Introduction to discourse analysis

Unit 1

(Main source: Johnstone 2002)

Outline

- Food for thought
- Discourse(s)
- Analysis
- Discourse analysis
- What to analyse
- Tasks

Just to get started

- «An unexamined life is not worth living»
  - Who said/wrote that?
  - How can you paraphrase it?
  - How would you translate it into your language?
  - Do you agree with that statement? Why or why not?
  - How do you think this could be relevant to our course?

Discourse

- Singular, mass noun
- Actual instances of contextualized, (mostly) verbal, communication
  - Language: an organized system of rules and structural relationships (grammar) and a set of resources for conveying meaning (lexis)
  - Discourse: production and interpretation (exchange) of (individual or sets of) utterances in a textual, situational, cultural and social context (application of knowledge of the resources of a language to social interaction)
    - Patterns of language behaviour in real life

Discourses

- Plural, countable noun (Foucault)
- Conventional ways of
  - THINKING (beliefs) and
  - DOING (behaviour) and
  - TALKING/WRITING (linguistic patterns)
    - About a(n) topic/issue = Ideologies
- Ideas and ways of talking influencing each other
    - That reproduce and sustain social relationships, esp. Power (hierarchical networks)

Analysis

- Explicit, systematic, coherent and plausible (i.e. evidence-based) examination of
  - Aspects of actual linguistic behaviour
    - Structure and function of language in use
- As a way to account for social, interactional behaviour
  - What people do with language and how
    - Conventionally and/or intentionally and/or inadvertantly

Analysis, cont. 1

- Taking apart the language
  - Examining *components* of language behaviour, e.g.
    - Turns in a dialogue
    - Paragraph boundaries in a written text
  - Examining *aspects* of language behaviour, e.g.
    - Information flow (new vs old) in an essay/narrative
    - Semantic roles of the subjects of clauses
  - Examining *prominent patterns* in language behaviour, e.g.
    - Frequency and collocation of words
    - Typical opening formulas in public speeches

Analysis, cont. 2

- Taking apart social behaviour = Matching instances (of types) of linguistic interaction with aspects and components of the context in which interaction occurs
    - Number, length and distribution of turns across speakers in a multi-party conversation
    - Grammatical patterns used by social superiors vs subordinates in comparable contexts
    - How getting the floor is performed by intimates in a private vs public setting
    - How conversation differs in workplaces vs on public transportation
    - How scholars vs students write
    - How the persuasive vs narrative functions of monologic speech/writing are realized

Discourse analysis

- Explicit, systematic, coherent and plausible (evidence-based) examination
  - Of stretches of connected written text or transcript of speech
  - In its relevant social, cultural, situational and verbal context(s)
- Describing, making sense of and accounting for
  - The structure, meaning and functions
    - Of products of human verbal communication (paragraphs, stories, conversations and other)

Discussion questions

- 1a) Do you ever analyse texts, (in)formally, (un)systematically (e.g. in the study of literature, when reading drug facts or a university-wide policy)?

- 1b) Do you ever discuss (e.g. at home, in workplaces) what a message/person means/meant, what the import of a conversation/announcement is?

- 1c) What questions get asked in such cases? List a few.

Discussion questions, cont. 1

- 2a) What general or specific questions do you ask yourself when trying to understand a message (e.g. «An unexamined life is not worth living»)?

- 2b) What general or specific questions do you ask yourself when translating a message of whatever length (e.g. «An unexamined life is not worth living»)?

Task

- Ia) Consider the following statements and translate them into a language you are very proficient in
    - *All men are created equal.*
    - *Don't count your chickens before they hatch.*
- Ib) Keep track of the decisions you have to make and what motivates them. Does anything get lost? Is anything gained? Why or why not? And what for, if anything?

Central research questions in discourse analysis

- What is this text/transcript like?
  - Accurate, systematic, coherent, plausible (i.e. evidence-based) and possibly thorough description
- Why is it the way it is?
  - What co-textual interpersonal, situational, social, cultural, historical … circumstances (options, constraints, habits) and motivation (goals, needs and reasons) shape it that way?
- How else could it have been worded and with what effects?
- (Task: Compare them with your answers to Discussion questions 1) and 2))

Research options in discourse analysis

- ## What to examine
  - ### What elements of discourse
    - Components and aspects of, and patterns in, communication (see above)
  - ### How many tokens of discourse
    - One vs many communicative event(s) (e.g. 1 speech by 1 politician or several speeches by 1 politician or 2 speeches each by 3 politicians…)
  - ### How much discourse
    - Entire communicative events or excerpts from them (e.g. whole narratives or «only» the beginning of each narrative; see below)

Research options in discourse analysis, cont. 1

- Types of data to analyse
  - Entire texts/transcripts
    - E.g. book; record of a conversation
  - Parts of texts/transcripts
    - E.g. introduction; paragraph; conversation opening; adjacency pair
  - Concordances
    - I. e. short fragments of texts exemplifying similar collocations of words, meanings or grammatical structures
  - Repeated samplings of a website over time
  - Answers to questionnaires
  - Think-aloud protocols
  - Diary entries

Possible topics in discourse analysis

- No exhaustive list is ever possible
  - Communication is multi-faceted
    - The same communicative event can be analysed
      - From multiple, complementary perspectives
      - At different levels of detail
    - So one's choice of what to study and how has to be motivated
  - Many different types of communicative events take place
    - An analyst's time and energy are at a premium ['scarsi']
- But that's also the beauty of it – if one likes challenges
  - You can never stop finding out more about communication

Possible topics in discourse analysis, cont. 1

- Specific examples
  - Information flow across sentences
  - Surface connectedness of speech/writing
  - Acknowledgement tokens in listener responses
  - Native vs non-native speakers' communication styles
  - Linguistic variation across interactant roles, ethnic/social groups and geographic areas
  - Principles for encoding vs decoding intentions
  - Grammaticalization of linguistic expressions (a semantic function becomes a stable component of the language's grammar)
  - The stages of a narrative

Aspects to keep in mind

- Context affects and is affected by communication practices
  - I. The external world
  - II. Language (lexico-grammar)
  - III. Communication participants
  - IV. Previous communication
  - V. The medium
  - VI. The purpose

I. The external world

- Communication is usually about something which is not itself (e.g. events, situations, people, opinions, rules, civil rights, films…)
- Communication practices can and do *represent* this something in various ways (i.e. *NOT* neutrally): through a linguistic, social and cultural filter
  - E.g. intriguing vs. boring, serious vs light, formal vs informal, familiar vs unfamiliar, mysterious vs obvious/banal
  - (Task: which of the above would apply to the Harry Potter saga and why?)

I. The external world, cont. 1

- NB: what is *NOT* said is as important as what *IS* said, that is, it has an impact on the *NON-neutral representation* of the world
    - E.g. Think of a quotation in French that you may find in an English book; if it comes without an English translation, what could this suggest about the writer (and what they expect/think of the reader)?
    - E.g. What does the use of an agentless passive suggest, as in «It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife» or «A man was mugged last night on the way home from work»?
    - (Discussion questions: Do you agree that *No linguistic choice in communication is innocent*? How would you paraphrase this statement?)

II. Linguistic constraints and options

- Consider this English made-up dialogue
  - *A. Mom, I'm going out with a friend.*
  - *B. Who is this friend?*
  - *A. Just a friend from school.*
  - *B. And their name?*
  - *A. Pat, Pat Morgan*
- Where is grammatical gender an option vs a constraint?
  - Would the same options/constrains apply to your language?
- (Discussion questions: How free are we to express ourselves when we use language? Can we take liberties? If so, how far can we go?)

II. Linguistic constraints and options, cont. 1

- Notice on the wall
  - *Thank you for not smoking*.
    - The claim is presented as uncontestable, and thus as a given/fact, because placed in an embedded clause
    - The notice induces guilt and encourages people to adapt their behaviour accordingly
  - (Discussion questions: What is your opinion of the author of the above message? What linguistic evidence is your opinion based on?)

II. Linguistic constraints and options, cont.2

- What names/labels do we give to people/entities, thus determining their identity, category membership and role?
    - *Mommy, Madam, Dr. Rosenberg, Frances*
    - *The defendant, the alleged murderer, the shady character*
- In what order do we present information
    - From most to least important so as to draw the addressee's attention on what *WE* want?
- (Discussion question: How and to what extent does language empower us to affect the real world?)

III. Participants' relationships

- Participants include
  - Speakers/writers, audiences, overhearers
    - Represented in texts
    - Producing and interpreting texts
  - Communication practices can be, and often are, designed
    - For their intended audience,
    - But sometimes for the overhearers,
    - And at other times they effectively DESIGN their audience by invoking the style/content of texts typically used with a certain kind of addressee

III. Participants' relationships, cont. 1: Tasks

- Task 1: Who are the participants in this joke?
  - Travel agent: *Where do you want to spend your holiday this summer?*
  - Customer: *Somewhere with no irregular verbs.*
- Task 2: Who is the intended audience of a reference to Lehman Brothers in a cartoon film? Children or their parents?
- Task 3: How does a mother talk to her infant child? What happens if she does the same to her teenage child?
- Task 4: How do doctors talk to patients, patients' families and other doctors?

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse

- Often-repeated activities give rise to recurrent communication practices
  - Styles and types of texts
- When we encounter a new instance of language use,
  - We tend to interpret it in the light of familiar activities, styles and forms.
- At the same time, every new instance of language use shapes our expectations
  - About what future discourse might or should be like

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse, cont. 1

- A genre is the set of communicative events that have conventionalised (non-)verbal ways of performing a complex interactional task; e.g.
  - Recipes
  - Birthday cards
  - Bookshop service encounters
  - Jokes
  - TV quiz shows

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse, cont. 2

- Tokens of a given genre can be recognized by recurrent characteristics in terms of
    - Structure (sequencing of components)
    - Content (topics)
    - Form (e.g. syntax, style)
    - Lexis (concepts and their connotation)
    - Length (amount of talk/writing)
    - Function (interactional [interpersonal and/or transactional] goals)

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse, cont. 3

- But we are more sensitive to INCONGRUITIES:
  - Dissonant matches between form and function/topic
    - Make us notice what we usually overlook

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse, cont. 4

- Task 1: What genre – genres? -- do following texts exemplify? How do you know? Be explicit and thorough in your argumentation.
  - *Dear Tech Support:*
  - *Last year I upgraded from Boyfriend 5.0 to Husband 1.0 and noticed a distinct slow down in overall system performance -- particularly in the Jewelry and flower applications, which operated flawlessly under boyfriend 5.0.*
  - *In addition, Husband 1.0 uninstalled many other valuable programs such as Romance 9.5 and Personal Attention 6.5. He then installed undesirable programs like NFL 5.0, NBA 3.0, and Golf 4.1. Conversation 8.0 no longer runs, and Housecleaning 2.6 simply crashes the system. I've tried running Nagging 5.3 to fix the problems, but to no avail. What can I do?*
  - *Signed,*
  - *Desperate*

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse, cont. 5

- *Dear Desperate:*
- *First keep in mind that Boyfriend 5.0 is an Entertainment Package only, while Husband 1.0 is an Operating System. Please enter the command "http: I Thought You Loved Me.htm" and try to download Tears 6.2, and Guilt 3.0. If those applications work as designed, Husband 1.0 should then automatically run Jewelry 2.0 and Flowers 3.5. But, remember, over use of the above application can cause Husband 1.0 to default to Grumpy Silence 2.5, Happy Hour 7.0, or Beer 6.1. Beer 6.1 IS A VERY BAD PROGRAM that will download and install the Snoring Loudly Beta.*
- *Whatever you do, DO NOT INSTALL Mother-in Law 1.0. (it runs a virus in background, that will eventually seize control of all your system resources). Also, do not attempt to reinstall Boyfriend 5.0. This is an unsupported application and will crash Husband 1.0.*
- *In summary, Husband 1.0 is a great program, but it does have limited memory and cannot learn new applications quickly. You might consider buying additional software to improve memory and performance. We recommend Hot Food 3.0 and Lingerie 7.7.*
- *Good Luck,*
- *Tech Support*

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse, cont. 6

- *[Dear Tech Support and Fellow Desperate],*
- *Unfortunately my version of Husband 1.0 is very outdated and was a very early prototype (Spouse 1.1). It therefore doesn't support any new applications and the whole system is liable to crash if used too often. It also only responds to very basic commands.*
- *[Misery loves company]*

IV. Previous and envisaged discourse, cont. 7

- Task 2: what can/should the following be like in terms of visual layout (if applicable), content, style, length, functions…?
  - Job application letter
  - Non-fiction book
  - Homework assignment
  - Police interrogation
  - Casual, multi-party conversation
  - Train ticket window service encounter

V. Medium

- Oral
  - Ups and downs of the voice
  - Micro-planning of language production
  - Spontaneously provided audience feedback
  - Accompanying gestures and facial expressions
- Written
  - Punctuation marking syntactic relationships and voice modulation
  - Macro-planning of language production
  - Envisaged audience feedback
  - Possibly accompanying pictures/videos

V. Medium, cont. 1

- Pairwork
  - Pair 1
    - Student A: Email Student B an invitation to join you and and a few friends for some pizza together
    - Student B: Reply to Student A's email.
    - Students A & B: Now do the same in a face-to-face conversation
  - Pair 2
    - Student A: Invite Student B to have pizza together tonight with a few friends.
    - Student B: React to Student A as you see fit.
    - Students A & B: Now do the same in writing.

VI. Purpose

- Manuals, recipes, ballroom lessons
  - Purpose: giving instructions
  - Language choices: imperatives, expressions of confidence, simplification of concepts, provision of evidence of expertise, explanations, adoption of the audience's perspective
- Job application letters
  - Purposes: obtaining a job interview/offer
  - Language choices: expressing interest, promising commitment, reporting on past accomplishments, deferentially requesting an appointment, giving options

VI. Purpose, cont. 1

- Task: what are the purposes and consequent linguistic/strategic choices typical of the following?
  - Jokes
  - Weather forecasts
  - Abstracts of academic articles
  - Hotel reviews
  - Written exam papers

Goals of discourse analysis

- Describing communication practices
  - Explicitly, systematically, coherently and plausibly
    - So as to make scholars and the public at large aware of them by appealing to reason
- Changing the social status quo
  - Unmasking the communication practices of powerful social groups that use language to justify, hide, maintain their power
    - So as to empower citizens to claim what they have a right to have
  - (Critical linguistics; Critical discourse analysis)

Tasks

- What are the typical language choices of an educational text addressed to children?

- What is a magazine ad like? Choose one to focus on – does it comply with, play on or violate your expectations regarding magazine ads?

- In what kind of texts do you find impersonal and imperative formulas like «One is aware that …», «It is clear that …», «This is regarded as…», «These are called …»?

Tasks, cont. 1

- Compare the transcript of a conversation as it appears in a linguistics book vs a play/film script. What are the differences in content, form, length …?

- Compare the transcript of a conversation with a report of the content of a conversation in a newspaper article. What are the differences in content, form, length… ?

- Choose a text. Relate its linguistic features to the 6 above-mentioned aspects of context (the external world, lexico-grammar, participants, previous and future discourse, the medium, the purpose)

Food for thought

- What kinds of texts/transcripts, or part thereof, could be the subject of discourse analysis?
  - Memo messages in the workplace?
  - The writing styles of two authors?
  - The speaking styles of two characters?
  - Native and non-native speakers' conversation closings?
  - Collocations of the wordforms (allomorphs) of a given word?