THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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TECHNIQUES OF ANALYSIS

III DISCOURSE

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Modern linguistics, like traditional grammar before it, has tended to regard the sentence as the central element of language. Recently, however, researchers have increasingly focused on larger elements, from casual conversations to extended written texts, which are referred to by the generic term **discourse**. The concept of discourse is fundamental to understanding language as communication: it is the means by which the beliefs, values, assumptions that constitute a speaker's social and individual reality are moulded and expressed (Widdowson 2004). Not only the individual but a community defines and maintains itself by communicating, and the patterns of its communication over time form its culture (Garner 2004). In turn, the shared experiences of community and its culture make possible the continuation of communication between individuals. **Discourse analysis** therefore requires a different approach from that of sentence linguistics: it is not possible simply to apply sentence-level linguistics on a larger scale.

For example, every member of a community is able to conduct conversations in an orderly and meaningful manner with people from a variety of social groups. This requires the ability not only to create well formed **utterances**, but to connect these utterances to those of the other person(s) in the interaction, taking into account a range of social factors. A conversation with a stranger or an elderly person will differ from one with a friend or a child, in terms of, among other things, the number, length, and function of **turns**, the **topic** dealt with and what is and is not said about them. The **lexis** will vary, not only in terms of the types of words selected, but more significantly in terms of the way in which lexical items are connected throughout the discourse, making a network of explicit and implicit meanings. Conversational interactions are also influenced by factors such as: the physical setting (for example, at work, compared with in the pub); the purpose (transacting a sale, compared with entertaining); and the media of communication (e-mail, compared with face-to-face speech). Sociolinguistic analysis attempts to reveal the relation of the linguistic variation in a conversation to such social and contextual phenomena.

At a macro-sociolinguistic level, discourse analysis can be used to explore the communicative roles that different forms of discourse play within a community, or to compare their roles in different communities. These topics are researched from a range of theoretical positions, including: the **ethnography of communication** (Hymes 1972); **cross-cultural communication** (Scollon and Scollon

1997); the **ecology of language** (Haugen 1972; Fil and Mühlhäusler 2000; Garner 2004); **critical discourse analysis** (Wodak and Meyer 2002; Wodak and Chilton 2005a, b); and **multilingualism** (Edwards 1997). A micro-sociolinguistic analysis may describe, for example, the ways in which patterns of discourse vary, influenced by such things as situation, communicative function, region, **ethnicity**, **gender** and **social class**.

There are many and varied (and sometimes conflicting) definitions and approaches to discourse analysis, reflecting different theoretical orientations and the enormous range of discourse types. In this chapter, discourse analysis is used as an overarching term to cover analyses of language as communication. This broad definition enables two very influential approaches to be outlined – conversation and oral narratives – which can serve as examples of the potential of discourse analysis in sociolinguistic research. Whilst there is insufficient space here to detail further approaches, Chapter 19 illustrates another highly influential discourse analytical framework by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). The introductory sketch provided here can be extended through the further reading recommended at the end of the chapter.

THE ANALYSIS OF CONVERSATION

Face-to-face conversation is the most basic and pervasive form of language. Through it the mother tongue is acquired, and it continues throughout life to be the most common form of language that community members engage in. **Conversation Analysis** (CA) began as the study of everyday, informal discussions (Sacks 1972; Schegloff 1968). It has since widened its field of application to include all forms of talk-in-interaction, and occasionally other, non-verbal, forms of communicative behaviour that are concomitant with the language.

Conversations are used to accomplish an almost endless range of functions, but all have some common structural features that mark them out as a specific form of discourse. Participants must contribute in a more or less orderly fashion, without interrupting or talking over each other too much: in other words, there are procedures for **turn-taking**. Each speaker's turn must be related in some readily recognizable sense to what has gone before, and contribute to the on-going shared construction of meaning: there are principles of coherence. In the natural give-and-take of conversation, however, utterances are planned at the point of articulation, and mistakes are made. Turn-taking is not always entirely orderly; coherence is not always achieved; misunderstandings arise; the intended outcome may not be achieved. Participants therefore need to be able to correct themselves and one another, using **repair** strategies that allow the negotiation of meaning to continue despite temporary set-backs or detours.

CA has developed a systematic and, despite some debate about specific issues, a generally coherent methodology. A number of excellent methodological guides can be found in the literature (for example, Sacks 1995; Psathas 1995; Have 1999; Schegloff 2001; Renkema 2004). Schegloff *et al.* (2002) is a very useful survey of the literature.

CA methodology

There are three essential prerequisites for using CA in sociolinguistic research. The first is a good quality recording of naturally occurring interaction. Second, in addition to the linguistic data, a great deal of contextual information needs to be noted. The time and place of the interaction, what else was occurring at the same time, the social characteristics of the participants and the nature of their relationship, the purpose of the interaction, and anything else that may have a bearing on the conversation, are all potentially relevant. These should be described in as much detail and as soon after the recording as practicable. (There is a 'pure' approach to CA that argues that such extra-linguistic information is outside the purview of the analysis, which should be concerned only with the linguistic elements that occur in the interaction. From a sociolinguistic perspective, however, this information is essential.)

The third requirement is an accurate and detailed **transcription**. The process of transcribing does not simply turn the audio data into text: it also interprets the text in certain ways which influence the final analysis (Ochs 1979; O'Connell and Kowal 1994; Ashmore and Reed 2000). Transcription needs to be carefully planned in advance, and if necessary modified as it is being done. Decisions need to be made on such questions as the amount of **phonological** information to be included (for example, to indicate **non-standard** pronunciation) and what, if any, information to be included on features such as word stress, **intonation**, speed, rhythm, and variation in **pitch** and volume. How are **overlaps** between speakers, **interruptions** and **back-channelling** to be represented so as to make their sociolinguistic role in the interaction evident?

There are several transcription systems in common use (see Ashmore and Reed 2000), and the beginning researcher should become familiar with them and adept at employing at least one of them (Stockwell 2002: 127–8 is a good example), before undertaking the particular research at hand. It may be desirable to adapt one of the standard methods to the analysis.

The transcription is the first stage of the analysis. The next stage typically involves identifying and tagging the features that are being investigated. This is to a large extent an interpretative process, requiring some subjective decisions by the researcher. It should therefore be checked by other researchers working independently. The results of each then need to be compared, and divergent interpretations discussed and resolved as far as possible until there is sufficient agreement to ensure that the final analysis is valid.

The final stage of analysis next investigates relationships between the social, situational and/or cultural features of the interaction and the language used. This is often conducted manually, but for large amounts of data it may use or be replaced by computer-based analysis.

This is merely an indicative overview of how CA can be conducted within a sociolinguistic framework. A clearer idea of its possibilities can be obtained only by reading published studies: some examples can be found in the references (e.g. Schegloff *et al.* 2002; de Fina 2003; Drew *et al.* 2001).

Let us now examine a rather different approach to discourse analysis.

THE ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE

Narratives are analysed within a range of disciplines, from social history to psychotherapy, and there is no single, unifying view, even within each discipline, of either what narrative is or the purposes and methodology of narrative analysis.

There are, none the less, some features that are characteristic of narrative as a distinct discourse type. It involves a recounting of personal experience, whether of the teller or of someone else. It exhibits temporality: a set of more or less discrete events occurring in a chronological sequence towards a culminating point – in other words, it has a 'plot'. Thus, loosely defined, narratives fulfil three broad communicative functions: entertainment, instruction, and the construction of personal **identity**. Typical of the first are jokes, artistic works such as novels, films, biographies, and the performances of story-tellers. The second function is characteristic of, for example, myths and traditional stories intended to impart religious or cultural knowledge and worldly wisdom. The third function is performed by the innumerable narratives that constitute the stuff of everyday conversations, by which community members explore the nature of the social and physical worlds and the appropriateness of their responses to them. They are thus an important aspect of how the self is constructed and negotiated.

There is no hard-and-fast distinction between the three functional types, and many narratives simultaneously serve more than one function. Furthermore, narratives of different types may co-occur: for example, a narrative about 'what happened to me yesterday' may be couched in terms of a well known joke or a fairy-story. Nevertheless, it is the third type of spontaneous, spoken narrative (or stories) that is of most interest in sociolinguistics.

At the most basic level stories can provide a rich source of linguistic data. Virtually all personal experiences are interesting; people enjoy talking about and hearing them. Asking informants to tell their own stories is one of the least constraining ways of encouraging them to talk at length. A simple cue question such as 'What is the most frightening experience you have had?' or 'When you look back on your life, are there any incidents that stick in your memory?' can result in a great deal of the sort of natural language that is the essential subject-matter of sociolinguistics. Furthermore, sharing another's experiences in this way can create a sociable bond between the researcher and the **informant**, which can make the research experience rewarding and enjoyable over and above the amount and quality of the data obtained.

The methodology of narrative analysis

Using narrative as a data-gathering technique, however, is incidental to our present concern, which is about analysis of the narratives themselves as sociolinguistic texts. There has been rather less research interest in this sort of analysis than might be predicted, and, with one notable exception (discussed below), analysis remains largely intuitive. The field offers ample opportunity for significant new discoveries to the enterprising sociolinguistic researcher.

Gathering data for analysis requires the recording and transcription of narratives, either in a free, naturalistic interaction or, more commonly, in a **sociolinguistic interview** in which the informant is prompted to recount his or her experiences. (See Wengraf 2001 for a carefully structured method of collecting biographical narratives.) The circumstances and setting in which the narratives occurred must be noted in detail, since they are important elements in the interpretation. A fairly broad transcription, which shows the words uttered and perhaps the hesitation phenomena, is usually adequate for most analyses, but a more narrow transcription (indicating phonological features, for example) may be required by the research question.

The narrative is then codified and tagged for the categories that become the basis of the analysis. Broadly speaking, two approaches to sociolinguistic codification can be identified. The first focuses on the linguistic patterns and narrative structures, guided by questions such as 'What are the principles by which narratives in general and/or this specific narrative are constructed?' 'How do narratives vary according to social categories such as social class, gender, and ethnicity?'

The classic work on the structural analysis of narrative is Labov and Waletzky (1967), which has given rise to a number of subsequent studies (JNLH 1997). Labov and Waletzky (1967: 10) started from the narrative defined as 'one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred'.

The 'primary sequence' is '*a* happened, then *b* happened', and the basic narrative clause maintains the temporal sequence of the events. Matching clauses to events does not rigidly determine the position of every clause in the narrative, however. The order of some clauses may be possible without disrupting the historical sequencing of the events. Narratives may also contain 'free clauses', which can occur anywhere within the narrative.

The transposability of clauses relative to one another reveals a number of structural principles of oral narratives. In later work, Labov (1972b) identified six components at the level of the whole text, not all of which occur in every narrative or in the same order. The 'abstract' gives a brief summary of what the story is about. The 'orientation' puts the listener in the picture, by giving the participants, setting, time, and so on. These are typically expressed by free clauses that occur before the narrative clauses start. The 'complication' is the main body, telling of the series of events, and leading to an outcome or result. 'Evaluation' expresses 'the attitude of the narrator' towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some units as compared with others. The evaluation disrupts the primary '*a* then *b*' sequence, and gives the narrative its communicative purpose. The 'resolution' defines the result of the narrated events. Finally, the 'coda' shifts the narrative focus to the present time (e.g. 'so I've always avoided him ever since').

These structural elements led Labov (1972b) to postulate an ideal or 'normal' form of narrative, one that contains all six components. The extent to which any given narrative approximates this form, and the ways in which it diverges from it, enable the researcher to make social and cultural comparisons between different **speech communities** and between individual members of one particular speech community.

The second approach to narrative analysis, which can be used in conjunction with the structural approach, focuses on content. Which events of life experience does a speaker select? What is said about them? What do they suggest about the speaker's beliefs, attitudes and sense of self? The answers shed considerable light on perceptions of self and others, the values that guide behaviour and the degree to which an individual or group conforms to and deviates from established social norms. Content analysis is therefore of interest to, for example, sociologists, social psychologists, social historians and anthropologists.

It is also a rich (though still underexplored) field for sociolinguistics, particularly with an applied and multidisciplinary orientation. The study of differences between the narratives told by, for example, a powerful majority group and a marginalized and minority group can reveal cultural and attitudinal bases for behaviour, and suggest interventions aimed at changing them. Sociolinguistic narrative research has been undertaken in, among other areas, health care (Drew *et al.* 2001) and ethnicity studies (de Fina 2003), and has potential in many other fields such as **language maintenance** and **revitalization**.

There are, however, methodological challenges that need to be met if the benefits of narrative analysis are to be fully realized. Content analysis tends to rely on intuitive descriptions for recurring topics, and many and varied systems are used. As social phenomena, narratives vary by social context (home, school, work, and so on) and data extracted from narratives will vary by the social context within which they are collected. A significant contribution that sociolinguistics can make is to identify a consistent linguistic basis for content analysis, as the Labovian approach has done for structural analysis.

One method is **systemic analysis** (Halliday 1978, 1994; Halliday and Hasan 1985), which uses the categories of **field**, **tenor** and **mode** for the description of discourse of all types, including oral narratives. *Field* expresses the topic of discourse through its 'ideational function', of which transitivity (including, for example, 'material', 'mental' and relational' processes expressed in the verb structures) is a key element. *Tenor* expresses and constitutes the relations between participants in the discourse. For example, 'mood' includes the familiar traditional categories (indicative, imperative, and so on), but also encompasses a range of **speech acts** (promising, requesting, threatening and others). Another key element is the reflexive language used by speakers to comment on their own language.

Mode is the role that the narrative is playing in a particular interaction, for example a story may be told in order to justify the speaker's actions to the listener.

Whatever approach is used, narrative analysis is ultimately an interpretative enterprise. Interpretations can be more or less valid and revealing, but there is no final measure by which an interpretation can be judged as indisputably right or wrong. It is best used for the exploration of ethical, moral and cultural ambiguities, sensitizing the researcher to critical sociolinguistic phenomena and illustrating, but not by itself validating, theory. It is, in other words, a form of hermeneutics.

CONCLUSION

Discourse is a major focus of contemporary linguistic research. It is fundamental to understanding human interaction and the ways in which meanings are negotiated through language, and in which social identities are constructed and expressed. It is a fruitful field for the conduct of sociolinguistics. This chapter has attempted to provide an outline of the basic perspectives and methods of two rather different approaches to discourse analysis, but it is only a starting point for anyone interested in engaging in this kind of research. There is a rich and growing literature on discourse analysis, and ample opportunity for researchers to explore the potential of discourse to continue to expand our knowledge of sociolinguistics in this vital aspect of communicative behaviour.

FURTHER READING

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