Discourse method – ideas or spanners!

Book review
Wetherell, M, Taylor, S, & Yates, S J (eds) (2001) **Discourse as data: A guide for analysis.** London: Sage. ISBN: 0761971580. 344 pages.

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Discourse as data should sooner be shelved amongst the car mechanics manuals than amongst the philosophical tomes. It is a toolbox for any practical-minded, cut-the-frills discourse analyst who is ready to get their hands dirty digging about in 'real' research. This book is a "real-issue" manual. It takes as its specific focus "... the *practice* of conducting discourse research ..." (p i), and sets as its overall purpose the demonstration of "...how to *do* discourse analysis" (pi). With these in mind, the editors advertise the neutralization of the following philosophical bamboozlements:

• "*How [to] actually proceed* if you are interested in analyzing people's talk in interviews and other contexts." (pii).

• "*How [to] begin* if you want to work with texts such as historical documents or records of social events, or if you want to study social interaction as it happens on the streets, in clinics, in schools." (pii).

• *How [to] work* with such material." (pii).

It should be clear that the book's primary concern is to position itself as a "... *practical guide* to discourse analysis" (pi). However, the point should not be exaggerated; because in addition to the practical components, the book does indeed aim to convey some of the fundamental principles that have direct relevance to the successful application of the procedures.

These fundamental principles are contained in the first and last chapters so as to present the researcher with an easily digestible sandwich made up of two thin slices of theory with a solid, practical filling. The theoretical slices aim to locate discourse analysis within social scientific research as well as review some common features that are characteristic of all discourse research. Gentle rumination on the chapters, however, creates a dull sense of despondency. The fundamental issues are herded into their confined space and present themselves in a rushed and staccato manner – as if anxious to be done with. One soon realizes that the sandwich is more fast-food than home-made. But fast food is after all quick, convenient, tidy and at times - useful.

And what is fast-food without the fries on the side? In this case, the fries come in the form of a range of background concerns facing the discourse analyst and are discussed

in a general introduction to discourse analysis. These 'side' issues include the role of the researcher, transcription, ethics, the process of formulating research questions and the process of writing up research. In addition, it ends with a discussion of how to evaluate, validate and apply discourse research.

Discourse analysis is defined, in this text, as "... the close study of language in use" (p5). This rather broad definition is returned to and elaborated in the 'hands on' practical chapters that form the surprise filling between the rapid-fire theoretical chapters. These comprise the largest - and most praiseworthy - part of the book. Here, there is something to chew on and digest; what with six step-by-step models of *how to do* discourse analysis. The models were selected from what the editors describe as five core traditions in discourse research, including:

- Conversation analysis (Wooffit)

- Corpus linguistics and interactional sociolinguistics (Yates)

- Discursive psychology (Horton-Salway)

- Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough)

- Foucauldian genealogical research (Carabine)

Each chapter relies heavily on primary textual material, with each author presenting his or her own empirical work. The result is that experienced discourse analysts provide a behind-the-scenes tour of their published articles to show the reasoning and procedures which led to the finished product. The result is a clear step-by-step overview of the process involved in writing up research in each genre.

Throughout these diverse approaches to discourse analysis, a range of types of discourse data is presented. These include examples of natural conversation and institutional talk, computer mediated communication such as e-mails, single interview and group interview data, policy documents and historical material. Of course, this adds to the richness of the explanation of how to do discourse analysis.

To round off a good presentation, further reading and reference sections at the end of each chapter have the effect of alleviating the critiques of superficiality to a certain extent.

The essential value of the book lies within these central chapters. They are well presented and lucid in their explanation. It would be hard to understand why any analyst would embark on research using any of the featured methods without having read the appropriate chapter. The editors claim that "...through the juxtaposition of the different approaches ... with their very different definitions of discourse, their differing levels of engagement with discursive material from molecular to the more global patterns, contrasting aims, and theories of social action, subjectivity and social relations, this book demonstrates what is at stake in broader debates in discourse communities" (piii).

The juxtaposition of various approaches is a great achievement and provides a rich account of the many threads of discourse analysis. To claim that this book demonstrates what is at stake in broader debates in discourse communities is, however, nonsense. For those that understand the philosophical tensions underlying discourse analytic work, this 'tool box' will prove to be a useful addition to any resource library. However, due to the perfunctory explanation of the theoretical underpinnings, the book appears to be most suited to researchers who already have a solid grounding in the epistemological concerns informing discourse analytical methods. For those without this grounding the text will confuse as much as it will enlighten.

The book aims to be of "... particular significance to social psychologists, sociologists, those working in culture and media studies, education researchers, social policy researchers and socio-liguistics" (pii). As an educational tool it is pitched more toward postgraduate scholars who know how to think independently as researchers. The hurried presentation of the theoretical sections appears to have the effect of boring the novice into submission without fail.

The work makes some contributions to the overall topic of discourse analytic research by providing a lucid and rigorous 'manual' for discourse analysts. If books have an implicit agenda, then this one's is to engage with the proliferation of discourse analytic methods and the tendency for this proliferation to confuse or misguide. To an extent then, the book represents a valiant attempt to remove discourse analysis from its haughty location in the elites and intangibles of social research methods and make it available to the common garden-variety researcher.

When compared to a few other prominent works in this area, the idiosyncrasies announce themselves. Consider, for example, Wood and Kroger (2000) who provide lengthier and more careful consideration of theoretical underpinnings. In addition, it appears to be less prescriptive in what constitutes which genre. The neat categorization of discourse analytic methods presented by Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001) is challenged. In addition less detail on the actual nuts and bolts of discourse analysis is provided.

Schiffrin (1994) provides a much deeper explanation of discourse analysis than either of the two previously considered texts. An obvious advantage is that Schiffrin strikes a good balance between theory and practice. Different genres are, however, considered and this book should therefore be treated as a complimentary rather than alternative text to Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001). Van Dijk (1997a & 1997b) adopts the alternative, and in my opinion, more honest approach of teaching discourse analysis by explaining the field of concepts that underpin this set of methods. Topics covered in Voume 1 include semantics, stylistics, narrative, argumentation, and cognition (including social cognition). Topics covered in volume 2 include gender in discourse; discourse, ethnicity, culture and racism; organizational discourse, discourse and politics. Van Dijk offers a much more thorough explanation of discourse-related issues. Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001) are, in their defense, operating from a history of rigorous approaches to analysis and seem to be maintaining the strict analytical stance that have categorized previous work from these researchers, for example, Potter & Wetherell (1987).

In summary then, it would suffice to say that the editors seem to exhibit some dire need to categorize and neatly pigeonhole discourse analytic methods. The resultant overemphasizes of the 'practical' aspects of discourse analysis goes a long way toward losing the theoretical spirit of post-structural methods – a spirit of adventure, creativity and boundary-crossing. At no time should this text be used by a researcher who has not grappled with the seminal works in the genre of choice. If this is not done, the very 'empirical' treatment of discourse analysis will provide no more than what may be termed a 'template' approach to analysis in which the novice analyst is constrained to the steps laid out by the authors – almost comparable to someone learning a language without knowing the meanings behind the words. A wonderful display of artificial intelligence!

Despite this, however, the book is a valuable contribution to the field. Supplementing the text with other books can alleviate the short, inadequate explanations of the theoretical underpinnings – resulting in a powerful and lucid resource.

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