The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies

Discourse studies, which encompasses the ways in which language is used in texts and contexts, is a fast-moving and increasingly diverse field. With contributions from leading and upcoming scholars from across the world, and covering cutting-edge research, this handbook offers an up-to-date survey of discourse studies. It is organized according to perspectives and areas of engagement, with each chapter providing an overview of the historical development of its topic, the main current issues, debates and synergies, and future directions. The handbook presents new perspectives on well-established themes such as narrative, conversation-analytic and cognitive approaches to discourse, while also embracing a range of up-to-the-minute topics from post-humanism to digital surveillance, recent methodological orientations such as linguistic landscapes and multimodal discourse analysis, and new fields of engagement such as discourses on race, religion and money.

Anna De Fina is Professor of Italian Language and Linguistics at Georgetown University.

Alexandra Georgakopoulou is Professor of Discourse Analysis and Sociolinguistics at King’s College London.

Together they have co-authored Analyzing Narrative (2012) and co-edited The Handbook of Narrative Analysis (2015).
Genuinely broad in scope, each handbook in this series provides a complete state-of-the-field overview of a major sub-discipline within language study and research. Grouped into broad thematic areas, the chapters in each volume encompass the most important issues and topics within each subject, offering a coherent picture of the latest theories and findings. Together, the volumes will build into an integrated overview of the discipline in its entirety.

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The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies

Edited by

Anna De Fina
Georgetown University

Alexandra Georgakopoulou
King’s College London
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Contributors

Clyde Ancarno is Lecturer of Applied Linguistics at King’s College London. She is interested in corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), particularly how these can be used across disciplinary boundaries to explore textual data.

Johannes Angermuller is Professor of Discourse, Languages and Applied Linguistics at Open University and has been director of the ERC DISCONEX and INTAC projects at Warwick University and the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris) since 2012. After obtaining a PhD at University of Paris-Est and Otto-von-Guericke University in 2003, he was a junior professor in the sociology of higher education at Mainz University. He has published widely in the field of discourse studies, including Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis: Subjectivity in Enunciative Pragmatics (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and Why There Is No Poststructuralism in France: The Making of an Intellectual Generation (Bloomsbury, 2015), which have been translated into French, German, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish.

Michele Back is Associate Professor, World Languages Education, at the University of Connecticut and studies the intersection of multilingualism, race and ethnicity in educational and naturalistic contexts. Her works include Transcultural Performance: Negotiating Globalized Indigenous Identities (Palgrave, 2015) and Racialization and Language: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Peru (coedited with V. Zavala; Routledge, 2019).

Anders Björkvall is Professor of Swedish at Örebro University. He is active in the fields of multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotics, genre analysis, and literacy and learning. His latest publications include “Material Sign-Making in Diverse Contexts: ‘Upcycled’ Artefacts as Refracting Global/Local Discourses” (with A. Archer; in Making Signs, Translanguaging Ethnographies: Exploring Urban, Rural and Educational Spaces, ed. by E. Adami and A. Sherris, Multilingual Matters, 2019),

Jan Blommaert is Professor of Language, Culture and Globalization at Tilburg University and holds appointments at Ghent University and the University of the Western Cape. Publications include Discourse: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge University Press, 2005), Grassroots Literacy (Routledge, 2008), The Sociolinguistics of Globalization (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Durkheim and the Internet (Bloomsbury, 2018).

Carol Bohmer is a lawyer and sociologist, a visiting scholar in the Government Department at Dartmouth College and a teaching fellow at King’s College London. She has worked in the area of law and society, examining the way legal and social institutions interact, with particular emphasis on the role of gender in law. Her current research interests are in the field of immigration and asylum. She is coauthor with Amy Shuman of Rejecting Refugees: Political Asylum in the 21st Century (Routledge, 2007) and Political Asylum Deceptions: The Culture of Suspicion (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Brigitta Busch is an applied linguist. In 2009 she was granted a Berta-Karlik research professorship by the University of Vienna. She has also been working for many years as an expert for the Council of Europe.

Suresh Canagarajah is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor in Applied Linguistics and English at Penn State University. His current research focuses on the academic communication of international STEM scholars.

Anna De Fina is Professor of Italian Language and Linguistics in the Italian department and affiliated faculty with the Linguistics department at Georgetown University. Her interests and publications focus on identity, narrative, discourse and migration, and superdiversity. Her books include Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse (John Benjamins, 2003), Analyzing Narratives (with A. Georgakopoulou; Cambridge University Press, 2012) and the coedited volumes Discourse and Identity (with D. Schiffrin and M. Bamberg; Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Storytelling in the Digital World (with S. Perrino; John Benjamins, 2019).

Zsófia Demjén is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the UCL Centre for Applied Linguistics, editor of Applying Linguistics in Illness and Healthcare Contexts (Bloomsbury, 2020). Her research interests include health communication, metaphor and the intersections of language, mind and health(care). She is author of Sylvia Plath and the Language of Affective States: Written Discourse and the Experience of Depression (Bloomsbury, 2015), coauthor of Metaphor, Cancer and the End of Life: A Corpus-Based Study (with E. Semino, A. Hardie, S. Payne and P. Rayson; Routledge,
Cedric Deschrijver earned his PhD at King’s College London, investigating metalanguage and shifting indexical links surrounding economic/financial terms in online debates. He is currently employed at Hong Kong Shue Yan University, and uses methods of linguistic-pragmatics discourse analysis to investigate the metapragmatics of online economics discourse and the metapragmatic labels surrounding media discourse (for example, “fake news” and “conspiracy theory”).

Branca Falabella Fabricio is an associate professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, working in the Interdisciplinary Program of Applied Linguistics. She is also a researcher of the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq). Her research interests are related to identity practices in changing institutional contexts, with a special focus on text trajectories and potential identity effects, leading to subtle rearrangements.

Alexandra Georgakopoulou is Professor of Discourse Analysis and Sociolinguistics at King’s College London. She has developed small stories research, a paradigm for studying identities in everyday life stories. Her latest study of small stories on social media has been carried out within the ERC project “Life-Writing of the Moment: The Sharing and Updating Self on Social Media” (www.ego-media.org). Her latest book is entitled Quantified Storytelling: A Narrative Analysis of Metrics on Social Media (with S. Iversen and C. Stage; Palgrave, 2000).

Korina Giaxoglou is a lecturer in English language and applied linguistics at Open University. Her research focuses on the circulation of stories and affect in “traditional” and contemporary sharing practices. She has been investigating digital mourning as small stories linked to specific types of affective positioning in her research monograph A Narrative Approach to Social Media Mourning. Small Stories and Affective Positioning (Routledge, 2020).

Zane Goebel is an associate professor at the University of Queensland, where he teaches Indonesian and applied linguistics. Goebel works on language and social relations in Indonesia. He has published three monographs in this area: Language, Migration, and Identity: Neighborhood Talk in Indonesia (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Language and Superdiversity: Indonesians Knowledging at Home and Abroad (Oxford University Press, 2015) and Global Leadership Talk: Constructing Good Governance in Indonesia (Oxford University Press, 2020). He has also edited a number of collections, including Rapport and the Discursive Co-construction of Social Relations in Fieldwork Settings (Mouton de Gruyter, 2019), Contact Talk: The Discursive Organization of Contact and Boundaries (with D. Cole and H. Manns; Routledge, 2019) and Reimagining Rapport (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Martyn Hammersley is Emeritus Professor of Educational and Social Research at Open University. He has researched into the sociology of
Christopher Hart is Professor of Linguistics at Lancaster University. His research investigates the link between language, cognition and social action in political contexts of communication. He is author of *Critical Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Science: New Perspectives on Immigration Discourse* (Palgrave, 2010) and *Discourse, Grammar and Ideology: Functional and Cognitive Perspectives* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He is editor of *Cognitive Linguistic Approaches to Text and Discourse: From Poetics to Politics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019) and coeditor of *Discourse of Disorder: Riots, Strikes and Protests in the Media* (with D. Kelsey; Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Rachel Heinrichsmeier is a visiting research fellow at King’s College London. Her research focuses on identity construction in interaction, particularly older age, gender and institutional identities, and combines a conversation analytic-informed discourse analysis with ethnographic methods. Her monograph, *Ageing Identities and Women’s Everyday Talk in a Hair Salon*, was published by Routledge in Spring 2020.

Christina Higgins is a professor at the University of Hawaii in the Department of Second Language Studies. She is a sociolinguist who researches multilingualism from a discursive perspective. Much of her research has been in post-colonial contexts, including Tanzania and Hawaii, where she has examined the expression of different world views in public health communication, linguistic hybridity in everyday conversation and in the media, language learning and identity among transnationals, the dynamic nature of heritage among new speakers of Hawaiian and the shifting value of languages in their linguistic landscapes. She currently serves as coeditor of *Applied Linguistics*.

Emily Hofstetter is a postdoctoral researcher at Linköping University, examining how the body and voice are connected in interaction. Her past work has included several applied projects, examining service interactions in different settings.

Sylvia Jaworska is an associate professor in applied linguistics in the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading. Her main research is in the area of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics, and the application of both methods to studying media, health and business communication. She has published
widely on discourse in these domains in *Applied Linguistics, Discourse & Society, Language in Society, the International Journal of Business Communication* and *Discourse, Context & Media*.

**Rodney H. Jones** is Professor of Sociolinguistics and Head of the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading. His recent books include *Discourse and Digital Practices* (Routledge, 2015), *Spoken Discourse* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *A Sociolinguistics of Surveillance* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

**Kendall A. King** is Professor of Second Language Education at the University of Minnesota, where she teaches and researches sociolinguistics and language policy. She earned her PhD at the University of Pennsylvania and previously worked at New York University, Georgetown University and Stockholm University. She has written widely on indigenous language revitalization, bilingual child development and the language policies that shape student experiences. She is 2020–2021 president of the American Association of Applied Linguistics.

**Yi-Ju Lai** will earn her PhD degree in second language education from the University of Minnesota in 2020. Her research addresses multilingual populations’ language socialization into academic discourse communities. Lai’s work has appeared in *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* and the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. Her current project examines the dialogic nature of language socialization in science fields, focusing on how disciplinary knowledge and ideologies, mediated through the use of language and multimodality, are constructed between international graduate instructors and undergraduate students.

**Gavin Lamb** recently received his PhD in second language studies from the University of Hawaii. His publications and research are in the areas of interactional sociolinguistics, multimodal discourse analysis, the sociolinguistics of multilingualism in Hawaii and ecolinguistics. His main research uses ethnographic discourse analysis to examine the forms of intercultural communication that arise in human entanglements with threatened species and places, with a focus on the linguistic, sociocultural and ethical dimensions shaping wildlife conservation and ecotourism contexts. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Jyväskylä.

**Tong King Lee** is Associate Professor of Translation at the University of Hong Kong, NAATI-Certified Translator (Australia) and Chartered Linguist (Chartered Institute of Linguists, UK). He is the author of Translation and Translanguaging (2019, with M Baynham), Applied Translation Studies (2018), Experimental Chinese Literature (2015), and Translating the Multilingual City (2013).

**Li Wei** is Chair of Applied Linguistics at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London (UCL), UK. His research interests cover
List of Contributors

different aspects of bilingualism and multilingualism. He is Editor of the
International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism and
Applied Linguistics Review. His book Translanguaging: Language,
Bilingualism and Education, jointly authored with Ofelia Garcia, won
the 2015 British Association of Applied Linguistics Book Prize. He is a
Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, UK.

Vally Lytra is Reader in Languages in Education in the Department of
Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research,
practice and community engagement focus on bilingualism and biliteracy
in homes, schools and communities that have experienced diverse
migration flows. Her current ethnographic work explores how school
leaders, teachers, parents and adult language learners involved in more
established and more recent forms of Greek language education abroad
are reconfiguring the Greek schools’ mission, curricula and pedagogy.

Tommaso M. Milani is Full Professor of Multilingualism at the
University of Gothenburg. His main areas of expertise include language
policy, language ideology, (multimodal) critical discourse analysis and
language, gender and sexuality. He has written extensively on these
topics in international journals such as the Journal of Sociolinguistics,
Discourse & Society and Language in Society. Among his most recent
publications are the edited collections Language and Masculinities
(Routledge, 2017) and Queering Language, Gender and Sexuality (Equinox,
2018). He is currently coeditor of the journal Gender and Language (with
C. Caldas-Coulthard).

Luiz Paulo Moita-Lopes is a Full Professor of Applied Linguistics at the
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and a researcher of the CNPq. His
most recent publications are Global Portuguese: Linguistic Ideologies in Late
Modernity (Routledge, 2015/2018) and the coedited Meaning Making in the
Periphery (with M. Baynham; Aila Review 30; John Benjamins, 2017).

Annabelle Mooney is Professor of Language and Society at the University
of Roehampton. Her most recent publications include the coedited The
Language of Money and Debt (with E. Sifaki; Palgrave, 2017) and The

Robert Moore is a senior lecturer in educational linguistics at the
Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. He has con-
ducted fieldwork on Native North American languages and contributed
essays on topics ranging from language endangerment and the politics
of accent in Irish English to multilingualism policy in the EU and the
semiotics of brands and branding.

Kristine Kohler Mortensen is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of
Gothenburg. She completed her PhD at the University of Copenhagen in
2015, investigating online dating and how participants construct and
negotiate desire through email, chat and personal profiles. She also
studied language variation and social media practices among Danish
youth with a focus on Snapchat in the project “Dialect in the

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Periphery.” She is currently leading a project funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark on the introduction of compulsory education in “Danish sexual morals” for newly arrived migrants. Her work has been published in Discourse Studies, Discourse, Context & Media, Gender and Language and the Journal of Language and Sexuality. Among her latest publications is the coedited collection Sociale medier og sprog: Analytiske tilgange (with A. Candelers Stehr; Samfunds litteratur, 2018).

Mohammad Naseh Nasrollahi Shahri is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Asian/Middle Eastern Languages at San Diego State University. His research lies in academic discourse, qualitative research methods, semiotics and linguistic anthropology.

Kay O’Halloran is Head of Department and Communication & Media Chair in the School of the Arts at the University of Liverpool. Prior to this, she led the Multimodal Analysis Group at Curtin University and was Director of the Multimodal Analysis Lab in the Interactive & Digital Media Institute at the National University of Singapore. Professor O’Halloran has a background in mathematics, multimodal discourse analysis and linguistics. She has extensive experience in establishing and leading interdisciplinary research teams to develop and make widely available new digital tools and techniques for analyzing images, videos and 360 videos. She is currently developing mixed methods approaches to combine multimodal analysis, data mining and visualization for big data analytics in areas including online extremism and political rhetoric.

Markus Rheindorf is an applied linguist and currently Senior Researcher at the Department of Linguistics, Vienna University. He specializes in critical discourse studies, genre analysis and argumentation. His research interests include political discourse, populism, nationalism, the construction of national identity as well as academic literacies. He recently published Revisiting the Toolbox of Discourse Studies: New Trajectories in Methodology, Open Data, and Visualization (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Jennifer Roth-Gordon is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Arizona, teaching courses in cultural and linguistic anthropology. She published Race and the Brazilian Body: Blackness, Whiteness, and Everyday Language in Rio de Janeiro (University of California Press, 2016).

Brooke R. Schreiber is an assistant professor of English at Baruch College, City University of New York. Her research focuses on second language writing pedagogy in ESL and EFL settings, including translingual approaches to writing pedagogy.

Philip Seargeant is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Open University. He has authored several books on topics ranging from English around the world and language and social media to language and creativity. His most recent book is The Emoji Revolution: How Technology is Shaping the Future of Communication (Cambridge University Press, 2019).
Elena Semino is Professor of Linguistics and Verbal Art in the
Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster
University and Director of the ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to
Social Science. She holds a visiting professorship at the University of
Fuzhou. She specializes in health communication, medical humanities,
corpus linguistics, stylistics, and metaphor theory and analysis. She has
(co)authored over eighty publications, including *Metaphor in Discourse*
(Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *Metaphor, Cancer and the End of
Life: A Corpus-Based Study* (with Z. Demjén, A. Hardie, S. Payne and
P. Rayson; Routledge, 2018).

Amy Shuman is Professor of Folklore and Narrative in the Department
of English at Ohio State University. She is coauthor, with Carol Bohmer,
of *Rejecting Refugees: Political Asylum in the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2007)
and *Political Asylum Deceptions: The Culture of Suspicion* (Palgrave
Macmillan, 2018) and coeditor of *Technologies of Suspicion and the Ethics
of Obligation in Political Asylum* (with B. M. Haas; Ohio University Press,
2019). Among other awards, she is the recipient of a Guggenheim
Fellowship and a Fellowship at the Hebrew University Institute of
Advanced Studies.

Jack Sidnell is a linguistic anthropologist and a professor of anthropol-
yogy and linguistics at the University of Toronto, where he earned his
PhD. He has conducted ethnographic research in the Caribbean and in
Vietnam and made scholarly contributions to conversation analysis,
linguistic pragmatics, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. He is
(co)author of three books and (co)editor of several more including *The
Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology* (with N. J. Enfield and
P. Kockelman; Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Laura Smits completed her MA in online culture studies at Tilburg
University.

Sabine Tan is a member of the Multimodal Analysis Group and a Senior
Research Fellow in the School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, at
Curtin University. She has a background in critical multimodal dis-
course analysis, social semiotics and visual communication, and has
applied multidisciplinary perspectives to analyze institutional discourses involving traditional and new media. She has worked on inter-
disciplinary projects involving the development of interactive software for the multimodal analysis of images, videos and 360 videos for research and educational purposes, and contributed to the development of multimodal approaches to big data analytics in the fields of online terrorism, political discourse and 360 video.

Lionel Wee is Provost’s Chair Professor in the Department of English
Language & Literature at the National University of Singapore. He
works on language policy, world Englishes and general issues in socio-
linguistics and pragmatics. His latest book is *The Singlish Controversy*
(Cambridge University Press, 2018).
Peter Wignell is a member of the Multimodal Analysis Group; formerly, he was a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, at Curtin University. His background is in systemic functional linguistics, discourse analysis and multimodal analysis, and his research has been both theoretical and applied. For example, his work on the role of language in the construction of specialized knowledge systems has informed literacy theory and pedagogy. Recent research on the application of a systemic functional multimodal analysis approach to violent extremist discourse and political discourse has led to publication in a diverse range of applications such as brand semiotics, performance studies and translation.

Noura Yacoubi completed her MA in online culture studies at Tilburg University and is currently pursuing a master’s program in philosophy.

Virginia Zavala is Professor of Sociolinguistics at The Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, where she addresses issues surrounding language and education with a focus on the Andes, from an ethnographic and discourse analytic perspective. Her latest books are Qichwasimirayku: Batallas por el quechua (coauthored with L. Mujica, G. Córdova and W. Ardito; PUCP, 2014) and Racismo y Lenguaje (coedited with M. Back; PUCP, 2017).
Preface

Discourse analysis is nowadays a broad and cross-disciplinary field of studies and scholars seem to be unanimous in describing it as too difficult to delimit. Indeed, discourse analytic studies have surged not only within fields that have in common an interest in language use, such as linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, ethnography and media and communication studies, but also in a wide range of disciplines such as anthropology, history, psychology, literary studies, philosophy and sociology, to mention but a few. In turn, there is a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives. It is symptomatic of this diversity and the complexity of the field that definitions of discourse abound and diverge in their fundamental scope: from minimalist, language-based views such as the description of discourse as “language above the sentence or above the clause” (Stubbs 1993: 12), or as “utterances” (Schiffrin 1994: 39), to text-centered definitions as well as connections of discourse with the social world in its characterizations as “a type of social practice” (Fairclough 1992: 28).

With the above in mind, our aim with this handbook has not been to superimpose either artificial boundaries or some kind of coherence on a heterogeneous field but, instead, to offer readers a panorama of current areas of engagement and cross-fertilization. In turn, our decision to opt for “discourse studies” in the title as opposed to “discourse analysis” reflects our wish to avoid identification with a traditional linguistic focus on “discourse” as a method of analyzing language-in-text. Such a disciplinary focus has often meant that emphasis is placed on specific approaches seen as foundational in the development of the field (for example, speech act theory, systemic-functional grammar, text-linguistics, etc.) at the expense of acknowledging that traditional ways of segmenting and labeling “discourse analyses” have diminishing resonance or relevance in the face of emergent research areas and new methodological combinations (for example, corpus-based critical discourse analysis).
In light of the above, the remit and organization of this handbook have stemmed from our belief that long-standing differentiations within the field in terms of traditional schools of thought and approaches (for example, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, pragmatics, systemic functional grammar, text-linguistics) or in terms of different methodological orientations (experimental, ethnographic, quantitative, qualitative, etc.) do not do justice to its evolution, its porous boundaries or indeed the synergies and intersections that have developed in the last two decades. As we hope to show, discourse analytic studies have experienced a productive merging of interests amongst different perspectives and trends, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an exponential growth in works that draw on and bring together traditionally distinctive and separate approaches. For example, critical discourse analysis is often merged and combined with ethnographic approaches and corpus linguistics (for example, see Chapter 4 by Fabricio and Moita-Lopes, Chapter 9 by Hart and Chapter 27 by Björkvall) in ways that would have been unthinkable in the past; discourse studies in digital environments combine qualitative perspectives with big data analysis (see, for example, Chapter 5 by De Fina and Georgakopoulou and Chapter 8 by Ancarno); and multimodal approaches to data have been adopted within a variety of discourse analytic frameworks such as conversation analysis and translanguaging (for example, see Chapter 12 by Tan, O’Halloran and Wignell and Chapter 18 by Tong King Lee and Li Wei). New approaches such as linguistic landscapes or the analysis of digital surveillance also combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies (see, for example, Chapter 14 by Seargeant and Giaxoglou and Chapter 32 by Jones). At the same time, new theoretical and analytical challenges have emerged in the last two decades, not least as a result of the increased mediatization of social life. This has made apparent the need for well-established approaches to rethink, reconceptualize and update assumptions long held by discourse analysts. Examples of these are the recent attempts to develop a conversation analysis fit for online environments or the growth of journals and publications dealing with discourse and semiotic practices in digital environments. These attempts are often framed within the turn to materiality and posthumanist approaches to discourse (see Part III) that problematize and destabilize conventional definitions of discourse and the role of language in them. Awareness of the importance of mobility in contemporary societies has also impacted on how discourse analysts think about the ways in which communicative events are organized, communities are formed and function, and identities are expressed and negotiated, bringing to light the importance of different types of connection at a variety of scales (see Part IV). Connectivity and the ubiquitous merging of texts with other semiotic systems and embodied activities have pushed the boundaries of discourse analysis even further. In addition, the study of discourse as a means of reproducing or challenging social inequalities and its pivotal role in issues
of social justice, inclusion and diversity, rather than being a concern in the interdisciplinary “margins” of the area, has become inherent to many of the topics under study, rendering previous distinctions between “critical” and “descriptive” discourse analyses problematic (see Part V).

Our aim has been to register and contribute to trends such as those just mentioned and, in the process, to reflect on the impact of rapid social and technological changes on the study of discourse and the redrawing of disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, this handbook does not aim at being comprehensive; rather, it is intended to be representative of twenty-first-century concerns of discourse studies. Besides giving space to new trends in discourse analysis, we have also ensured inclusion of approaches that are brought together by a focus on discourse practices and the study of concrete contexts, thus paying special attention to orientations focused on participants and their own ways of organizing discursive events and activities. We highlight the main trends and ideas that run through this vast production of research in discourse studies in the introductions to the handbook’s parts.

The handbook is divided into six parts: Part I, (Con)Textualizing Discourses, is composed of chapters that provide critical presentations and discussions of some key ways in which different types of context have been theorized and incorporated into discourse studies, whilst problematizing and updating certain long-standing assumptions that are lacking in explanatory power in the era of digital media and globalization. Part II, Perspectives and Modes of Analysis, is devoted to questions regarding methodologies, data and units of analysis seen from different traditions, from conversation analysis to poststructuralism. In Part III, Discourse Materialities and Embodiment, the focus is on the relationships amongst discourse, embodiment and the material world. Contributors reflect on the implications of incorporating the environment, material objects and the body into the analysis of communication. Part IV, (Trans)Locations and Intersections, is concerned with the manifold ways in which mobility has impacted on methods of analysis and theorizations about identities and language practices in discourse studies. Part V, Ethics, Inequality and Inclusion, discusses justice and (in)equality issues from different perspectives in a variety of institutional domains. In Part VI, Discourse, Publics and Mediatization, contributors bring to the fore the impact of different kinds of discourse on public life in areas such as politics, the private and public sector, and digital communication.

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