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23

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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This chapter considers the use of written and spoken texts as the basis for social and cultural research. It focuses on discourse analysis as a method for studying the use of language in social contexts. This method provides insights into the way speech and texts help to shape and reproduce social meanings and forms of knowledge. I define the term 'discourse', outline approaches to the social and cultural analysis of discourse, and explore discourse analysis in relation to four key stages of the research process:

1. Defining the research problem
2. Collecting data
3. Coding and analysing data
4. Presenting the analysis

This qualitative approach to textual analysis can sometimes seem a difficult method to pin down because it is used in different ways within different fields (see Hammersley, 2002; Wetherell et al., 2001a). While its origins lie most firmly in the

disciplines of linguistics and social psychology (see Billig, 1987; Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 1997), the method has been widely taken up within sociology, media and communications, politics and social policy, health studies, socio-legal studies, education, management and organisation studies. In this discussion I am concerned with these broadly *social* approaches to textual analysis, focusing on how social categories, knowledges and relations are shaped by discourse.

Discourse analysis takes its place within a larger body of social and cultural research that is concerned with the production of meaning through talk and texts. As such, it has affinities with semiotics, which is primarily concerned with visual texts (see Chapter 16) and with conversation analysis (see Chapter 24). While approaches to discourse analysis vary, they share a common understanding of language as an object of inquiry. To the discourse analyst, language is not simply a neutral medium for communicating information or reporting on events, but a domain in which people's knowledge of the social world is actively shaped. Anyone who has been in an argument with a skilled or slippery debater will be aware of the way that language can be used to compel certain conclusions, to establish certain claims and to deny others. Discourse analysis involves a perspective on language that sees this not simply as reflecting reality in a transparent or straightforward way, but as constructing and organising the terms in which we understand that social reality. Discourse analysts are interested in language and texts as sites in which social meanings are formed and reproduced, social identities are shaped, and social facts are established.

What is discourse?

Discourse can refer to a single utterance or speech act (from a fragment of talk, to a private conversation, to a political speech) or to a systematic ordering of language involving certain rules, terminology and conventions (such as legal or medical discourse). This second definition allows researchers to analyse how discourses shape specific ways of speaking and understanding. Viewed in this way, 'a discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic' (Hall, 1992: 290). Such an approach is often associated with the work of the French thinker Michel Foucault, and his interest in how forms of discourse help to produce the very categories, facts and objects that they claim to describe (Foucault, 1972: 49). Discourse, in Foucault's sense, does not refer simply to language or speech acts, but to the way language works to organise fields of knowledge and practice. Thus, following the work of Foucault, one might ask:

- How is our understanding of sexuality shaped by various moral, medical, legal and psychological discourses?
- How is the concept of deviance (e.g. 'mad' or 'delinquent' behaviour) defined and talked about within discourses of psychiatry or criminology?
- How are these discursive constructions linked to social practices, to social institutions, and to the operation of social power?

A good example of this kind of approach is Bell's (1993) use of discourse analysis to examine how the crime of incest is constituted under English and Scots law (Box 23.1).

BOX 23.1

BELL'S (1993) ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL DISCOURSES ON INCEST

Incest was criminalised in English law in 1908; while it has been criminal in Scotland since 1567, the law was modernised in 1986. Bell bases her analysis on the parliamentary debates surrounding both pieces of legislation (Bell, 1993: 126–127). Her interest is in how incest is defined as a criminal act in ways that draw on particular forms of expertise and evidence at these different historical moments.

Bell identifies three key 'knowledges' that shape the political and legal discourse about incest:

1. The first of these concerns issues of health – articulated in terms of the dangers of 'inbreeding' in the 1908 debates and 'genetic' risks in the 1980s (Bell, 1993: 130–1). While medical or scientific arguments appear in both debates, Bell points out that they are in themselves insufficient to define the offence of incest. For example, they do not explain why incest would be wrong if there was no chance of conception; they focus on the possible consequence of the act rather than the act itself. At the same time they define incest as a problem in rather limited ways, as referring only to sexual relations between men and fertile women, and to blood relatives rather than adoptive or step-family. The victim of incest, furthermore, is understood to be the potential offspring, rather than either of the parties directly concerned. In these terms Bell examines how medical knowledges shape the discourse on incest to produce particular definitions of the problem itself and the subjects it involves.
2. The scientific discourse of genetic harm is supplemented by a second body of knowledge that constructs the offence of incest in terms of sexual, psychological or child abuse. Here the speakers in the parliamentary debates are seen to draw on discourses of child protection, social welfare and psychology. Incest is constructed as wrong on the basis of mental harm, coercion and violence, defined in terms of power relations within the family. The victims of incest are represented within these discourses as children or young women who are vulnerable to (especially male) adults. While such a conception of incest might be seen as more in keeping with current understandings, Bell does not claim to assess the 'relative truth' of these competing accounts (1993: 129). Rather, she is concerned with the differing ways in which they produce incest as a legal fact, defining the problem and the victim in various terms.
3. The third key frame within which incest is constructed in these debates is as a threat to the family as a social institution. This is particularly important for the inclusion of adoptive and step-relations in the definition of incest under the more recent Scots law, in contrast to the scientific arguments seen earlier. Here, the offence of incest is construed in terms of a breach of trust within the family, and as violating the family as a social bond rather than simply a genetic one. Such an understanding involves an extended notion of the family unit, as well as its importance to a wider social and moral order.

Bell's analysis is interesting in showing how the category of incest, while often naturalised as a primary human taboo, can be understood as a legal artefact moulded by various political, medical and moral discourses. English and Scots law define incest differently; moreover, the parliamentary debates that inform these laws draw on contrasting and sometimes conflicting knowledges which go beyond the legal sphere. Incest is constructed as a legal fact via discourses of medical science, psychology, child protection, social welfare, the family and moral order. It follows that legal discourse – and the legal facts that it inscribes – is shaped by wider networks of language, knowledge and power. This point goes beyond semantics: discourse – ways of speaking about and understanding an issue – is important here because it helps to determine the practical ways that people and institutions define and respond to given problems.

Critical discourse analysis

This social and historical approach to the study of discourse is often associated with critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993, 2001; Wodak, 2004; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Critical discourse analysis is concerned with the social and political context of discourse, based on the view that language is not only conditioned by these contexts, but itself

helps to constitute them (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). Leading approaches in CDA examine how ideologies are reproduced through language and texts (Fairclough, 1995), and how discourse can be understood in relation to historical processes and events (Wodak, 2001). Critical discourse analysts go beyond the rhetorical or technical analysis of language to explore its social and political setting, uses and effects. They see language as crucial to the ways that power is reproduced, legitimated and exercised within social relations and institutions.

Discourse in a social context

Perhaps the easiest way to think about discourses as linking language, knowledge and power is to take the model of 'expert' languages. Doctors, for example, do not simply draw on their practical training when doing their job; they also draw on a medical language that allows them to identify symptoms, make diagnoses and prescribe remedies. This language is not readily available to people who are not medically trained.

Such an expert language has a number of important social effects: it marks out a field of knowledge or expertise, it confers membership, and it bestows authority:

1. Medical discourse establishes a distinct sphere of *expertise*, setting out the domain of medical knowledge and the issues with which it is concerned. Consider, for example, ongoing debates as to whether chronic fatigue syndrome or ME should be considered as primarily a physical or a psychological problem, and, to an extent, whether such a condition can be said to exist at all (see Guise, et al., 2010). One way in which such debates play out is in the language used to describe the condition. The term 'myalgic encephalomyelitis' clearly *medicalises* the condition, while a term such as 'yuppie flu' does not. The use of language plays a notable part in arguments for recognising a condition as a 'proper' illness: as a valid object of medical expertise and a suitable case for medical treatment. Medical discourse in this sense helps to delimit a distinct field of knowledge, and to exclude certain facts or claims from this field.
2. Medical discourse confers *membership* in allowing health professionals to communicate with each other in coherent and consistent ways. Language in this sense represents a form of expert knowledge that professionals draw on in their everyday working practice and reproduce in their interactions. The internal conventions and rules of medical discourse act as a way of *socialising* individuals into the medical professions, and enabling them to operate competently within them. In this respect, discourse has a role to play in the institutional organisation of medical knowledge and its professional culture.
3. Medical discourse *authorises* certain speakers and statements. Doctors' authority is perhaps most routinely expressed by their access to an expert language from which most of their patients are excluded. On an everyday level, while we may at times be frustrated by the use of medical language to describe our symptoms, we may also be reassured that our doctor is an authority on these matters. More generally, medical authority is asserted in the use of expert discourses to dismiss competing accounts, such as those associated with homeopathic and alternative remedies.

Expert languages provide an obvious and a very fruitful area for research; discourse analysis, however, is by no means confined to this domain. Discourse analysts might study formal policy or parliamentary discourse, but also the popular discourses used in politicians' speeches and manifestos, the news and other forms of media, interviews and conversations. In all cases, the analyst is concerned with examining the way that specific forms of text and speech produce their versions of a social issue, problem, event or context.

Doing discourse analysis

It is difficult to formalise any standard approach to discourse analysis. This is partly because of the variety of frameworks adopted by different researchers, partly because the process tends to be 'data-driven'. However, while there are no strict rules of method for analysing discourse, it is possible to isolate certain core themes and useful techniques which may be adapted to different research contexts. In the discussion that follows I consider some of these in terms of four key stages of the research process: defining the research problem; selecting and approaching data; sorting, coding and analysing data; and presenting the analysis.

Defining the research problem

I have stressed the 'special' character of discourse analysis as a method of research – its distinctive approach to language and its resistance to formulaic rules of method. However, the discourse analyst is faced with a common set of questions that arise within any research process. What is the research about? What are my data? How will I select and gather the data? How will I handle and analyse the data? How will I present my findings?

Formulating a research problem can be one of the most difficult moments in social research. Sometimes it can seem like a very artificial exercise – qualitative research frequently is data-led, and the researcher cannot be certain precisely how the research problem will be defined until they have begun data collection and preliminary analysis (see also Chapter 7). This is underlined by the fact that this form of research is not so much *looking for* conclusive answers to specific problems ('What are the causes of juvenile crime?'), as *looking at* the way both the problem, and possible solutions, are constructed ('How is juvenile crime explained and understood within current political discourse?'). Explanations of juvenile crime might draw on accounts of moral decline, poor parenting, the absence of positive role models, inadequate schooling, poverty, lack of prospects, adolescent rebelliousness and so on. This is not to say that the issue – juvenile crime – does not exist or has no meaning, but to assert that social actors make sense of this reality in various, often conflicting ways. If a dominant understanding of juvenile crime within political and media discourse rests on the notion of poor parenting, for example, it is likely that the problem will be tackled in a different way than if it was commonly understood in terms of a language of material deprivation.

As with other forms of social and cultural research, discourse analysis often begins with a broad – even vague – interest in a certain area of social life. The way this broad interest becomes a feasible research topic is strongly linked to the choice of research methods (see Box 23.2).

BOX 23.2

FORMULATING A DISCOURSE ANALYTIC PROJECT ON IMMIGRATION

A researcher has a broad interest in undertaking research on immigration – a topic of ongoing political, media and public interest. There are different ways of approaching research on immigration, and these will influence how the research problem is defined. You might, if you were not planning to do discourse analysis,

- explore statistical data relating to the number of people entering a country in each year, their countries of origin, and patterns of change over time, or
- select a sample of people who have settled in a place, and use interviews to research aspects of their experiences of immigration, for example: their experience of immigration bureaucracy, of the process of integration, questions of cultural difference, the notion of 'home'.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Using discourse analysis, you might:

- choose to examine political debates surrounding immigration legislation
- analyse press reports on immigration issues
- investigate anti-immigration literature published by right-wing organisations.

A discourse analyst might be concerned with how immigration is constructed as a political issue, the ways in which immigrants are represented within public discourses, the manner in which certain conceptions of immigration are warranted in opposition to alternative ways of thinking – for example, representations of immigration in terms of illegality or 'threat' (see Van der Valk, 2003; see also Philo and Beattie, 1999; KhosraviNik, 2009). A starting point for such a study could be as simple as 'How is immigration constructed as a "problem" within political discourse?' The analytic process will tend to feed back into this guiding question, helping to refine the research problem as you go along.

Selecting and approaching data

Having set up a problem like the one in Box 23.2, the next step is to collect data for analysis. This will in part be determined by how you are defining the issue. Do you want to look at:

- Immigration policy?
- Immigrant identity?
- Media representations of immigration issues?
- Attitudes towards immigration within sections of the public?

Depending on how you are conceptualising the research problem, you could collect data from a number of sources. These include parliamentary debates, political speeches, party manifestos, policy documents, personal accounts (including interviews), press or television reports, and campaigning literature. As with textual analysis more generally, a discourse analyst potentially can draw on a very wide range of data. As a general rule of thumb, discourse analysis tends to be based on more textual data than conversation analysis and less than content analysis, where computer-assisted coding can allow the researcher to process a large amount of material. However, the primary consideration in selecting textual material is its relevance to the research problem, rather than simply the number of texts analysed. It is therefore especially important to make clear the rationale for your selection, and how it might provide insights into a topic. Box 23.3 shows how two discourse analysts selected texts for their studies.

BOX 23.3

SELECTING DATA FOR DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Study 1: The historical construction of incest

Bell's study of the construction and criminalisation of incest considered the changing ways in which this problem is defined and understood over time and in different legal systems. Rather than undertaking a very large-scale historical study, however, Bell was able to identify two contrasting bodies of discourse at two different historical moments: the 1908 legislation in England, and 1986 legislation in Scotland. While both nations are governed by the British parliament, they maintain their separate historical legal systems.

In addition to the Acts of Parliament that constitute the letter of the law, Bell analysed the debates in both the upper and lower houses of the British parliament which framed these pieces of legislation, as well as reports of relevant parliamentary committees. In this way, she was able to examine the political discourses and arguments that shaped the law.

Source: Bell, 1993

Study 2: Refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in the British press

This study by Majid KhosraviNik examined the ways in which these groups were represented in a sample of British newspapers against the backdrop of two major events: the 1999 conflict in Kosovo, and the 2005 British General Election. In each case, the researcher chose a specific time-frame: March 1999, covering the NATO bombing of Serbian positions in Kosovo and the displacement of Kosovar refugees; and May 2005, covering the British election campaign. Note that in the first sample the 'problem' of refugees is constituted at a relative distance from the British public addressed by these newspapers, while in the second sample it becomes a more immediate, domestic issue in a context of heightened political debate. He also identified a specific sample of media texts:

> [T]hree representative newspapers (along with their Sunday editions) were selected in terms of their formats and socio-political ideologies as follows:
>
> *The Guardian* and *The Observer:* liberal quality newspapers
>
> *The Times* and *The Sunday Times:* conservative quality newspapers
>
> The *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*: "tabloid" newspapers.'
>
> (KhosraviNik, 2009: 482)

In selecting this sample, the researcher aimed to explore a range of press discourse on refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, using a common social research strategy that distinguishes 'quality', 'serious' or 'broadsheet' press from more 'tabloid' or 'populist' media, and associates particular newspapers with more liberal or left (*New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *El País*) or more conservative (*Washington Times*, *Le Figaro*, *El Mundo*) political orientations.

Source: KhosraviNik, 2009: 482

As Bell (1993) found, political and policy discourse – whether parliamentary debates, formal legislation, committee enquiries, political speeches and manifestoes, or policy texts – are valuable resources for discourse analysts. In many countries such texts are freely available on the public record and increasingly are archived on-line, making them an accessible source of data for student researchers. Political or policy discourse is also an excellent example of the way that language helps to reproduce and reinforce social power, and has an impact on how institutions and individuals are governed. In selecting such data for analysis, however, the researcher needs to be sensitive to the different kinds of discourse that are at stake: a political speech on the campaign trail is not the same as a piece of legislation or a policy paper. As in all social and cultural research, the analyst should be clear about their rationale for choosing certain kinds of data, their strategy for collecting it (What range of textual data? Over what time period?),

and how they understand the relevance and role of these data in their social context.

Like political and policy discourse, media texts of the type studied by KhosraviNik (2009) – whether press, radio, television or other media – are important resources for discourse analysts. They represent the powerful way in which discourse can shape attitudes and help to establish dominant meanings, as well as demonstrating the contested nature of many of these accounts. They are also easily accessible, increasingly on-line. The very abundance and availability of media texts, however, poses a real challenge for the researcher in selecting a manageable amount of relevant data. KhosraviNik could not have gathered, let alone analysed, everything that appeared in the British (print, radio, television, Internet) media on Kosovo or the 2005 election – he therefore had to be very selective in constructing his sample and accounting for those choices in writing up his research.

Sorting, coding and analysing data

Discourse analysis has been called a 'craft skill' (see Potter and Wetherell, 1994: 55), and has been compared to riding a bike – a process that one picks up by doing, perfects by practising, and which is difficult to describe in a formal way. Doing effective discourse analysis has much to do with getting a real feel for one's data, working closely with them, trying out alternatives, and being ready to reject analytic schemes that do not work. While it has been argued that discourse analysis is not centrally concerned with 'some general idea that seems to be intended' by a text (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 168), the overall rhetorical effect of a text provides a framework in which to consider its inconsistencies, internal workings and small strategies of meaning. Potter and Wetherell refer to these as the interpretive repertoires at work within a discourse, the ways of speaking about and understanding a topic that organise the meanings of a text.

When doing discourse analysis it is not necessary to provide an account of every line of the text under study, as can be the case in conversation analysis. It is usually more appropriate and more informative to be selective in relation to the data, extracting those sections that provide the richest source of analytic material. This does not mean that one simply 'selects out' the data extracts that support the argument, while ignoring more troubling or ill-fitting sections of the text. Contradictions within a text (including and perhaps especially those parts that contradict the researcher's own assumptions) can often be productive for the analysis.

If there is one rule of method that we might apply to discourse analysis, it would be Durkheim's first principle: abandon all preconceptions! At times it can be tempting to impose an interpretation on a sample of discourse, but if this is not supported by the data then it will not yield a convincing analysis. We cannot *make* the data 'say' what is simply not there. Most discourse analysts would reject the idea that texts are open to any number of different, and equally plausible, readings. Rather, analytical assertions are to be grounded in textual evidence and detailed argument. In this respect discourse analysis entails a commitment to challenging common-sense knowledge and disrupting easy assumptions about the organisation of social meanings.

Discourse analysis is an interpretive process that relies on close study of specific texts, and therefore does not lend itself to hard-and-fast 'rules' of method. Even so, we might take a cue from Foucault (1984: 103), who suggested that one might analyse a text in terms of 'its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form and the play of its internal relationships'. Put simply, this directs our attention to the organisation and the interpretive detail of given texts. Here we can identify some useful pointers for analysis:

1. Identifying key themes and arguments.
2. Looking for association and variation.
3. Examining characterisation and agency.
4. Paying attention to emphasis and silences.

Note that these are devices or tools for opening up a text, rather than a fixed set of analytic strategies. The tactics that you adopt as an analyst come from engagement with the data themselves, rather than from any textbook approach.

Identifying key themes and arguments

A common starting point for analysis is to locate key categories, themes and terms. Identifying recurrent or significant themes can help you to manage the data and bring a more systematic order to the analytic process. In this way, discourse analysis draws on more general approaches to handling and coding qualitative data (see Chapter 21). The analytic process involves sifting, comparing and contrasting the different ways in which these themes emerge. On a simple level, the repetition or emphasis of keywords, phrases and images reveals most clearly what the speaker or writer is trying to put across in the text. This can provide the basis for a critical analysis of the data:

- What ideas and representations cluster around key themes?
- Are particular meanings and images being mobilised?
- What other discourses or arguments are drawn on to define or justify the approach taken in the text?

KhosraviNik's (2009) study of the representation of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in the British press notes a basic contrast in the use of key terms in his sample (see also Boxes 23.3 and 23.6). In the coverage of the Kosovo conflict and NATO air-strikes in 1999, the common term used to describe displaced Kosovar people is 'refugee'. In the same newspapers' coverage of the 2005 British General Election, the language is that of 'asylum seeker' and 'immigrant'. KhosraviNik suggests that this linguistic shift marks a political shift to a more negative view of these groups. In the first case, the British newspapers are reporting on a distant humanitarian crisis in which the claims of the refugees are not in question: Kosovars are represented as victims of forced and unwilling displacement. In the second case the newspapers are reporting on people who have arrived in Britain. Whereas the use of the term 'refugee' assumes the legitimate status of this claim, the use of the term 'asylum seeker' implies that such a status is unclear, uncertain or even illegitimate.

Bell's analysis (Box 23.1), to take another example, was organised around the three core arguments she identified as shaping the political debates on incest: potential genetic risks; the abuse of children and other vulnerable individuals; and the threat to the family structure – or as Bell sums it up, discourses of 'health, harm and happy families'. Her analysis also highlights the wider fields of discourse and knowledge that inform legal argument in this setting. The criminalisation of incest rests not only on legal definitions and knowledge, but on medical and psychiatric knowledge, child psychology and welfare discourses, moral and socio-cultural understandings of the family. These shape the interpretive repertoires – the ways of speaking and modes of understanding – at work in the texts she studied.

Looking for association and variation

Another useful tactic for opening up a piece of discourse is to look for patterns of association and patterns of variation within the text. What associations are established between different actors, groups or problems? Van der Valk's (2003) study of right-wing French discourses on immigration (Box 23.4) points to the way that 'immigrants' and their imputed 'allies' on the political left are differentiated from a unitary understanding of 'the people', while Teo's (2000) study of Australian news reporting traces the associations made between Asian immigrants and criminality.

BOX 23.4

ANALYSIS OF RIGHT-WING DISCOURSES ON IMMIGRATION

Van der Valk (2003) examines how a notion of 'the people' was mobilised within political debates in France so as to exclude certain groups. She argues that not only did these discourses represent immigrant 'others' in a negative light (especially in terms of criminality), but these negative associations were transferred to those seen as 'allies' of immigrants – specifically, the political left. The invocation of 'the people' works not only to legitimise the anti-immigration discourses of sections of the right, but also to question the legitimacy and the loyalties of the left. References to such abstract notions as 'the people', 'the community' or 'family life' in political discourses are hard to rebut, because they seem to embody values which no one would want to dispute but at the same time are often imprecise. For these reasons, they can become powerful carriers of meaning.

Differences within an account also point us to the work that is being done to reconcile conflicting ideas, to cope with contradiction or uncertainty, or to counter alternatives. By paying attention to such variations the analyst disrupts the appearance of a coherent or 'watertight' piece of discourse, allowing insights into the text's internal hesitations or inconsistencies, and the way that the discourse excludes alternative accounts. Huckin's (2002) study of homelessness illustrates this (Box 23.5).

BOX 23.5

ANALYSIS OF MEDIA DISCOURSE ON HOMELESSNESS

Huckin's (2002) study of media discourse on homelessness uses an example from a newspaper editorial. He argues that the text emphasises substance abuse and mental illness as two of the chief causes of homelessness, but does not include strategies for addressing these problems in its discussion of appropriate public responses. Rather, the text concentrates on charity and voluntary action, on jobs, and on policing and criminalisation. There is a mismatch, then, between the account of the causes of homelessness, and the account of possible solutions. Huckin reads this mismatch in terms of a conservative political agenda that stresses the role of charity, opportunity and private enterprise over public welfare programmes. Indeed, the solutions highlighted in the text are strongly associated with law and order, which the researcher suggests may be inappropriate as a response to problems of mental illness and substance abuse.

In reading for variation in the text, Huckin develops an argument about the way dominant policy solutions for homelessness are advanced even if these are at odds with how the problem is understood. Looking for associations and reading for variations or contrast represent two tactics for analysing what Foucault called 'the play of internal relationships' within a text. The two studies demonstrate each in turn: in her account of right-wing political discourse (Box 23.4), Van der Valk analysed patterns of association, showing how these were created between 'the people' and the parties of the right, and between immigrants and the left. In the study of homelessness (Box 23.5), Huckin's patterns of variation included inconsistency between the diagnosis of a problem (mental illness and substance abuse) and the endorsement of practical solutions (charity and policing).

Characterisation and agency

Patterns of association within a text are frequently used to characterise particular individuals or groups. This leads us to a third tool for opening up a discourse for analysis: exploring how social actors are spoken about and positioned within a text. This involves asking the following questions:

- What characteristics, problems or concerns are associated with different social actors or groups?
- From what standpoint does the speaker or author develop their account?
- How is agency attributed or obscured within the text?

Effects of characterisation are partly about how certain values, problems or qualities – illegality, threat, order or patriotism, for example – come to be associated with certain groups. Other strategies of characterisation work through more specific effects of 'personalisation' – giving people names and individual histories – or depersonalisation (see Box 23.6). KhosraviNik's (2009: 486) study contrasts press accounts where refugees or immigrants are represented in depersonalised and mass terms – 'Albania flooded by the rising tide of refugees' – with others where they are 'personalised' – '[Bajrie's] mother had carried him in her arms through snowdrifts up to three feet deep, with her other children and their grandmother trailing behind, to become unwilling refugees of war'.

The author or speaker's own standpoint may also be of analytic interest. Press accounts frequently depersonalise the author's voice: one of the ways in which authority is established in media discourses is through presenting these accounts as impersonal, distanced or objective. This implies that the journalist's standpoint is neutral, detached and disinterested – they merely *report* on events rather than providing an interpretation of them. KhosraviNik (2009: 488–489), for example, examines a piece in the *Daily Mail* in 2005 with the provocative headline 'White flights grows from cities divided by race' that describes a 'serious and urgent' situation involving white residents leaving areas whose racial make-up is being changed by 'chain migration'. While the headline and the content uses controversial language, however, the account it offers is largely attributed to 'a report' and 'evidence' provided by a 'think-tank', distancing the story's authorship.

In contrast to this impersonal or objective standpoint, political discourse often draws on strategies of association and personalisation to position the author in a positive way. The *authority* of a political discourse is less likely to rely on distancing strategies than on associating the speaker with such values as statesmanship, the nation or the people, or by personalising their account in terms of their biography, their family or their hardships (see the workshop and discussion exercise associated with this chapter).

BOX 23.6

CHARACTERISATION OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

KhosraviNik's (2009) study offers good examples of 'personalisation' and association. In his analysis of how British press covered the Kosovo conflict of 1999, KhosraviNik notes how the newspapers in his sample give Kosovar refugees individual or family stories in which people's names are used, and their ages or aspects of their personal histories given. In examining the coverage of the 2005 British General Election campaign, he identifies a similar strategy in an account of one local group's support for a single Malawian asylum seeker threatened by deportation. Here, the liberal *Guardian* newspaper intervenes in the broader political debate by highlighting the personalised story of an African woman who has settled in Dorset (a rural English county with a very small black and minority ethnic population). The local group is associated with a church, and the woman is a mother of four children who does voluntary work in a charity shop – drawing on a series of positive associations with community, church, family and charity.

The third analytic strategy in respect of characterisation and agency is to examine how agency is depicted within the text. Who is seen as active or passive in producing the problems, processes or solutions described? This dynamic can work in different ways: agency often has positive associations within a text, but passivity may also have positive connotations. KhosraviNik notes how the newspapers he analyses from 1999 commonly represent Khosovar refugees as innocent, passive or powerless: 'He was doing his homework when the tanks stormed the village, a five-year-old boy sitting quietly at the table with his mother'; 'The Serbian special police burst through the door and handcuffed a man, a simple Albanian farmer whose family had lived there for generations' (2009: 484).

Critical discourse analysts also point to more technical linguistic strategies of nominalisation and passivisation in establishing or obscuring agency and causality (see Billig, 2008). Nominalisation refers to the use of nouns instead of verbs to describe events: in the example Billig suggests, a headline such as 'Attack on protesters' (where attack is a noun) has a different force from one reading 'Police attack protesters' (where attack is a verb). In a similar way, a speaker's use of the *passive* rather than the active voice can obscure agency: 'Protesters were attacked' as opposed to 'Police attacked protesters' – in the latter case, using an active verb requires a subject or agent. The discourse analyst can look for instances where the text substitutes abstract nouns or concepts for social actors: think of how often finance reporters tell us that 'the markets responded positively' to news of job cuts at a certain company, or of references to how 'globalisation' is threatening jobs. In each case the abstract category (markets, globalisation) replaces the social actors (stockbrokers, investors, corporate executives) who make decisions about the benefits of layoffs to share value or whether to move their firm's production to cheaper labour markets. Specific forms of agency by real social actors are attributed to abstract or impersonal processes.

Attending to emphasis and silences

The final tool for opening up a text for analysis is to look for patterns of emphasis and for silences. KhosraviNik highlights the references to large numbers, uncontrollable quantities or irresistible forces in media representations of refugees and immigrants, especially through metaphors of 'flooding' – with references to 'influx', 'pouring in', 'ever-swelling numbers' and a 'rising tide' (2009: 486). It is worth noting here that, while discourse analysis is a qualitative method of social research, researchers at times use a quantitative logic of argument in noting the frequency or consistency with which various terms, metaphors or associations are used. With a relatively large sample of textual data such as KhosraviNik's, it becomes possible to trace these patterns across different texts.

Huckin's (2002) example points us to the telling silences in the media account of homelessness. He argues that the text's neglect of the systematic lack of affordable housing support a reading of homelessness as involving individual pathologies (mental illness) and illicit behaviour (substance abuse). Similarly, Van Dijk (2000, 2002) refers to the frequent 'silence' of ethnic minorities in media coverage of race. Minority voices are seldom heard in mainstream media, he argues, and when they do appear they are often marginal or treated with scepticism. KhosraviNik (2009: 492) offers an interesting inversion of this kind of silence in his account of a report in *The Times* of a televised public debate with the opposition Conservative (Tory) Party Leader during the 2005 British election campaign. Three of the contributors from the audience are named (while a fourth is described as a 'disillusioned Tory voter'); of these, one individual is referred to as 'an Afro-Caribbean' and another as 'a young Asian man'. The silence in this case is around the ethnic identities of the other two audience members mentioned in the article, with the implication that they are white. The journalist considers it relevant to identify the minority ethnicity of two individuals, whereas the ethnicity of the others is taken for granted or not deemed relevant to the public debate on immigration.

These kinds of analysis require the researcher to adopt a rather 'split' approach to the text. That is, it is necessary to read *along* with the meanings that are being created, to look to the way the text is organised and to pay attention to how things are being said. At the same time, discourse analysis can require the researcher to read *against* the grain of the text, to look to silences or gaps, to make conjectures about alternative accounts which are excluded by omission, as well as those which are countered by rhetoric. While I have argued that we cannot force our data to say things that are not there, we can as critical researchers point out those places where the text is silent, to think about what remains 'unsaid' in the organisation of a discourse. Such a move can help to place the discourse in a wider interpretive context.

Presenting the analysis

The final stage of the research process involves developing and presenting an argument on the basis of your discourse analysis. It is at this point that the researcher is concerned with using language to construct and warrant their own account of the data (that is to say, to back it up with persuasive evidence and authority). This aspect of the process provides a useful context in which to consider the relation of discourse analysis to issues of validity, writing and reflexivity (see Chapter 30).

Social researchers can think about research validity in terms of both internal and external validity (see Chapter 30), referring to the coherence and consistency and the evidence base of a piece of research on the one hand, and the generalisability of the research on the other. Discourse analysts have a particular concern with issues of internal validity. Their reliance on close textual work means that they develop arguments on the basis of detailed interpretation of data. One can therefore ask:

- How coherent is the interpretive argument?
- Is it soundly based in a reading of the textual evidence?
- Does it pay attention to textual detail?
- How plausible is the movement from data to analysis?
- Does the researcher bring in arguments from outside the text, and if so how well supported are these claims?

Discourse analysis is concerned with the examination of meaning, and the often complex processes through which social meanings are produced. In evaluating discourse analytic research we should therefore be looking for interpretive rigour and internal consistency in argument. Analytic claims need always to be supported by a sound reading of data. In this sense, good discourse analyses stand up well to the demands of internal validity. However, this is not to say that discourse analysis aims to offer a 'true' or objective account of a given text. The discourse analyst aims to provide a persuasive and well-supported account, offering an insightful, useful and critical interpretation of a research problem. The discourse analyst seeks to open up statements to challenge, interrogate taken-for-granted meanings, and disturb easy claims to objectivity or common sense in the texts they are reading. It would therefore be inconsistent to contend that the analyst's own discourse was itself wholly objective, factual or generally true.

Discourse analysts often deal with relatively small data sets emerging from specific social settings. Like much qualitative case study research, they are therefore unlikely to support claims of being more widely representative, so raising problems regarding generalisation and external validity as conventionally conceived, though

their capacity for theoretical generalisation (see Chapter 9) is likely to be strong.

Discourse analysis involves a commitment to examining processes of meaning in social life, a certain modesty in analytic claims, and an approach to knowledge which sees this as open and contestable rather than closed. By adopting such an approach to knowledge, the analyst and the reader may be confident of the internal validity and wider relevance of a particular account while remaining open to other critical insights and arguments. Discourse analysis fits into a broader field of social research methods (e.g. conversation analysis) which seek to analyse general social patterns through a close investigation of detail.

A critical and open stance towards data and analysis may also be understood as part of a reflexive approach to social research (see Chapter 5). In aiming to be reflexive in their research practice, social researchers question their own assumptions, critically examine their processes of inquiry, and consider their effect on the research setting and research findings – whether in terms of their presence in a fieldwork situation, the way they select their data, or how their theoretical framework shapes the process of data collection and analysis. Reflexivity also involves attention to the writing strategies that researchers employ to construct a research account, and here the insights of discourse analysis are very useful.

Conclusion

In writing this chapter, I have drawn on various discursive strategies in an effort to make my account fit into a methods textbook. I have suggested that discourse analysis does not sit easily with hard-and-fast rules of method. At the same time, however, I have drawn on a particular language (data, evidence, analysis, validity) and on particular forms of textual organisation (moving from theory to empirical examples, using subheadings, boxes, numbered and bulleted lists) so as to explain discourse analysis in the form of a fairly orderly research process. An attention to the way that language is put to work is a useful tool for any reader or researcher who wants to think critically about social research processes and to evaluate research findings.

FURTHER READING

Wetherell et al. (2001a) collects together pieces by key writers on different approaches to discourse theory, while (2001b) offers a practical guide to discourse analysis; Fairclough (2003) is another extremely useful textbook; Van Dijk (2007, 2008), Wodak and Meyer (2001) and Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2008) are further useful references from a critical discourse analysis and discourse-historical standpoint. For shorter introductions, Gill (1996) and Potter and Wetherell (1994) remain clear and very helpful. Both provide detailed examples of the use of discourse analysis in media research.

Student Reader (Seale, 2004b): relevant readings

1 Michael Billig: 'Methodology and scholarship in understanding ideological explanation'

51 Stuart Hall: 'Foucault and discourse'

52 Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell: 'Unfolding discourse analysis'

53 Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak: 'Critical discourse analysis'

54 H.G. Widdowson: 'The theory and practice of critical discourse analysis'

See also Chapter 13, 'Discourse analytic practice' by Alexa Hepburn and Jonathan Potter and Chapter 14, 'Critical discourse analysis' by Ruth Wodak in Seale et al. (2004).

Journal articles illustrating or discussing the methods described in this chapter

Johansson, K., Lilja, M., Park, M. and Josephsson, S. (2010) 'Balancing the good – a critical discourse analysis of home modification services', Sociology of Health & Illness, 32 (4): 563–582.

Maier, C.D. (2011) 'Communicating business greening and greenwashing in global media: a multimodal discourse analysis of CNN's greenwashing video', International Communication Gazette, 73: 165–177.

Rogers, R., Malancharuvil-Berkes, E., Mosley, M., Hui, D. and Joseph, G.O. (2005) 'Critical discourse analysis in education: a review of the literature', Review of Educational Research, 75: 365–416.

Web links

Discourse Analysis Online: www.shu.ac.uk/daol

Discourseanalysis.net: www.discourseanalysis.net

Language on the Move: www.languageonthemove.com

KEY CONCEPTS FOR REVIEW

Advice: Use these, along with the review questions in the next section, to test your knowledge of the contents of this chapter. Try to define each of the key concepts listed here; if you have understood this chapter you should be able to do this. Check your definitions against the definition in the glossary at the end of the book.

Agency	Nominalisation
Critical discourse analysis	Passivisation
Discourse	Patterns of association
External validity	Patterns of variation
Internal validity	Reflexivity
Interpretive repertoires	Silences (attending to)
Keyword	Warrant

Review questions

1 What kinds of data might discourse analysts collect?
2 What are the main considerations in selecting these data for analysis?
3 What questions does a discourse analyst ask of a text?

Workshop and discussion exercise

1 **The extract in Box 23.7 is from a speech given in Philadelphia by the Democratic Senator Barack Obama in March 2008. Obama responds in this speech – often referred to as his 'race speech' – to the controversy surrounding comments made by his local pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright, including remarks suggesting that the United States had provoked the terrorist attacks of September 2001. Obama was elected as the USA's first African-American president in November 2008. Read the extract and consider the following questions:**

(a) **Consider the different *discourses* or *interpretive repertoires* that are being drawn upon to construct the speaker's arguments: for example, which moral, historical and political ideas are being mobilised in order to support the speaker's position?**

(b) **How does the speaker construct a particular 'identity' or 'voice' for himself? What is the potential effect of such a voice – how might it *be heard* – within discourses of race?**

(c) **Which other individuals are invoked in this extract? How are their stories positioned in relation to this account? You should look here not only for references to specific individuals, but also 'types' – such as 'fathers' or 'lobbyists'. How do the references to these types of actors draw on other discourses from outside the text?**

(d) **How does the speech use variation and patterns of emphasis to create its rhetorical effect?**

(e) **Can you identify strategies of *nominalisation* or *passivisation* in this speech – that is, where agency is imputed not to social actors but to impersonal nouns or abstract processes? Alternatively, can you identify moments where agency is imputed to individuals or groups? What is the effect of these contrasting versions of agency in the speech?**

(f) **In what ways does the speaker characterise America and Americans?**

BOX 23.7

EXTRACT FROM A SPEECH MADE BY SENATOR BARACK OBAMA, 18 MARCH 2008 IN PHILADELPHIA

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

These people are a part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love.

[...]

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through—a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care or education or the need to find good jobs for every American.

We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African-American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Segregated schools were and are inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, 50 years after Brown v. Board of Education. And the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.

Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions or the police force or the fire department—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between blacks and whites, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persist in so many of today's urban and rural communities.

A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family contributed to the erosion of black families—a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods—parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pickup, building code enforcement—all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continues to haunt us.

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late '50s and early '60s, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way, for those like me who would come after them.

For all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations—those young men and, increasingly, young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race and racism continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or the beauty shop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

[...]

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they're concerned, no one handed them anything. They built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and they feel their dreams slipping away. And in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze—a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns—this too widens the racial divide and blocks the path to understanding.

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

But I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care and better schools and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans: the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who has been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

[...]

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed, not just with words, but with deeds, by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more and nothing less than what all the world's great religions demand—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the O.J. trial—or in the wake of tragedy—as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright's sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words ...

That is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, 'Not this time.' This time, we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time, we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

This time we want to talk about how the lines in the emergency room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care, who don't have the power on their own to overcome the special interests in Washington, but who can take them on if we do it together.

This time, we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. This time, we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.

This time, we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together and fight together and bleed together under the same proud flag. We want to talk about how to bring them home from a war that should have never been authorized and should have never been waged. And we want to talk about how we'll show our patriotism by caring for them and their families, and giving them the benefits that they have earned.

I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.