

Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis is a term used to describe a range of research approaches that focus on the use of language. There are many different types of discourse analysis such as **conversation analysis**, **discursive psychology**, **critical discourse analysis** and **Foucauldian discourse analysis**. Each of these has its own assumptions, emphasis and methods but the key overlapping interest is in the way meaning is constructed in communication.

Discourse analysis has been used to understand a wide range of texts including natural speech, professional documentation, political rhetoric, interview or focus group material, internet communication, journals and broadcast media.

A **discourse** is a set of meanings through which a group of people communicate about a particular topic. Discourse can be defined in a narrow or a broad sense and a narrow definition of discourse might refer only to spoken or written language. However, discourse analysis more often draws on a broader definition to include the shared ways in which people make sense of things within a given culture or context, including both language and language-based practices (i.e. the ways in which things are accomplished).

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Most forms of discourse analysis assume that discourse does not just *describe* an external reality, but rather that it is *constructive* of the world as we experience it. For example, if the main way in which we discuss dependant drinking relates to 'the disease of alcoholism', we are participating in the construction through language of a world in which 'alcoholics' deserve medical support and sympathy and are treated by doctors in buildings called hospitals. On the other hand, if dependent drinkers are described in terms such as 'feckless', we are engaging with a *moral* discourse about drinking in which the problem of heavy drinking may appropriately be dealt with through moral education and enforcement.

An assumption underpinning most discourse analysis is that a person's agency, or ability to make choices, is limited by the discourses available to him or her. People cannot begin to think and speak about things in ways that are outside of the discourses available to us and therefore we are all seen as being **subject to discourse**. Within each discourse, there are certain **subject positions** available. For example, in a discourse of therapy, subject positions might be therapist/ client/ third party. What a therapist can meaningfully say or do in therapy differs in certain ways from what a client or a third party can meaningfully say or do. The subject positions available sum up the meaning of the relevant discourse: i.e. the availability of the subject positions of client, therapist and third party tell us about what therapy is.

Within discourse analytic work, rather than talking about the 'self', writers often refer to the 'subject'. The term 'self' implies that a person has a coherent and stable inner identity but this notion is challenged in discourse analysis by the notion of being subject to discourse.

Some (but not all) forms of discourse analysis have an explicit focus on the relationship between discourse and power, as dominant discourses define what is seen as truth within a given context.

Some examples of types of discourse analysis

- **Conversation analysis** focuses on a fine grained analysis of the ways in which language is used, for example how people reply to a spoken invitations or the uses of a specific word or phrase. Some conversation analysis uses quantitative techniques. Conversation analysis does not usually pay attention to factors outside the text unless such factors are evident in the text – for example, if they are referred to by the speakers.
- **Discursive psychology** applies the notion of discourse to psychological topics such as memory and attitudes.
- **Critical discourse analysis** considers the social power implications of particular discourses with an explicit aim of challenging power imbalances.
- **Foucauldian discourse analysis** draws on the ideas of Foucault, often considering the development and changes of discourses over time. Foucauldian discourse analysis is generally concerned with the webs of power relationships that are enacted and constructed through discourse.