

5 Discourse analysis and sign languages

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Introduction

People often wonder what discourse analysis is and what the field of study includes. As a newer field, discourse analysis is still determining its own boundaries. It is different from traditional linguistics in several ways – it uses natural data for analysis, and it deals with utterances, as opposed to sentences. If you spend time observing everyday talk, you will notice that these utterances rarely look like those grammatical sentences seen in the grammar books and often described in linguistic research about syntax and grammar. In everyday interaction, people do not always use complete “sentences,” they leave out information, they add meaning with their voice, or their faces, and they leave their comments unfinished. Yet, we still understand each other. An utterance, then, is the real-life expression of people’s thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

Simply put, discourse analysis is the study of language in use. In discourse analysis, we study how people interact by expressing meaning using language within a context. This includes much more than just studying the words or signs that make up an utterance. It includes all the aspects of those utterances: pacing, facial expression, body shifting, gestures, and any other features that add meaning to an utterance. It also includes building understanding one utterance at a time, from beginning to end, in real time.

A major distinction is the difference between *discourse-focused* analyses and *discourse-based* analyses. Both are revealing, and each sheds complementary insights on meaning and interaction. Discourse-focused analyses consider the broader text and context and intentions of interactants, exploring

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how the parts build the meaning of the whole. Some examples of studies that begin to consider a broader discourse focus, in the discussions if not the methodologies, can be seen in Duchkovsky and Sandler's (2009) analysis of prosodic features in Israeli Sign Language and in Hermann's (2010) analysis of eye blinks and their role in the prosodic structuring of sign utterances in German Sign Language.

Discourse-based analyses on the other hand tend to focus on discrete elements taken from discourse (sign units, space, head nods, leans, etc.). For example, there are studies that investigate eye gaze and verb agreement as discrete features within discourse (Thomson, Emmorey, and Kluender 2006), eye blinks (Wilbur 1994), and utterance boundaries (Brentari and Crossley 2002; Fenlon, Denmark, Campbell, and Woll 2007). These features all contribute to discourse meaning, and such discourse-based analyses are essential for understanding discrete elements of language and interaction; they provide windows into the structures and functions of discourse as a whole. Indeed, focusing on more than one or two discrete elements in an overall text can be an overwhelming task for a single researcher. What remains to be done is to integrate the findings of disparate studies based in discourse and create a discourse-focused understanding of the ways that all the features impact our understanding of meaning in discourse.

The scope of discourse-focused analyses extends beyond the descriptive and utterance level, attempting to ascertain the reasons signers choose to use depiction instead of, or in combination with other linguistic features, and how those uses may change and evolve through an entire discourse or discourse structure. This focus on the larger discourse and its co-occurring structures is at the heart of discourse-focused studies, which search for the intent and impact of the discourse features as well as the specific form and function.

All discourse analysis research, both discourse-based and discourse-focused, reveals important insights for language learners, educators, sociolinguists, and discourse analysts. Collaboratively sharing data that is analyzed from many perspectives, like corpus studies, will allow us to extend de-contextualized information about single discrete features to a broader understanding of all the factors that impact understanding. This, in turn, can be applied to everyday language needs such as language learning and interpreting, two applications that epitomize language in use.

Five important concepts in discourse analysis

In this section we discuss five major concepts that contribute to the study of discourse analysis. Schiffrin (1994) outlines similar ideas, and here they are applied more directly to the study of sign languages.

Idea 1: discourse is interactive

Discourse always has a creator or presenter and an audience and both have an impact on the meaning of the message. Although discourse is often conveniently categorized into monologues and dialogues, in fact there are few, if any, discourse “texts” that have no intended receiver. Discourse that is often labeled “monologue” such as lectures or presentations always occur in some context where an audience will listen or watch it. Presenters frame presentations to the responses and reactions of the audience (Goffman 1981). They pause for laughs or nods of agreement; they scan the audience for signs of understanding. Even “monologues,” presented on video with no apparent audience, are presented with the audience and its potential responses in mind. Thus we can explore intent to interact in all discourse.

Likewise, even the most interactive discourse contains types of monologues, where a single participant may continue for substantial periods of time, discussing one or more topics in depth. These segments of discourse can be analyzed both as internal chunks (Labov 1972), and as they impact and influence the responses of other participants.

It is sometimes helpful to think of communication as a cycle. It begins when the first utterance is made and is based on the language choices made by that person. It continues when the other person receives the utterance and uses his or her own understanding of the language choices, context, and content to construct similar meaning. It continues further when that person responds, making their own choices of language features to reflect the underlying meaning, and continues still further when the first interactant receives a response, continues to formulate meaning to create further understanding, and then continues with further talk, or a response (Goffman 1981).

Idea 2: discourse is a series of choices

Keeping in mind that discourse is interactive, and that meaning emerges whether we speak or sign, it is essential to remember that all language production is the result of choices made by the interactants. There is no random use of words or signs. There is no “neutral” facial expression that conveys no meaning. Every aspect of communication has an impact on how that communication is understood, and every aspect of communication occurs due to choices made by the communicators.

That does not mean that each choice is a consciously well-thought-out decision. If it were, we would never have a conversation! But, using our knowledge of language and communication, we base our every understanding on all of our past experience with language and interaction, and try to build discourse meaning as it emerges. And our every response is chosen to reflect

our own internal meaning so that the other person can most easily understand what we want to communicate (Grice 1975). Every choice of sign or word, every choice of facial expression, intonation, shift of body stance, or eye gaze communicates something. So, every aspect of communication is part of the study of discourse analysis. Further, every choice is related to the discourse and meaning that has emerged previously, whether a minute ago, or a conversation last week, or last year. These choices create texture and cohesion throughout the text/discourse, and aid the listeners in understanding the underlying coherence of the message as it is created.

Idea 3: discourse meaning emerges

Almost all discourse starts at the beginning and ends at the end. While that may not seem profound, it is an essential understanding for discourse analysts. That is how we first experience it and understand it, sequentially, from start to finish. The first time we see or hear a lecture, read a book, have a conversation, we have only the first utterances to use. We generally do not know what the other person will say next. As we continue our conversation, we can begin to interpret more and more of each other's meaning, but we can never know it at the beginning. In daily discourse we have only real-time, on-line processing to work with. Janzen (2005), and Wilcox and Shaffer (2006) offer insights into ideas of co-construction of meaning in discourse, and bring cognitive considerations to how we analyze discourse. They help us understand that meaning is not a static "thing" transferred like a package of data between people; it is a dynamic, fluid, and amorphous concept that people hope to share in some way as they interact.

Emerging meaning, understood via emerging discourse, is an essential idea in discourse analysis. In linguistics, it is very easy to take an entire text after the fact and analyze it as a whole, but this is only possible after the fact. While we are in the middle of discourse, we have only part of the text, and we build our interpretation of it based only on what we have, not the text as a whole. If presenters never get a chance to finish what they wanted to say, the audience never gets the chance to interpret the full meaning, or guesses must be made at their full meaning. Likewise, others build their understandings of what was intended only to the extent that they are able to interpret all or most of the linguistic and extra-linguistic messages. Even then, as Becker (1995) pointed out, there are exuberances and deficiencies within all our understandings, or interpretations. There are few, if any, studies in sign languages that focus on the understandings of both interactants in discourse. Most focus on specific use of linguistic features, and possibly either the presenter's or the audience's understanding. Exploring both is a challenge for future discourse analysis.

Idea 4: discourse is context, all the parts of interaction

We develop our emerging understanding of the meaning of any interaction by the signals and cues that are part of that interaction, and all of them are important. Each communicative choice that someone makes, from the choice of a topic to a lexical item, from the length of a turn to the length of a pause, contributes to our emerging conceptualization of the meaning. Equally important to our understanding of the meaning is the context of the interaction.

The context in discourse analysis can be separated somewhat arbitrarily into two types: *internal context* and *external context*. Internal context is the text itself: the choice of discourse features, such as symbols (signs or words), the use of different pronouns to reflect different meanings, the choice of and subsequent repetition of lexical items and reference to them, the various choices made in prosody. Also included as internal context are elements such as turn-taking, overlapping talk, and utterances that constitute a pair. These are the kinds of topics that studies of syntax rarely investigate. Discourse analysis finds these topics to be central areas of interest. Each of these contributes cohesive links from previous utterances to subsequent utterances and is intended to help the audience interpret the underlying coherence of the message.

External context is the context that we use to understand discourse meaning around the text. For example, the usual issues of context include the setting, the goal of the interaction, the race, gender, age, and education of each interactant, and the relative status of each toward the other and toward society as a whole. Each of these external forces has an impact on the choices that people make while interacting and on the types and number of cues any given listener or audience member may recognize and use to interpret the speaker's meaning.

Idea 5: natural language data

In discourse analysis we use natural language data. This means that the texts used for analysis are produced in or for real-life settings for a real purpose of communicating. In order to understand how people use language in real life, we need to study it in real life. This makes discourse analysis somewhat challenging. We need to collect data from real conversations, lectures, etc. while trying not to impact those very situations by our data collection, and we do not always get the information we need. For example, if we want to study use of space for mapping time in ASL, we may have to collect hours of data, because temporal maps seem to be relatively rare in ASL. If we want to study how signers ask a favor, we will have to collect video until we gather enough natural examples of asking for favors. Thus, we often arrange for

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people to be videotaped while just talking about everyday matters, or with real professionals, such as nurses, or police officers, and real patients or witnesses to role-play situations (Metzger 2000), an effort at natural interaction.

Applications of discourse analysis and major ideas

In this next section, we will discuss some of the recent research in signed language discourse as they support the previous claims.

Part 2-end will be assigned later in the term.

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