Working with Written Discourse

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1 Discourse and discourse analysis

One important preliminary to the study of anything is defining your object, the phenomenon you are studying. In this first chapter we will consider some definitions of *discourse*, and how they are related to different analytic approaches.

If you look up the word *discourse* in a general-purpose dictionary, you will probably find something like the following (taken from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD)*):

> **Discourse**, n[oun] & v[erb]: a. conversation, talk; b. a dissertation or treatise on an academic subject; c. a lecture or sermon.

This entry tells us that the word *discourse* is used in ordinary English to talk about language—both speech, as in sense (a), and writing, as in (b). (Sense (c) names two 'mixed' genres, 'lecture' and 'sermon', which are delivered orally but are usually composed at least partly in writing.) However, none of these senses is exactly what *discourse* means when it is used as a technical term. Acknowledging this point, the entry continues by listing another sense of the word, which it identifies as belonging to the specialist vocabulary of linguistics: 'a connected series of utterances, a text'.

But *discourse* is not only a technical term in linguistics. As Sara Mills observes (1997: 1), it 'has become common currency in a variety of disciplines: critical theory, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, social psychology and many other fields'. This, she suggests, can be a source of confusion, because although they are all using the same word, people in different academic disciplines or theoretical traditions do not all define it in exactly the same way. That might not matter if the disciplines and traditions in question were completely separate enterprises, each carried on in isolation from all the others. But as we noted in the Introduction, discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary enterprise, influenced by ideas from more than one tradition. Consequently, anyone who wants to understand the field or contribute to its discussions must be aware of the various ways in which its terms may be defined and used.

THREE DEFINITIONS OF DISCOURSE

Definitions of discourse are many and varied, but most are variations on the following three themes:

1. Discourse is language 'above the sentence'.
2. Discourse is language 'in use'.
3. Discourse is a form of social practice in which language plays a central role.

The first definition, 'language above the sentence', comes from linguistics, and is closer than the others to the dictionary definition quoted above, 'a connected series of utterances, a text'. To understand what it means, it is useful to bear in mind that the traditional aim of linguistics is to describe and explain the way language works as a system: what its basic units are and what the rules are for combining them. In that connection, one fundamental insight is that language has different kinds and levels of structure which articulate with one another. Smaller units of linguistic structure combine to form larger ones: for instance, speech-sounds are combined into syllables, syllables into words, words into phrases and phrases into sentences. Importantly, however, the units and the rules for combining them are not the same ones at every level. We need different kinds of units and rules for phonology (the sound system of a language) and syntax (its sentence structure). This principle explains what is meant by *above* in 'language above the sentence'. As your units get larger (e.g. words are larger than sounds and sentences are larger than words), you metaphorically move 'up' from one level to the next. If discourse analysis deals with 'language *above* the sentence', that means it looks for structural patterns in units which are larger, more extended, than one sentence—the 'connected series of utterances' or 'text' of the dictionary definition.

One of the earliest discourse analysts, the linguist Zellig Harris (1952), posed the question: how do we tell whether a sequence of sentences is, in fact, a **text**—that the sentences relate to one another and collectively form some larger whole—rather than a random collection of unrelated bits? The answer to that question, Harris thought, would make clear what kind of structure exists 'above the sentence'. Texts would have this structure, whereas random collections of sentences would not. As an illustration of the kind of structure he had in mind, consider the following two sentences taken from the first page of *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Schiffrin et al. 2003: 1):

(1) Discourse analysis is a rapidly growing and evolving field. (2) Current research in this field now flows from numerous academic disciplines that are very different from one another.

Intuitively, it seems clear that these two sentences belong to a single text: they are not just separate statements that have been randomly juxtaposed. In this they contrast with the following (invented) sequence:

(1) Discourse analysis is a rapidly growing and evolving field. (2) Many millennia ago, the earth was inhabited by dinosaurs.

In the invented example there is no obvious link between the two sentences, but in the textbook example the two sentences can easily be understood as discussing a single topic, discourse analysis, with the second sentence building on the proposition put forward in the first.

Our intuitions about this are not just prompted by the *content* of the two sentences in the textbook example; they also have to do with their *form*. One aspect of their form is the order in which they appear. Imagine that the order of the two sentences were reversed: 'Current research in this field now flows from numerous academic disciplines that are very different from one another. Discourse analysis is a rapidly growing and evolving field'. We might still be able to connect them topically—they would not seem as randomly juxtaposed as the 'dinosaurs' example—but the sequence would strike us as disjointed in a way the original version is not.

In the textbook, connections between the two sentences are made not only by ordering them in a certain way, but also through the use of *cohesive* devices which tie the second one

back to the first: an example is the expression *this field*, which occurs in the second sentence but refers to something mentioned (and described as 'a field') in the first: 'discourse analysis'. Confronted with the reference to 'this field', a reader does not wonder, 'which field can the writer mean?' Since 'a field' has already been mentioned—and named—in sentence (1), it makes sense to assume that '*this* field' in sentence (2) refers to the same field, not some entirely different and previously unmentioned field. This kind of structural **cohesion** is one of the formal clues that we are dealing with a text rather than with two separate and unconnected sentences—and it is this which may be lost, or at least obscured, when the order of the sentences is reversed.

But it might still be asked whether we can distinguish texts from random collections of sentences using purely formal/structural criteria. As readers, we are predisposed to treat adjacent chunks of language *as if* they were connected, and to make connections even when none were intended. This is what produces the humour in examples like the radio programme announcement quoted in Stubbs (1983: 93): 'later, an item on vasectomy, and the results of the do-it-yourself competition'. Connecting the parts on either side of the conjunction *and* generates an interpretation of 'the do-it-yourself competition' as a reference to a 'do-it-yourself vasectomy competition'. Yet while we recognize this as a possible reading, we also recognize that it cannot be the intended one, because we know no one would organize a competition where men performed vasectomies on themselves. When we approach a text with a view to making sense of it, we do not just consider its structural linguistic properties, we also refer to two other considerations: our background knowledge about the world outside the text, and what we think the producer of the text might have intended to communicate. If an interpretation based on the structure of the text is implausible on these other criteria, we will normally discard it. This makes discourse a somewhat different case from phonology or syntax. You do not need to know anything about the world to decide that /krin/ is a possible word in English whereas /rkin/ is not, or that *stood boy the on up a chair* is not a well-formed English sentence. Our intuitions in these cases are entirely based on what we know about language structure. But once we get 'above the sentence', our ability to make sense of sequences and decide whether/how they are connected involves more than just applying a set of quasi-grammatical rules.

Another objection to the 'language above the sentence' definition of discourse has been put forward by Henry Widdowson (1995), who argues that a text does not have to be larger than one sentence; indeed, it can be much smaller. The legend LADIES on the door of a public lavatory could be described as a text, for example, as could the letter P which is used in Britain to indicate a space for parking cars. Clearly, a single word or letter cannot have 'structure above the sentence'. But in Widdowson's view it can nevertheless be a text, if in context it communicates a complete message. Once again, though, the recognition of something like LADIES as a text, and the interpretation of what it means, relies on real-world knowledge that is not contained in the text itself. Looking up the word *ladies* in a dictionary would not, on its own, make clear what message it conveys when written on a door. A great deal of general knowledge and contextual information has to be brought to bear on even the most banal texts we encounter if those texts are to serve their communicative purpose. And an interest in what and how language communicates is an essential feature of discourse analysis.

From that perspective, a better definition of *discourse* than 'language above the sentence' might be the second one listed above, 'language in use'. 'Language in use' is the broadest of the three definitions; it is also implicitly a more 'social' definition than 'language above the sentence'. The latter definition suggests that discourse analysis, like syntax, will be concerned primarily with formal patterns in language itself. 'Language in *use*', by contrast, need not

imply any lack of interest in linguistic form, but it does suggest that attention will be given to other questions, such as who is using language and what purposes it is serving for its users in a particular **context**.

Most discourse analysts who locate themselves within linguistics are concerned with both form and function, and with the relationship between the two. But not all discourse analysts are linguists: many are social scientists, for whom the analysis of discourse is not an end in itself, but a way of gaining insight into various aspects of social life. That does not mean they are *un*interested in language and how it is used. All discourse analysis has both a social and a linguistic dimension. But when the emphasis falls on the social, the general notion of discourse as 'language in use' is often combined with the third definition listed above, in which discourse is approached as a form of social practice. This definition comes from critical social theory rather than linguistics (though it has influenced many discourse analysts who are linguists), and it requires some additional explanation. In the following section we examine it in more detail.

POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE: DISCOURSE(S) AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY

Social scientists have always treated discourse—in the 'language in use' sense—as a source of information about people's attitudes, beliefs, experiences and practices. Some commonly-used methods in social research, such as face-to-face interviewing, involve spoken discourse; others, such as asking people to fill in questionnaires, keep diaries or, more recently, interact with researchers using online social media, rely on written language. Most researchers who use these methods are not interested in discourse primarily for its linguistic qualities, but rather for what it can tell them about some other social phenomenon—for instance, about their subjects' experiences of childbirth, their feelings about getting older or their beliefs about climate change. The experiences, feelings and beliefs are taken to exist independently of the discourse which expresses them: language is simply a vehicle for transmitting the relevant information from the subject to the researcher.

One social scientific approach to analysing data is known as *content analysis*: as that label suggests, its aim is to extract and then analyse the information which is 'contained' in questionnaires or interview transcripts or whatever other texts are being examined for research purposes. Analysts go through a sample of data identifying items which are relevant for their purposes, using a set of categories selected in advance to 'code' them. This approach is used in media studies, for instance, to investigate questions like how frequently a particular issue is covered in news reports, whether the coverage has increased or decreased over time, and what items of information or range of opinions are presented in reports.

But although this approach is applied to discourse *data*, it differs from discourse *analysis* as we define the latter in this book. To give a clearer idea of what the difference is, we will consider some examples of media discourse relating to body size and weight. The examples below are all taken from the website of *Bliss* magazine, a UK-based publication for pre-adolescent and early adolescent girls (mybliss.co.uk). Specifically, they are from the electronic version of the magazine's 'problem page', which features letters and emails from readers expressing their anxieties and asking for advice. On the website, there is a large archive of these communications: it includes a section on body problems, where size and weight are among the most frequently-aired concerns.

1. I hate my body, I'm so overweight! I hardly go out because I think people are laughing at me.
2. I am overweight for my age and height and really want to lose a healthy amount of weight.
3. I'm thinking of losing weight, not just to be super skinny, but because I want to be healthy.
4. I am trying to lose weight because I am a bit chubby.
5. Help! I'm 12 years old (nearly 13) and I've tried and tried to lose weight but I can't! I always think I look fat.
6. My Mum and Dad say I'm getting big and need to lose weight.
7. I hate being the weight I am. My friends are all really skinny and I hate being the odd one out.

Someone carrying out a content analysis of these letters would probably be most interested in the nature and range of the concerns writers express about their weight. The correspondents whose words are reproduced above give several reasons for needing or wanting to lose weight: some mention not liking the way their bodies look (e.g. 1, 4, 5), some allude to other people's negative reactions to their size (1, 6, 7), and some assert that they want to lose weight for health reasons (2, 3). A coding system could be devised to tag every instance of each of these concerns: the analyst could then extract all the examples of each type, and on that basis draw conclusions about how prevalent particular concerns were in the sample.

A discourse analyst, by contrast, would want to look not only at the content of the letters, but also at the way the writers have chosen to formulate their accounts linguistically. Their concerns, attitudes and feelings are not only evidenced by *what* they have written, but also, a discourse analyst would argue, by *how* it is written. To illustrate what we mean, we will focus on examples (2) and (3) above. Both contain a proposition that could be rendered as 'the writer wants to lose weight to be healthy'; but a closer look at the writers' linguistic strategies suggests that something more complicated may also be going on.

The writer of (3) frames her own motivation for losing weight by contrast with a different motivation which she mentions in order to make clear that it is not her main or only concern: she is 'thinking of losing weight, *not just to be super skinny*, but because I want to be healthy'. A content analysis which coded this as 'wants to lose weight for health reasons' would not be 'wrong', since that is indeed the main proposition asserted by the writer. But such an analysis would be leaving aside the question of why she mentions, but downplays, an alternative motivation, the desire 'to be super skinny'. When people downplay or disclaim a motive in discourse (which is quite a common move: a clichéd example is the prefatory formula 'I'm not a racist/sexist/feminist, but…'), it is usually because they anticipate that others are likely to ascribe that motive to them, and judge them negatively for it. They are staking a claim to legitimacy by contrasting themselves with some other group who do, by implication, deserve the criticism. In this case, the writer may be anticipating and trying to pre-empt a common negative judgment of young girls who want to lose weight, that their concerns are driven more by a preoccupation with the way they look (and with the impossible ideal represented by the supermodels and celebrities they see in the media) than by any understanding of what would be a healthy weight. This girl is at pains to present herself as a responsible individual who has thought about this and come to sensible conclusions. The writer of (2) uses a different strategy to serve a similar purpose. She stakes her claim to legitimacy by adopting the kind of authoritative voice we might associate with an expert like a scientist or a doctor. 'I am overweight for my age and height' is a bald assertion of fact—no hedging with 'I think' or 'my mum and dad say'; the formal/medical word *overweight* is preferred to the softer, vaguer and more colloquial terms used by other writers (e.g. *big*, *chubby*, *fat*); the reference to 'age and height' displays a knowledge of how experts judge whether someone is 'overweight'.

ACTIVITY

The writers of examples 1, 5 and 7 seem to be presenting themselves and their desire to lose weight in a different way from the writers of 2 and 3. What kinds of personae are these writers constructing in their letters to *Bliss*, and what details of the language they use can be related to that construction?

The discussion above suggests some reasons why 'content', in the sense of recurring themes and propositions, might not be the only thing a social researcher might want to look at in discourse data, and why it might also be revealing to consider the details of language-use. But our analysis of the *Bliss* letters also raises a more 'theoretical' question about the use of discourse data in social research—one that would apply not only to texts like the ones we have just analysed, which were not originally written for the purposes of research, but also to texts which were produced specifically for a research project, such as questionnaire responses. Can it ever be assumed that the discourse people produce is simply a report of experiences, feelings, attitudes and concerns which exist independently of the discourse itself, and of the context in and for which that discourse was produced?

Discourse analysts, and many other social researchers today, would argue that the answer is no: there is no single, objective 'truth' about people's experiences or feelings which their discourse simply 'puts into words'. Rather, people design their discourse for a particular audience, in a particular context; whatever else they may be discoursing about, they are always also making choices and calculations about how to present *themselves*. Above we argued that the two writers who chose to foreground health concerns in their letters to *Bliss* were presenting their desire to lose weight as 'legitimate', and themselves as rational and knowledgeable, in contrast to the stereotype of girls who diet as foolish, insecure creatures led astray by peer pressure and celebrity culture. It is possible that this self-presentation is partial in both senses of the word: it could be that the writer of (3) is entirely motivated by the desire to be 'super skinny', and is denying it only because she thinks she will be judged more positively if she emphasizes 'being healthy'. But it would be hard to establish that with certainty: we can't know what is in people's heads; we can only try to interpret their verbal representations. For that purpose, it is important to consider the linguistic choices they have made. There is always more than one way of representing any given state of affairs linguistically: in producing one representation rather than another, a language-user is also constructing a particular version of reality.

This is one part of what is meant by the claim some theorists make that social reality is not a set of fixed truths which we will discover if we ask the right questions, but is rather a *discursive construct*, made and remade as people talk or write about things. In some kinds of social theory, the idea of reality as a discursive construct is taken a step further, by observing that while individuals make choices about how to represent their reality, their choices are inevitably shaped by larger social forces. As the discourse analyst Jay Lemke puts this point (1995: 24–5):

> We speak with the voices of our communities, and to the extent that we have individual voices, we fashion them out of the social voices already available to us, appropriating the words of others to speak a word of our own.

Lemke is not suggesting that individuals never dissent from their communities, or that they do not have their own ideas. He is, however, suggesting that their contributions have to be framed in relation to the understandings of the larger community. This is partly a matter of some ways of speaking being more socially acceptable than others (for instance, the *Bliss* writers discussed above have evidently understood that the adult community regards 'being healthy' as a more legitimate reason to want to lose weight than 'being super skinny'). But it is also a more fundamental matter of what will be found intelligible. Language-using is an *intersubjective* rather than purely subjective process: a 'voice' that is wholly individual runs the risk of being incomprehensible.

Analysts who follow this line of argument view discourse analysis less as a method for finding out what particular individuals 'really think', and more as a method for investigating the range of 'social voices' in a community. This can be related to the third, 'social practice' definition of the term *discourse*. The idea that speakers and writers 'appropriat[e] the words of others', drawing on resources 'already available' is expressed by other theorists by saying that individuals' understandings and accounts of the world are constructed out of the 'discourses' in circulation. Evidently, the word *discourse* in this formulation is not being used in the way linguists typically use it, to mean 'language above the sentence' or 'language in use'. An obvious difference is that the linguist's 'discourse' has no plural, whereas social theorists often talk about *discourses*. This plural usage reflects the influence of the philosopher and cultural historian Michel Foucault, who defined *discourses* as 'practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49). To see what Foucault meant, let us consider another example relating to the issue of body size and weight: current discourse about 'obesity'.

The term *obesity* belongs to the vocabulary of science and medicine, where it has a precise scientific definition: a person is 'obese' if they have a body mass index (BMI) equal to or greater than 30. BMI is calculated from an individual's height and weight: a value of 18.5–24 is considered 'normal', below 18.5 is 'underweight' and 25–30 is 'overweight'. Since height and weight are physical realities, you might think that nothing could be more 'objective' and less 'discursively constructed'. But a follower of Foucault would point out that there is nothing inevitable about the existence of a formula for calculating 'body mass index'. Measuring people's height and weight, working out their BMI, and on that basis categorizing them as 'underweight', 'normal', 'overweight' or 'obese' are examples of the kinds of 'practices' Foucault refers to in his definition of discourse: their invention and subsequent adoption in clinical practice have brought into being a state of affairs whereby people can be classified, evaluated and treated (e.g. exhorted to lose weight, prescribed drugs or even surgery) according to where they are on the BMI scale. Without this set of practices there would still be people of objectively varying size, but there could be no such thing as 'obesity'. In that sense, obesity is very much a discursive construct.

Foucault's formulation says that discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects *of which they speak*', which suggests that the practices in question are linguistic practices, or at least have a significant connection to language (and thus to discourse in the linguist's sense). So far, our explanation of the idea that 'obesity' is an object constructed in discourse has placed more emphasis on non-linguistic practices like weighing, measuring and classifying people: the main linguistic phenomenon we have mentioned is the labelling of the categories this set of practices produces, using terms like *normal*, *overweight* and *obese*. That is not, of course, unimportant, but it is not the only way in which we can connect the discursive construction of obesity to language. The non-linguistic practices just listed are embedded in a larger context where language—spoken and written—plays a very significant role: it is used to explain what obesity is and why it matters, to argue about how it should be defined and measured, to debate its causes and remedies, etc.

Until recently, most utterances and texts dealing with obesity belonged to the domain of science and medicine. Though body weight, fat and dieting were topics of everyday discussion, the term *obesity* itself was not much used outside medical contexts. But recently that has changed: the term is now in common use, and the subject generates large quantities of discourse. This development illustrates another important aspect of Foucault's thinking about discourse, his concept of 'power/knowledge'. In modern societies, he points out, a great deal of power and control is exercised not by brute physical force or economic coercion, but by the activities of 'experts' who are licensed to define, describe and classify things and people. These practices are carried out in large part by means of language-use. Words can be powerful: the institutional authority to describe, categorize and label people is frequently inseparable from the authority to judge them and to do things to them. This is what is going on in current discourse about obesity. It was always defined as an individual medical problem, but today it has also acquired the status of a collective social problem. Attempts to define and control it have intensified, and many new kinds of experts and other commentators have been drawn into the ongoing discussion. With so many institutions and interest-groups involved, not surprisingly there are multiple 'discourses' on obesity. They may be concerned with the same subject, but they do not represent it in only one way.

To illustrate this, below we reproduce five extracts from news reports on the subject published in the UK and the USA. We found these reports by conducting an online (Google) search in January 2013, using the search-term 'obesity news': the examples we selected are a subset of the items that came up on the first page of results. We chose them because they represent a number of current discourses on the 'problem' or 'crisis' of obesity: in particular, they illustrate that there are varying definitions of the problem (of why it is a problem and what kind of problem it is), and competing accounts of where the responsibility for it lies. (Before you read our analysis of the 'discourses' that are present in these extracts, you might find it interesting to try to make your own, and see how closely it resembles the one we offer later on.)

1. Obese adults are costing the N[ational] H[ealth] S[ervice] in London £883.6 million each year. Childhood obesity is costing a further £7.1 million. But the bill to treat youngsters if they remain obese into adulthood, could rise to a staggering £111 million each year, in the capital alone. ('Obesity crisis solved: eat less, says health secretary', *London Evening Standard*, 13 October 2011).
2. Societal changes in recent decades have helped spur growing waistlines, and now a third of U.S. children and teens and two-thirds of adults are either overweight or obese. Today, restaurants dot more street corners and malls, regular-sized portions are larger, and a fast-food meal can be cheaper than healthier fare. Not to mention electronic distractions that slightly more people surveyed blamed for obesity than fast food. ('Poll: fight obesity crisis but keep the junk food', *Associated Press/Guardian*, 7 January 2013).
3. Poor families are more likely to be obese, a health minister has said. Anna Soubry said children were suffering because of 'an abundance of bad food' in their homes. ('Anna Soubry says parents should ensure children have proper meals', *Daily Mail*, 23 January 2013).
4. Matt Goold, of Meadow Lane, Beeston said the comments were 'ridiculous'. The 39-year-old added: 'How does she know this? It's just a stereotypical assumption. It's absolute rubbish. She says people don't sit around the table – a lot of people can't afford a table for a start.' Richard Oldham, 40, of Field Lane, Beeston said the comments were 'nonsensical', adding: 'It is difficult to eat well on low money'. ('Outrage at Broxtowe MP's comments about the poor', *thisisnottingham*, 24 January 2013).
5. Unhappy with the slow pace of public health efforts to curb America's stubborn obesity epidemic, a prominent bioethicist is proposing a new push for what he says is an 'edgier strategy' to promote weight loss: ginning up social stigma. Daniel Callahan, a senior research scholar and president emeritus of The Hastings

Center, put out a new paper this week calling for a renewed emphasis on social pressure against heavy people—what some may call fat-shaming—including public posters that would pose questions like this: 'If you are overweight or obese, are you pleased with the way that you look?' (...) 'For him to argue that we need more stigma, I don't know what world he's living in,' said Deb Burgard, a California psychologist specializing in eating disorders and a member of the advisory board for the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. (NBC news website, 24 January 2013).

In these extracts there is evidence of several different 'discourses' on 'the problem of obesity'. In the first place, there are references to it as a *medical* problem: these are overt in (1) and (5), which use terms like 'health service', 'treat', 'public health', 'epidemic', but the idea is also present as a background assumption in (2) and (3). It can remain in the background because the idea that obesity causes illness and premature death is now a well-established proposition that readers are assumed to be familiar with. In most of the extracts what is foregrounded is a newer proposition, or set of propositions, about why and for whom obesity is a problem. In (1), for instance, the obesity of an increasing number of individuals is presented as an *economic* problem for the society they live in, putting more and more pressure on its publicly funded healthcare system. In (2) and (3), by contrast, the emphasis is on obesity as a *social* problem, connected either with 'societal changes' which mean we are all eating more while being less physically active, or else with the unhealthy choices made by a particular section of society. Finally, on the fringes of mainstream media reporting—so marginal that it is almost completely hidden in our sample of news reports, though it is hinted at in the quote from Deb Burgard in (5)—there is an 'oppositional' discourse which challenges the view that obesity in itself is a problem, and instead defines the problem as the stigma and discrimination obese people face.

Another thing we see in this set of extracts is a division between accounts which attribute the problem of obesity (whether it is seen as medical, social or both) to the shortcomings of obese people themselves—for instance, the ignorance or irresponsibility of the 'poor families' whose diet consists of 'an abundance of bad food' in (3), and the lack of self-control which the bioethicist in (5) proposes to 'shame' fat people out of—and accounts which cast obese people as victims of external forces, such as poverty, inequality and the easy availability of cheap junk-food (2, 4). This division dramatizes Foucault's argument that discourses are not 'just words', but have material consequences for people in the real world. Once it has been defined as a problem, obesity also becomes an object of social policymaking, and competing accounts of what causes the problem go along with competing proposals for what to do about it. In the version of the 'social' discourse which emphasizes personal responsibility, the solutions proposed are punitive: scolding and publicly shaming obese people. The version that emphasizes factors outside the control of individuals is more likely to produce proposals for interventionist social policies, like taxing junk food, placing restrictions on the advertising of unhealthy foods, or forcing the food industry to reduce levels of fat, salt and sugar in its products. 'Radical' versions of this discourse may also call for a broader policy of reducing poverty and inequality. 'Fringe' versions which entirely reject the postulate 'obesity is a problem' are associated with campaigns for 'fat acceptance'.

The one thing no one proposes, however, is ceasing to concern ourselves with 'obesity' in any way at all. Discourse has formed this object and brought it into sharp focus, making it impossible to ignore. Even those who dispute the scientific validity of what is said about 'obesity' must acknowledge it as part of our social reality. And in that reality, the various 'discourses' we have identified in our discussion of the extracts above form what a critical theorist might call the 'discursive field', a network of assumptions and propositions in relation to which

we will interpret and evaluate all new statements on this subject. It is impossible to say anything intelligible about obesity which does not in some way refer to, and thus recycle, these already-established discourses, even if the speaker's purpose is to challenge them. As Lemke says, 'we appropriate the words of others to speak a word of our own'.

At this point, though, alert readers may be thinking that we have not had much to say about the words, and wondering whether our discussion should be put in the category of discourse analysis, or whether it is more akin to content analysis. That would be a fair question: we cannot claim that the account we have just presented of competing discourses on obesity was based on a close analysis of the *language* used in media reports. But that kind of analysis could be done, and in fact it is often done by linguistically-oriented discourse analysts who have been influenced by Foucault's ideas. Many practitioners of critical discourse analysis, for example, are interested in exploring how certain patterns of linguistic choice may contribute to the production of competing discourses as more or less important, reasonable, authoritative or persuasive. Though we will defer detailed discussion of this approach until Chapter 6, it is worth giving a brief indication of the kinds of choices that might be examined in a critical discourse analysis of the media reports on obesity quoted above.

Such an analysis might consider, for example, the way *numbers* are used to lend an air of authority and certainty to claims like the ones made in (1)—though there are competing figures, and all such figures depend on assumptions that could be disputed, and projections which experts do not regard as 100% certain. Another point of interest is the recurrent use of particular *metaphors* in relation to obesity. An example in our own set of texts is 'obesity *epidemic*' (5). This now-commonplace expression likens obesity to an infectious disease, and so tends to imply that it requires the same drastic measures as an outbreak of cholera or plague. And there are also some observations to be made about the non-parallel ways in which sources representing different views are identified. In the extracts reproduced above, the people who are quoted most frequently and (arguably) given most credibility are those who voice the discourses in which obese people are blamed. Experts who take that view are described in ways that tend to boost their perceived credibility (e.g. 'a health minister', 'a prominent bioethicist'). By contrast, the 'oppositional' voices in the sample are described in ways that suggest either that they have no claim to expertise (as in (4), which identifies the speakers only as local residents), or else that their view is partisan rather than objective. Extract (5) explicitly links the psychologist Deb Burgard to a pressure group that campaigns for 'fat acceptance', for instance, while describing the other expert quoted, bioethicist Daniel Callahan, as 'a senior research scholar'.

We have explained the sense of *discourse* that comes from the work of Foucault in some detail, because it is currently influential across the range of disciplines where discourse analysis goes on. However, not all social researchers who adopt discourse analysis as a method are committed to the ideas of Foucault, or those of any other theorist. There are also varying views on the more general question of whether and to what extent social reality is 'discursively constructed'. Whatever position is taken on that question, though, it remains the case that a researcher who sets out to investigate some aspect of reality by eliciting discourse from a group of research subjects, or by sampling a subset of the discourse that circulates in society, will end up with data in the form of language. And if we recognize that language is not just a transparent medium, a window through which we can see into the language-user's mind—that it is shaped by its context and by the way verbal communication works—we might also conclude that paying attention to the form as well as the content is not only important for analysts who are linguists, but for any researcher who works with discourse data.

DISCOURSE, UTTERANCE, TEXT

This book's subject is specifically *written* discourse, and in that context the reference made above to 'the way verbal communication works' must raise the question of what difference it makes whether 'verbal communication' takes the form of speech or writing. The definitions of *discourse* discussed in this chapter are in principle applicable to either, but some attempts to define the term do seem to lean towards one as the prototypical case. For instance, the *COD* entry we quoted earlier places 'talk, conversation' first in its list of senses, and when it offers a more technical linguistic definition, that also begins with a sense that seems to relate to the spoken word ('a connected series of *utterances*'). It is not entirely clear whether what follows this ('a text') is intended to mark a distinction (utterances are spoken, texts are written) or just to provide further information about what *discourse* means as a general term ('a text is a concrete example of discourse').

Text is another term whose meaning can vary with the user's disciplinary and theoretical allegiances. Outside linguistics it is most often used to refer to written discourse (e.g. a work of literature is 'a text'); within linguistics it is commonly used to refer to any specific piece of discourse, whether spoken, written or multimodal (we will use it in this way ourselves, though that may not be obvious, since most of the examples we describe as 'texts' will, in fact, be written). But some linguists do make a more theoretical distinction between *discourse* and *text*. For Henry Widdowson (1995), for instance, the term *text* denotes a linguistic object (e.g. the words on a page in a book, or the transcript of a conversation), whereas *discourse* is the process of interaction with/interpretation of the object that produces its meaning in context. It follows that Widdowson makes a distinction between speech and writing. In speech, discourse precedes text—there is no textual representation of talk that comes before the negotiation of meaning in interaction—whereas in writing it is the text that comes first, and discourse is produced by the reader in the process of interpreting its meaning.

In this book we focus more on the practice of discourse analysis—the 'working with' part of our title—than on theoretical debates about terms and definitions. However, our subject, written discourse, means we do have to consider the much-debated question of differences between writing and speech. We have already indicated in the Introduction what our general position will be: in our view, it is not helpful analytically to discuss either speech or writing in generic, homogenizing terms, because of the diversity of forms each can take. We do not think there is an absolute dividing line between all spoken and all written discourse; but at the same time we do not want to present speech and writing as interchangeable modes of communication with no distinctive features at all. So, how should we understand the relationship between these modes, and what are the implications for discourse analysis? Those are the questions we will address in Chapter 2.

SUMMARY

This chapter has been concerned with the meaning of the term *discourse* and the goals or purposes of analysing it. The view of discourse analysis taken here and throughout this book is a 'holistic' one, which acknowledges that discourse analysis is several things at once. It is a method for doing social research; it is a body of empirical knowledge about how talk and text are organized; it is the home of various theories about the nature and workings of human communication, and also of theories about the construction and reproduction of social reality. It is both about language and about life.

FURTHER READING

A book whose purpose is to 'unpack' the complex term *discourse* is Sara Mills's *Discourse* (1997). A shorter survey of various tendencies in contemporary discourse analysis is provided by the introduction to *The Discourse Reader* (Jaworski and Coupland 2006). This volume also includes an edited extract from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, 'The incitement to discourse', which gives a sense of what Foucault and his followers mean by the term. A more traditionally 'linguistic' perspective is taken by the editors in their general introduction to *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2003), which also contains more than 40 chapters giving overviews of key topics in the field.