Second, discourse analysis entails studying language use. This focus should not be confused with the study of language, which is limited to descriptions of linguistic features, such as looking at a series of disparate syntactic structures without considering the human factor. The use in language use denotes a concern for the situational factors (i.e., context) that influence, and are influenced by, communication. Language use is approximate to what Gee (2014) refers to as "little d discourse."

Identifying and understanding these situational factors requires examining the functions of language. For example, "hello" may function as a greeting, an elicitation, or a pre-announcement depending on the communicative situation in which the word is used.

Language use can also be understood by examining its organization. All communicative situations possess an organization with parts that can be examined individually or collectively. For instance, a speech, a mission statement, a work email, and a conversation between friends all possess a narrative organization: a beginning, a middle, and an end. A discourse analyst may wish to examine the entire narrative structure of a mission statement or look at only the beginnings. Furthermore, some aspects of language use possess an organization. For example, topic management and turn-taking, which are present in most conversational exchanges, are two aspects of language use that possess an organization. A discourse analyst may look at the entire turn-taking organization of a business meeting or examine just the organization of individual turns.

Learning Activity 1.2 helps you reflect on the two main ways of studying language use as a discourse analyst: function and organization.

Learning Activity 1.2 Language Use

In this two-part exercise, the learning objective is to help you understand that people do things with language and that there is an organization to how this "doing" is accomplished.

For the first part of this exercise, identify one or two language examples for each of the language functions identified below. One example for each language function is provided to get you started. Do some language examples possess multiple functions? Why can the same words, utterances, or texts perform multiple functions? Can you also think of other language functions not listed below?

Language function	Example
1. request	*"please help me"*
2. promise	*"it will not happen again"*
3. apologize	*"my fault"*
4. suggest	*"maybe try looking it up"*
5. question	*"are you hungry"*
6. introduce	*"this is my cousin"*
7. invite	*"tell me more"*
8. inform	*"This is your captain. We are currently flying at 30,000 feet"*
9. refuse	*"next time"*
10. respond	student raises hand (in response to *"any questions"*)

For the second part of this exercise, identify the communicative situations that you are likely to see or hear under the organization column. One example for each organizational feature is provided.

Organizational feature	Example
1. introduction	Job seekers introducing themselves during interviews.
2. beginning	Teachers starting their lectures.
3. topic management	Colleagues managing topics in meetings.
4. turn-taking	Friends interrupting each other during a conversation.
5. ending	Customers terminating unsolicited phone calls.

Can you think of any language functions that you are likely to experience in each example provided above?

Third, discourse analysis is made up of different approaches that can be used to study your object of study. The literature may refer to these approaches as theories, frameworks, methods, or methodologies. Approaches are created according to disciplinary traditions and interests, and therefore what analysis means and how it is put into practice will vary from one researcher to another. Collectively, these disciplinary traditions and interests create layers of interpretation that make it difficult to tease out the core principles of discourse analysis. Indeed, entire books and anthologies are devoted to explaining just one approach within discourse analysis.

This book strips away these disciplinary layers by identifying several core principles and practices that will help you get started with discourse analysis. For example, Chapter 3 presents the basic perspectives and levels of analysis that can be used to study your object of study.

The current section has defined discourse analysis as an area of study with three core facets: the human factor, language use, and approaches. Figure 1.1 offers a visual illustration of discourse analysis.

Discourse

– human factor

– language use

Analysis

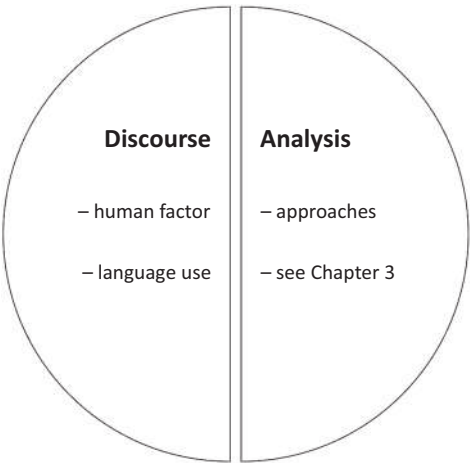– approaches

– see Chapter 3

FIGURE 1.1
Three aspects of
discourse analysis

Discourse analysis requires looking at both the human factor and language use, though there is considerable variation in how much attention is placed on each aspect of discourse. How a researcher approaches these two aspects of discourse is related to the analysis in discourse analysis (see Chapter 3).

The next step after defining discourse analysis is to consider examples of discourse. The next section, in providing examples of discourse, reveals possible objects of study for your research.

Summary 1.2

1. Discourse analysis can be broken into three parts: the human factor, language use, and approaches.
2. The discourse in discourse analysis consists of language use and the human factor.

1.3 Types of Discourse

Discourse is meaning. Humans ascribe meaning to all aspects of life from the utterances spoken by an individual during a fleeting moment with a stranger to religious principles that are preserved through texts and stories over many centuries. Furthermore, meaning can be found in more than just spoken words and texts. For example, symbols (e.g., company logos) and objects (e.g., a tall mountain) can possess meaning, creating discourse: a company logo can be associated with a sense of quality, or a tall mountain may be a part of folklore.

Meaning can also be found in belief systems or ideologies. For example, traditions that guide how families prepare and consume meals during important holidays represent meaning created by individuals within and across communities. Although belief systems and ideologies can be expressed in the material world though language and communication (e.g., praying before eating a meal), they get passed down from one generation to another and therefore transcend time and space.

Learning Activity 1.3 Reflecting on Discourse

In this exercise, the learning objective is to establish the ways in which discourse is all around you.

Complete the exercise by answering the questions in the left column. The right column addresses how your answers to these questions are related to, or are example of, discourse. The classroom is used as a point of reference.

The classroom	*Discourse*
1a. Think about a time when you were in a classroom if you are not presently in one now. Are there any implicit or explicit rules that determine how you should behave or communicate with the teacher and your fellow classmates, such as using a particular language, asking to speak, or leaving the classroom during a lecture?	1b. The implicit and explicit rules that you identified represent discourses. These discourses may be located in the material world, such as a sign on the wall reminding students to be quiet upon entering the room. In addition, classroom rules may not be located in the material world, such as the unwritten rule that students must raise their hands before talking.

The classroom	Discourse
2a. We are all made up of different social categories, such as man, woman, mother, sister, Asian, and student, to name a few. What are your social categories? What social categories are relevant and not relevant to your participation in classrooms? Why are some social categories relevant in the classroom while others are not?	2b. Your social categories are not only a part of your identity, but they can also be expressed as or through discourses. Your identity as a student is a discourse that can be expressed as a belief system (e.g., "I think students should respect their teachers.") or through language and communication (e.g., the types of questions that you ask your teacher versus your fellow classmates).
3a. What types of questions do teachers ask students? What types of questions do students ask teachers? Do teachers and students ask different questions? Why would teachers and students ask different questions?	3b. Discourse is all of the language spoken and written in classrooms, including question types. What is said, written, or otherwise communicated is influenced by other discourses, such as classroom rules and identities. For example, a teacher is more likely to ask questions to test understanding rather than to seek unknown information.

The questions in all three rows present opportunities to reflect on the discourses that occupy and shape classrooms. The first row demonstrates how discourse may or may not be located in the material world, persisting over time and space creating a history of experiences and belief systems. The second row shows how discourse is part of who we are, and illustrates how who we are may be tied to expectations to communicate in a particular way. The third row connects discourse with speaking and writing in general, and question asking in particular. Although speaking and writing are discourse examples that can stand alone as objects of study, language is shaped by other discourses, such as social rules and identities.

Discourse is pervasive, influencing how we think about, and manage, the world around us. Reflecting on the many discourses that influence one situation, such as the classroom, will get you closer to understanding what discourse analysis is capable of doing. With that said, stating that "discourse is meaning" or "discourse is pervasive" gives rise to a degree of openness or even ambiguity that is not helpful when it is time to identify a specific object of study. To address the ambiguity that comes with attempting to identify discourse, the following subsections identify seven types of objects of study that are commonly investigated in discourse analysis: (1) grammar; (2) actions and practices; (3) identities; (4) places and spaces; (5) stories; (6) ideologies; and (7) social structures. While not exhaustive, the list offers sufficient examples for readers to get started with discourse analysis (see Figure 1.2).
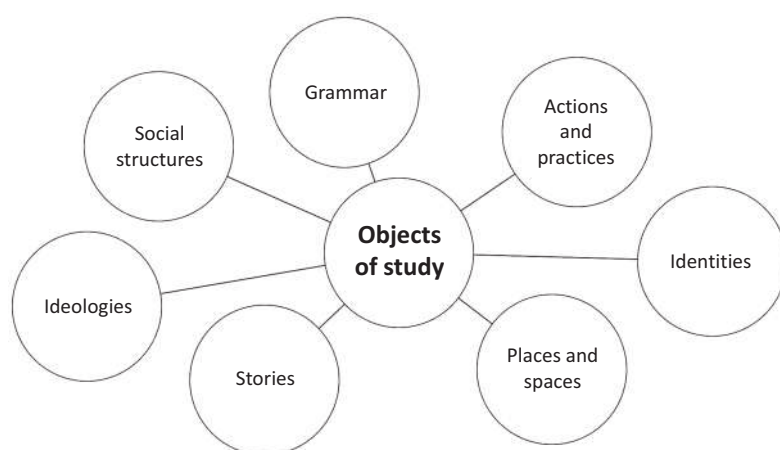

FIGURE 1.2
Objects of study

1.3.1 Discourse as Grammar

Discourse is connected to the grammar of a language. Grammar is a system of rules that outlines how words, sentences, utterances, and phrases should be structured and used. A linguistic approach to grammar is situated primarily at the sentence level, which involves studying grammatical rules separate from other sentences or discourse (i.e., studying language rather than language use). Conversely, discourse analysts are interested in how grammar connects multiple sentences or instances of discourse, creating meaning that is specific to a communicative situation.

To this end, a discourse approach to grammar looks at how grammatical items create meaning above the sentence level and beyond the language being used: these two discourse perspectives to grammar are referred to as texture (for a detailed account of texture, see Hasan, 1989).

For example, a discourse analyst may examine how the conjunction *and* accomplishes different functions (i.e., creates meaning) in texts through connection and repetition.

> **Bible, Genesis 1 (New International Version)**
>
> 3 **And** God said, "Let there be light," **and** there was light.
>
> 4 God saw that the light was good, **and** he separated the light from the darkness.
>
> 5 God called the light "day," **and** the darkness he called "night." **And** there was evening, **and** there was morning – the first day.

The sentence- and clause-initial conjunction *and* possesses in part a narrative function in this excerpt: the conjunction connects different observations to create a sequence or story of events. This narrative and temporal function is different from the *and* found within sentences that connects separate ideas to establish a coherent whole, such as the sentence found in the actual mission statement of drinkware and gear company Stanley 1913:

Founded in 1913 by inventor William Stanley Jr., Stanley has been there for generations of adventures. We're built on invention, innovation **and** inspiration with a timeless spirit that complements your wild imagination.

In the Stanley 1913 example, the conjunction *and* creates meaning within (rather than above) the sentence level by functioning as a device that connects attributes on which the company is built. Discourse analysts are not typically interested in studying grammar within sentences unless its use reveals something about the human factor, language use, or both.

As an object of study, grammar offers exciting possibilities to understand the ways in which grammatical items create meaning above the sentence level (i.e., the aspect of discourse concerned with language use) and beyond the language being used (i.e., the aspect of discourse concerned with the human factor). While there are no set rules that must be followed when selecting a grammatical item as your object of study, there are several steps that can be followed to get you started with the process of studying grammar from a discourse analytic perspective.

First, many discourse analysts identify an object of study as a result of noticing something interesting or peculiar about a grammatical item being used in their day-to-day lives. Try thinking of a human encounter where a grammatical item serves an important role in how you make sense of the situation and the people to which you are communicating. Second, after selecting an object of study, it is important to become familiar with its grammatical rules. This step provides the necessary foundation to explore how a grammatical item does more than create meaning within a single utterance or sentence. Third, you can begin exploring how your object of study creates meaning above the sentence level (language use) and beyond the language being used (the human factor).