1 Introduction: Are Discourse Analysts ‘Essential Workers’?

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When I was in the first grade, the teacher asked us to stand up one by one and tell the class what our fathers did. This was 1965, and so questions about what our mothers did rarely came up. I watched all my classmates declare proudly that their fathers were postmen, or firemen, or construction workers. Then it was my turn and I had to explain that my father was a public relations man (again, it was 1965, and so names of professions were still gendered – there were no ‘public relations people’ or ‘public relations professionals’). My classmates stared back at me blankly: there were no pictures of public relations men alongside the firemen, police officers, teachers and shopkeepers in our primary school reader. But there was nothing I could do to clear things up for them. Truth be told, at that age I really had no idea what my father did. At that moment I resolved that, when I grew up, I would be something that people had heard of, a doctor or a fireman. As it turned out, I grew up to become a discourse analyst. So that didn’t work out too well.

Of course, as I grew older, I did come to understand what my father did, and he came to understand what I did too. We used to say that his job was spinning things and my job was unspinning them. And we both knew that underlying what we both did was a conviction that words are important, that words have power, that words are things that ought to be handled with care.

Last month my father died of COVID-19, and suddenly words were not enough. He was in the USA and I was 4,000 miles away in the UK, and so our last conversations were sketchy video calls, first with him struggling to hold the phone up to his face, and later with the palliative care nurse propping an iPad in front of him for our final family Zoom calls. And in those calls, both of us, probably for the first time in our lives were at a loss for words, he because he could hardly breathe, and I because I didn’t know what to say. There was no amount of unspinning that could help me make sense of what was happening. Sure, I could deconstruct the president’s rhetoric on coronavirus or the way it was covered on Fox News, which my father watched religiously, but all that faded into the background. I could say the things I was supposed to say, the words that experts had decided were what you should say to a dying person. ‘I love you.’ ‘I forgive you.’ ‘Forgive me.’ But the words didn’t seem to be enough. This was real.

I’ve been thinking a lot during lockdown about what I do. I guess a lot of people have. The coronavirus pandemic has brought into sharp relief which of us are ‘essential workers’ (here in the UK they call them ‘key workers’) and which of us aren’t, revealing the ironic fact that those who do the most essential jobs like stocking supermarket shelves and delivering packages for Amazon often get paid the least. It has also made clear the distinction between those of us who can work...
from home, and those (like the doctor and the fireman that I never became) who have to venture out every day into a virus-ridden world. So it’s gotten me to consider whether what I’m doing with my life is ‘essential’ or not, which is probably something all of us would do well to consider from time to time.

My colleagues and I started the blog Viral Discourse (https://viraldiscourse.com), where early drafts of the essays in this Element were first published, in the midst of the pandemic, partly to keep track of what we were thinking, how we were making sense of what was going on around us, and partly to help us make sense of what we do, to help us figure out the different ways being a discourse analyst is relevant to the current moment. After a while, we came to the decision that we wanted to turn these short pieces into a more permanent document of our experiences, one which brought together our different perspectives in a way that we imagined would be useful for students of discourse analysis and for scholars in the humanities and social sciences struggling to respond to this crisis and to future crises.

**Can Discourse Analysis Save Lives?**

Two decades ago, in the midst of the George W. Bush’s War on Terror, my now-deceased mentor Ron Scollon wrote an essay called ‘What’s the point? Can mediated discourse analysis stop the war?’ (Scollon, 2002). We might ask a similar question. Can discourse analysis stop the deaths? Or stop people – whether they be politicians or the people around us – from doing things that seem to be increasing the death toll? But maybe that’s the wrong question. Maybe the question should be more along the lines of, what can discourse analysis do to help us live with death, to communicate about those things that are happening to us just a little bit better, and to understand the power of words to infect and to heal, and to learn how to treat them with care?

That’s pretty much the conclusion Ron came to as well. The real question, he decided, was not whether or not he could stop the war, but rather something a bit less dramatic and maybe a bit more important. ‘What can I do,’ he wrote, ‘that neither abdicates all action and responsibility to those who are causing such enormous human devastation nor quixotically burns up my life and the lives of those around me trying to feel as if we are taking meaningful action?’

The kind of discourse analysis Ron did – mediated discourse analysis – is all about ‘meaningful actions’, or rather, about understanding how every action is meaningful, and made possible by meaning (or discourse). Everything that happens is the result of chains of little actions following one after another, sometimes leading to monumental results, sometimes not, all woven together with words (and pictures, and other ways of making meaning). For Ron, the whole point of discourse analysis is to understand the role that discourse has in
stitching together those chains of action, the role discourse has in making things happen, or not happen.

Like wars, epidemics – diseases of all kinds – are sites where these chains of action and meaning can get particularly knotty and hard to untangle. One reason for this, as I argued in my 2013 book about health communication, is this:

Talking about health in any context is a complicated thing, first because when one is talking about health one is usually talking about other things as well, things like fear, trust, commitment, love, money, morality, politics and death, just to name a few. Second, communicating about health can be used to accomplish many different social actions from making an insurance claim, to making love, to making conversation around the dinner table, and how one talks about it depends on what one is doing with the talk. (Jones, 2013: 3)

Two decades ago, in the midst of a different pandemic, the cultural critic Paula Treichler (1999: 11) called AIDS an ‘epidemic of signification’. ‘Try as we may to treat AIDS as an “infectious disease” and nothing more,’ she wrote, ‘meanings continue to multiply wildly.’ AIDS had become ‘a chaotic assemblage of understandings’ – or, as Ron might have put it, a knot of entangled chains of discourse and action – a ‘horrendously complex entity made up of linkages among very different and independent discourses and ideologies, semiotic systems and their signs’ (Scollon, 2002). ‘We cannot,’ Treichler (1999: 11) concluded, ‘look “through” language to determine what AIDS “really” is. Rather we must look at language. We must intervene at the point where meaning is created.’

Noticing

In the end of the day, the best thing about discourse analysis is that it provides us with frameworks to notice when and how meaning is created, and sometimes to productively intervene. Each short research note in this Element might be seen as a window into that process of noticing – an example of a discourse analyst zeroing in on some point where meaning was created around the pandemic at some particular moment in some particular place, whether it be noticing the signs pasted in the windows of shuttered shops in our neighbourhood, or the slogans the prime minister was decorating his lectern with for his coronavirus briefings, or the metaphors used to talk about the pandemic in the newspapers, or the videos, memes and hashtags that shot through our social media feeds. And what they end up noticing is that making meaning in the context of COVID-19 is never just about COVID-19, but also about things like inequality, racism, militarism, cultural identity, expertise, and power, and sometimes meaning itself; what they end up noticing is how, at times like this, it is not just meaning but also ‘ambiguity
and uncertainty’ that need to be ‘socially and linguistically managed’ (Treichler 1999: 16).

One thing these essays remind us is that it is the particularity of these points where meaning is created that is most important – that meaning is always situated, that it is always created in some place, at some time, at some point in a chain of actions. The same words have different meanings depending on whether or not they appear on our social media feeds or come from the mouth of the prime minister. And so these analyses are also necessarily situated. They were written in the midst of the pandemic by people who were experiencing it in all of the big and small ways that others were.

Each of these pieces, then, is an example of discourse analysis being done in vivo, an attempt to make sense of what was happening as it happened. In some of them, we have plucked out some pieces of data from the stream of events and tried to test out our analytical apparatus on it, hoping to derive some insight or some foothold for future research. In others we have attempted to build a preliminary theoretical framework around what we were witnessing, a skeleton of concepts that might later be applied to more carefully collected data. And so the ideas presented here are necessarily tentative, snapshots of our thinking at particular points in a quickly changing narrative. In one sense, that might be a weakness. Couldn’t we have waited until we had more data, more certainty, something more ‘substantial’ to share? But in another sense, it is their incompleteness that is their strength, the glimpses they offer into how we as discourse analysts were making sense of things day by day; day by day trying to figure out what it means to be ‘essential’.

By the time this Element is published, the contours of the pandemic and people’s responses to it will no doubt have changed, and by the time some readers read this, the pandemic will be a distant memory. Hopefully. We will also have moved on in our thinking. We might have followed the threads we have picked up here, developing these ideas into more substantial projects, grant applications or research articles, or we might have moved on to different things. But what we wanted to capture here were those initial moments of sense making, when discourse analysts start to notice things and begin to map out where they want to go.

Another strength of this small volume is the range of different perspectives for understanding meaning and action that are represented. We are all discourse analysts, but we have our own tribes and our own tricks. These ‘bags of tricks’ go by names like critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, mediated discourse analysis, social semiotics, interactional sociolinguistics, genre analysis, linguistic landscape studies and corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Some readers will be familiar with these various frameworks, and others less
so. Where possible, the authors have tried to provide a short explanation of the main principles guiding their analysis and to use their analysis or theoretical discussion to illustrate how these principles might be applied. For this reason, this collection is suitable not just for seasoned discourse analysts, but also for those just getting started in the field.

None of the short essays in this Element are going to save anyone’s life. I’m pretty sure of that. But they might play some small part in some chain of action that ends up saving someone’s life, or making someone’s life better, or helping someone talk to someone who refuses to wear a face mask without getting into an argument, or getting someone to think twice about retweeting that hateful COVID-related tweet. More importantly, they might help us become more sensitive to those chains of action that have been set into motion by this virus and the role discourse plays in them before we get too entangled in them, before they get wrapped around us so tightly that we can’t talk. They might get us closer to understanding how to productively intervene where meaning is created. They might contribute, somewhere down the line, to the construction of a new architecture for understanding how to talk to each other over seemingly irresolvable physical and ideological distances in contexts where we are reduced to tiny iPhone-sized faces. They might in some small way help us to figure out what it means to be essential to the people around us, and how to say the things that need saying at the moments they need saying and in the ways they need saying; things like ‘I love you’, ‘I forgive you’, ‘Forgive me’.
Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a dramatic shift in the debate about wearing face masks to slow the spread of the coronavirus. In the beginning, most East Asian governments and even some European ones such as Austria and the Czech republic came down on the side of face masks. But the initial response in the United States and the United Kingdom were anti-mask. In these countries, experts were deployed to question the quality of the ‘evidence’ regarding the efficacy of masks (see Hafner, Section 3). There were those who worried that many people didn’t know how to wear masks properly, and some even insisted that wearing masks would actually make people more vulnerable to infection.

At that time in the UK and the USA, wearing a surgical mask in public, especially if you looked East Asian, could even invite racist attacks, a phenomenon that The Guardian dubbed ‘maskphobia’ (Weale, 2020). At the same time, there were also reports of Westerners in Asian locales receiving similar abuse for not wearing face masks (Choi, 2020). A piece of graffiti on the streets of Hong Kong in March declared: ‘HEY YOU GWEILO! Are you too poor to buy a mask?’ (gweilo being a less than flattering Cantonese term for foreigner).

In the UK, not all of the anti-mask sentiment directed towards East Asians was violent. Some of it was well meaning. At one UK university, a British Professor insisted that a Chinese student take her mask off during class. ‘I have to see your face,’ he said, and then proceeded to ‘educate’ her about why masks are ‘unscientific’. A few days later, the vice-chancellor of the same university sent a message to staff and students reminding them that, while there was ‘no evidence’ that people should wear masks, for some people mask wearing was part of their ‘culture’, and so should be ‘tolerated’.

But, even when experts were telling them not to, as the epidemic started to take hold in their countries, many people in the USA and UK started buying up masks. For some it seemed that their governments’ anti-mask messages were designed more to manage the scarcity of masks than to actually protect people.

In mid-March, sociologist Zeynap Tufekci (2020) argued in the New York Times that ‘the top-down conversation around masks has become a case study in how not to communicate with the public, especially now that the traditional gatekeepers like media and health authorities have much less control’. Tufekci’s criticism of anti-mask messages focused mostly on how they ignored the complex flows of information around health and risk in contemporary societies. But there is also a more discourse-analytical critique to be made, one which shows how the difficulties with communicating about face masks is also a result of ignoring the complex nature of meaning.
Much work in discourse analysis owes a debt to the older field of semiotics, pioneered by Charles Peirce in the mid nineteenth century. The focus of semiotics is not just what signs mean, but how they mean – the various ways that objects, utterances and inscriptions get entangled with ideas, people and social relationships. In the 1980s, linguists Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988) drew on this tradition to formulate an approach they called social semiotics. One important focus of this approach has been the strategic ways people combine different kinds of semiotic resources for particular purposes (see Ho, Section 4). An equally important focus has been understanding how the ‘meaning potential’ of different resources changes as society changes, and how resources come to us ‘heavy’ with the histories of their past uses. Sign systems are, as Halliday (1978) pointed out, ultimately functional, ultimately reflections of the societies that invent them, the kinds of things people in those societies need to do and the kinds of relationships they have with one another.

Masks are objects that come to us particularly heavy with meanings, meanings that can change depending on the social contexts in which masks are worn. Masks are never just one thing. They are always at least three kinds of things at one time. They are things that conceal, things that protect and things that transform. And understanding this can help us to make sense of how the discourse around masks has changed, and how it’s likely to change in the future.

Masks as Things That Conceal

One of the most important functions of masks throughout history has been to conceal the face of the wearer – either in order to hide their identity, or to perform modesty or decorum. Masks are the accessories of bandits and bank robbers, but nuns and brides also often appear veiled. How masks are used as coverings reveals societal beliefs about what should and what shouldn’t be covered in different circumstances. An example of this can be seen in the aforementioned professor’s insistence to his Chinese student, that, in the classroom, ‘I need to see your face’. In Christian moral philosophy and Western culture more generally, there has always been a suspicion of masks, as they function to disjoin identity from behaviour, making people essentially unaccountable.

In the Muslim tradition, of course, there are different beliefs about the meaning of a covered face. The purpose of veiling a woman’s face is not to conceal her evil intentions, but to discourage male onlookers from developing their own. Obviously, the unease of Europeans and Americans with East Asians wearing masks during the pandemic has been nothing compared to their long-standing discomfort with Islamic women wearing veils (niqabs, burkas), and just as ‘rational arguments’ were central to anti-face-mask rhetoric, ‘rational
arguments about social order have been used against the veil. Justifications for France’s 2010 law making it an offence to ‘wear clothing designed to conceal one’s face’, for instance, do not normally single out Islamic women, but rather focus on how the act of concealing one’s face constitutes a danger to public safety and public order.

Not surprisingly, this law ended up being used by scammers to target mask-wearing Chinese during the early days of the pandemic, with people in Paris pretending to be police officers stopping masked Chinese tourists and fining them €250 for violating the French anti-mask law. Perhaps the most ironic turn of events, though, was when Chinese students in the UK started wearing burkas to conceal their surgical masks in order to avoid harassment, apparently calculating that coronavirus related ‘maskphobia’ in the UK exceeded Islamophobia.

Masks as Things that Protect

Another central function of masks is to protect their wearers against magic spells, bad luck, air pollution, tear gas or diseases. In many cultures, masks have been endowed with the power to ward off evil spirits. Halloween masks, in fact, are linked to the ‘guises’ worn for the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain to protect wearers from malevolent ghosts. As with its concealing function, the protective function of the mask provides a window into principles upon which societies organize social relationships and their understandings of the nature of personhood. The protective function of masks turns them into a tool for distinguishing between good and evil, between inside and outside and between you and me.

This is just as true in the current debate around the ability of face masks to protect against the coronavirus as it was in the ancient rituals of the Celts. The striking thing about the European and American guidelines about mask wearing that were in place in the early days of the pandemic is the degree to which they focused on the wearer of the mask as the one who is (or is not) protected. For example:

**USA**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not recommend that people who are well wear a face mask (including respirators) to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19.

**UK**

Face masks play a very important role in places such as hospitals, but there is very little evidence of widespread benefit for members of the public.

This contrasts with the advice of the Hong Kong Department of Health, which states:
Surgical masks can prevent transmission of respiratory viruses from people who are ill. It is essential for people who are symptomatic (even if they have mild symptoms) to wear a surgical mask.

In Asia, wearing masks has always been a matter of protecting other people. Primary school students are taught to wear masks when they have a cold, and in times of epidemics, masks serve as a visible reminder that limiting infection is everyone’s civic responsibility.

‘Civic responsibility’ was also a trope in anti-mask discourses in the West. In the UK, for instance, in the beginning of the pandemic, the way to signal virtue, was to not wear a mask in order to save them for healthcare workers – to ‘protect the NHS’. One problem with this sloganeering was that it took attention away from the neoliberal policies, including the decade of austerity imposed on the NHS by the Tories, that led to shortages of personal protective equipment in the first place.

Masks as Things that Transform

According to anthropologists, the most important function of masks is not to conceal the face of the wearer nor to protect them from harm, but to transform them. This is what happens when superheroes don masks – they are transformed from ordinary beings to extraordinary beings. The usual way of thinking about this transformation, however, is in terms of representational meaning. The mask transforms its wearer into the being – say an animal or a god – whose face is represented on the mask. Such transformations are necessarily temporary. When the wearer takes off the mask, he or she returns to being human.

But anthropologist Donald Pollock (1995) proposes that a more important aspect of this transformation has to do with what semioticians and linguists call indexical meaning, the kind of meaning that is made when certain signs over time become associated with certain kinds of people, places, activities or values. In sociolinguistics, for example, certain ways of speaking can come to index certain regions, classes or kinds of people. When we see the transformative power of masks as a matter of indexical meaning, we come to see how meaning is socially constructed over time and reflects larger constellations of power and ideology within a society.

Another anthropologist, Christos Lynteris (2018), traces the practice of East Asians wearing face masks to the Great Manchurian Plague Epidemic of 1910–11, which broke out while the Chinese, Japanese, Russians and missionaries from Europe and America were vying for influence over the region. In the midst of this struggle, Wu Liande, a Chinese doctor in Harbin, defied the conventional wisdom of foreign experts by suggesting that, unlike earlier manifestations of plague, this strain was airborne. To protect people from infection, Wu invented an ‘anti-
plague mask’ (Fig. 2.1), meant to be worn not just by doctors and patients but also their contacts, and, if possible, by the entire population of the region.

The Europeans were dismissive of the mask, not just because they were sceptical of Wu’s airborne contagion theory, but also because they were sceptical that Chinese doctors had the level of ‘civilization’ required to understand science. Among Dr Wu’s most fervent opponents was the distinguished French physician Dr Gérald Mesny. In his autobiography, Wu related in the third person one of his confrontations with Mesny.

Dr. Wu was seated in a large padded armchair, trying to smile away their differences. The Frenchman was excited, and kept on walking to and fro in the heated room. Suddenly, unable to contain himself any longer, he faced Dr. Wu, raised both his arms in a threatening manner, and with bulging eyes cried out ‘You, you Chinaman, how dare you laugh at me and contradict your superior?’ (Wu, 1959: 19)

Not long after this meeting, Mesny visited plague hospitals without wearing Wu’s mask, quickly contracted the disease and died, leading other foreign doctors as well as the general public to quickly adopt the mask.

The main point of Lynteris’s article is not to reveal how the arrogance and racism of Europeans prevented them from adopting a life-saving technology, but rather the way Wu’s mask acted to transform the identities of Chinese doctors and unsettle the existing relationships of power. The mask came...