Introduction to Discourse Analysis for Interpreters

What is Discourse Analysis

"Discourses are like icebergs. Only a minor part of their meaning is 'visible' as explicit propositions exposed in their sentences. The major part of their meaning remains implicit…" Van Dijk Discourse and Knowledge 2014:595

"It is the thoughts that drive language forward. A basic challenge for discourse analysis is to identify the forces that give direction to the flow of thoughts." Chafe 2001:673)

Often people wonder what exactly discourse analysis is and what the field of study includes. As an emerging field, discourse analysis is still determining its own boundaries. It is different from traditional linguistics in several ways. In the broadest sense, it encompasses both the study of the contexts and purposes of communication (the **external context**, e.g. pragmatics, sociolinguistics, etc.) and the patterns found within discourse itself (the **internal context**, e.g linguistic sequences and structures-Winston XXXX; s*ee also Schiffrin XXXX,* Gee & Handford 2014:1; Koester & Handford 2014:252). Simply put, discourse analysis is the study of language in use during communication. 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 includes building understanding one utterance at a time, from beginning to end, in real time. And it includes the context of the interaction, ranging from tangible aspects such as setting and mode to the intangibles-participants' identities and their complex interrelationships. It uses *natural, or authentic*, data for analysis, it considers the complete text whenever possible (or complete episodes within full texts—*Biber & Conrad, XXXX*), and within those texts, it **deals with utterances** (as opposed to sentences). Utterances are the auditory and visual expressions people use when attempting to express their ideas; they are what we see, hear, and attempt to understand as we interact with others.

Important Ideas: Discourse Analysis

In this volume, there are five major concepts woven throughout the discussion of discourse; these five concepts contribute to our understanding and analysis of discourse. They do not occur separately during interaction. They overlap and intertwine, impacting each other, the discourse itself, and the unique understandings that each participant builds from participating in interactions. (Schiffrin XXXX, Chafe XXXX, etc.…) The concepts are separated here simply for ease of discussion

Idea #1: All Discourse is Interactive.

Discourse always has a creator or presenter and at least one audience member and each participant impacts how the other(s) build their understandings of the communication. Although discourse is often conveniently catagorized into **monologues** (with the primary focus on a single presenter communicating to an audience) and **dialogues** (with a primary focus on two or more audience participants interacting), in fact there are few, if any, discourse "texts" that have no intended audience. Discourses such as lectures or presentations are often labeled "monologues," but each occurs in some context where an audience is intended to listen to, watch, or otherwise receive it. Presenters frame presentations in anticipation of and in response 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. They expect discourse structures in specific interactions, and interpret meaning based on those expectations (Bazerman: 234). Even "monologues" presented on video with no apparent audience, are presented with the audience and its potential responses in mind.

Likewise, even the most interactive discourse contains snippets 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. Thus all discourse is interaction.

It is sometimes helpful to think of communication as a cycle. It begins when someone decides to share an idea, and attempts to communicate that idea. The idea flows through that person's filters of language and context, taking on the shapes and sounds of the creator's communicative repertoire. (Chafe XXXX; others to be listed) The first segment of discourse is produced based on the language choices made by the person. It continues when the other person hears and/or sees the utterance and uses his or her own understanding of the language choices, context, and content to construct their own unique understanding of the meaning or intent. It

flows on, as each person responds in turn, choosing from within their own communicative repertoires to reflect the underlying intent. The flow 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; Chafe 1994 others etc). "What is said and understood gets continually updated on a turn-by-turn basis; each contributor displays (or can display) some understanding or reaction to the prior contribution. (Linell 1995: 193-from Janzen& Shaffer, p. 334)   Bazerman 2014: 234. Thus, the interactions experienced, or anticipated, shape the forms and flow of all discourses. These notions are explored in depth in the chapter about Context.

Idea #2: Discourse is a series of choices

Keeping in mind that discourse is interactive, it is essential to remember that all language production and all resulting communication, is the result of choices made by the participants of the interaction. Equally essential, we need to remember that each text is "…produced in fundamentally different circumstances, for fundamentally different communicative purposes." (Biber & Conrad Ch 9: 256) The result is that each text is a unique study of variation, with each variation being a choice made in response to the context and purposes of the communication. This variation is not a random use of words or signs. There is no "neutral" facial expression that conveys no meaning; there is no "neutral" sound that does not impact the interaction. Every aspect of communication impacts the ways that the participants understand that communication, and every aspect of communication occurs due to choices made by the participants in the interaction.

This does not mean that the choices reflect perfectly, or even adequately, our intent. Language is at best an imperfect mapping of our feelings and intentions into words, signs, and gestures, and as the ideas flow through our minds, we choose communicative items and strategies that we hope will trigger similar understandings in our audience. (VanDyke 2016; others). These choices are always imperfect in reflecting our own intent at the time, and are only indicators that hopefully help the audience construe similar intents and ideas. But we make our best choices, constantly negotiating the growing understandings of our audience, and of ourselves. (Chafe XXXX; others)

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 in an attempt to reflect our own internal meaning and intent, 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 its created. These notions are explored in greater depth in the chapters about Cues and Strategies.

Idea #3: Discourse meaning emerges.

Almost all discourse starts at the beginning and ends at the end. While that may not seem to be a profound observation, it is an essential understanding for discourse analysts. That is how we first experience 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 to build our understanding. We generally do not know what the other person will say next. As we continue a conversation, we can begin to construe more and more of each other's meaning, but we can never know it at the beginning (or indeed, even at the end, we still only know our own understanding of the other's intent!). 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. Meaning is an emerging, 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 an interaction, we

have only part of the text, the part that has already occurred. We build our understanding, our interpretation of it based only on what we have, while waiting for the rest. If participants never have a chance to finish what they want to say, the audience never has the opportunity to interpret the full meaning; they may perhaps guess at the intended meaning, or they may dismiss the communication as "meaningless." 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. Understanding that meaning emerges based on previous understandings, predictions of expected structures and actions, and the responses of each participant to the cues shared by the other(s) is foundational. Even more important, we must understand that meaning is not contained in the discourse, the words, or the utterances. Meaning emerges for each participant as the words, utterances, and discourse flow from one to the other. "Available and familiar patterns of utterances (that is genre provide interpretable clues that allow people to make sense of each others' utterances and to frame utterances meaningful to one's interlocutors." (Bazerman: 229/2003) People construct meaning through the lens of their current understanding, utterance by utterance.(Chafe XXXX; Bazerman: 230-34) Indeed, our own meaning "remains in our heads"(Biber XXXX).

It is important to note here that these concepts of "meaning" and interaction are fundamentally different from the every-day belief that meaning is static, and that exists apart from the participants, to be "found" in the words or signs, something that can be discovered with enough effort. The implications of this are profound in our daily communications, but they are even more earth-shaking as we consider the complex task of interpreting other people's messages, which are in fact only imperfect reflections of their meaning. As we take them in, build our own understandings, and re-map them into another language for someone who then interprets them within the context of their own communicative repertoire….well, it goes on and on! Current approaches to teaching interpreting, and to assessing the process and products of interpreting are no longer enough-we cannot identify "THE MEANING" and then evaluate whether or how much a message deviates from it. As interpreters and interpreter educators, we

must grow beyond basic these error analysis approaches, and look instead to "success analysis" (Leeson XXXX; Janzen XXXX; Hopper 1987, 2014:Emergent Grammar; others). The point of this-that not only meaning, but language itself, and thus the intentions and meanings that we try to express through it, is always changing, as it emerges through use. These notions and implications are explored further in the chapters on Meaning, Assessment, and Research.

Idea #4: Discourse is impacted by context through all the parts of interaction
We develop our emerging understanding of the meanings and intents 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 of every discourse event in discourse analysis can be separated somewhat arbitrarily into two types: internal context and external context. **External context** is the context that we use to build our understand of the interaction. 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.

There are many approaches to studying external context within discourse analysis (e.g. Conversation analysis, Interactional sociolinguistics, discourse ethnography, corpus discourse analysis (Biber et al XXXX), emergent grammar (Hopper 2014; others). All are effective depending on the goal of the discourse analyst, and each focuses on perspectives relevant to specific understandings. However, none specifically focus on discourse for interpreting and interpreters. Thus, this volume attempts to synthesize and intertwine concepts from each that enlighten our thinking about interpreting.

Internal context focuses on 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.

Approaches to Discourse Analysis: Discourse-Based and Discourse-focused

A major distinction to consider is the difference between *discourse-focused* **analysis** 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 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 analysis 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.

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 the 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 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.

Additional challenges of using natural communicative interactional language as data is that it is often difficult to collect natural data. First, ethically we must inform people that we are collecting data if we are planning to use it for research. This can have an impact on the natural flow of interaction (although, with video becoming so pervasive in our world, people are less and less uncomfortable with video in some cases). In addition, there is now a plethora of video discourse available on the internet that adds more options to our data choices. Discussions of data for discourse analysis transcription and annotation can be found in the chapter about discourse analysis research.

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