

Eclecticism in Discourse Analysis

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If discourse analysis were represented pictorially by a tree, I see it as a tree with many branches—each shaped by different pioneers (from Searle to Schegloff, Gumperz to Grice), disciplines (linguistics to philosophy, anthropology to sociology to psychology), and perspectives (theoretical to methodological). Discourse researchers occupying these different branches have a history of maintaining their own set of aims and, in so doing, drawing clear lines between one another's work. As Lakoff (2001) writes, each domain of language study has advanced its own way of talking, with such boundaries both “guarded jealously and justified zealously” (p. 200).

In their article, Stubbe, Lane, Hilder, Vine, Vine, Marra, Holmes, and Weatherall (2003) challenge the view that the work of each branch of discourse analysis must stand apart from one another. Through their application of five approaches—conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, politeness theory, critical discourse analysis, and discursive psychology—to the same nine-minute transcript, the authors conclude that the wide-ranging interpretations provided “are not necessarily in conflict with one another,” but instead might be considered “complementary in many ways” (p. 380). All of the approaches are described as having the potential for providing insight into the same interaction.

Indeed, the promotion of eclecticism by discourse analysts may now be more the norm than the exception. As Wood and Kroger (2000) describe it, “there seems to be a move toward recognizing the strengths of different approaches and the possibility of drawing on more than one approach within the same project” (pp. 24-25). Lakoff (2001), for example, recently proposed an “inter-, cross-, and multidisciplinary approach for discourse analysis” (p. 200), finding that the examination of one speech act—apologies—can be understood more meaningfully when examined from a variety of perspectives, including speech act theory, conversation analysis, and sociolinguistics. van Dijk (2001) advocates a critical discourse analysis that employs the methodologies of approaches such as conversation analysis and pragmatics. Wieder (1999) calls for *ethnographies of interaction*, studies grounded in the ethnography of speaking and supplemented with more interpersonally-focused methods such as conversation analysis.

It is difficult to argue against callings such as these. It seems reasonable that the more we utilize a range of perspectives in making sense of a given text, the more equipped we are to uncover the multitude of aspects (social, cultural, situational, interpersonal, cognitive, textual, other) that contribute to individuals' understanding of one another in interaction. However, I was left with an unsettled feeling when I finished the article by Stubbe et al. My head was swimming; different interpretations of the same conversational exchanges that were presented all seemed plausible in their own right. Was a string of utterances by Tom early in the interaction a positive politeness strategy, a signaling of his identification with Claire's (his interlocutor's) wants, as politeness theory would have it? Did these same words function as an assertion of Tom's role as Claire's boss, according to the critical discourse analysis? Or could Tom have been aligning

himself with Claire's unstated discrimination complaint, as discussed in the discursive psychology section?

Susan Philips, both a conversation analyst and an ethnographer of communication, considers this very tension—how the findings of different discourse approaches can at times seemingly contradict each other. Studying courtroom behavior, she found that if the judges' hesitation and repair were viewed through the lens of conversation analysis, these phenomena would be interpreted as “locally managed” and “emergent in conversation” (Philips, 1992, p. 320). However, taking an ethnographic orientation grounded in particular speakers and their behaviors over time, Philips uncovered how the judges' display of these same phenomena appeared to be routinized. Noting that conversation analysis does not tend to examine the same speakers across numerous communicative exchanges, Philips demonstrates how the viewing of talk with one perspective (here, a microanalytic one) can shield researchers from a different and more relevant analysis that is only possible through the application of a different research method (here, a macroanalytic one).

In applying an interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis, I agree with Wood and Kroger (2000) that a vital first step is for researchers to ground themselves in “participants' concerns, with the way that they themselves work up the issues at hand” as they enact their own conversational events before interpreting the dynamics present within such events (p. 25). This foundation in the empirical evidence of talk reflects a fundamental tenet of conversation analysis. However, the meaning underlying a communicative act might not be analyzable solely through empirically gathered, naturally occurring, moment to moment talk. Within the Stubbe et al. article, the fact that gender discrimination was a “hot issue” (p. 360) at the workplace of the interlocutors seems to be a salient contextual feature that would have cast a shadow over the analyzed interaction (in which a female interlocutor is speaking to her male boss about a male colleague being appointed manager instead of her). The analyses of interactional sociolinguistics and discursive psychology accounted for this arguably vital background information; the other analyses did not. Making this assessment helped me to tentatively sort through which interpretations appeared to remain closest to the participants and their concerns in this conversational instance.

Some tentativeness will necessarily accompany the work we do as discourse analysts, for, as Stubbe et al. write, “it is...possible for the participants (or the analyst) to assign a number of different interpretations or readings to a given utterance or sequence” (p. 376). Due to the complex and often ambiguous reality of studying language in use, we must be ready with our particular research questions to cross into other domains of discourse analysis, to collaborate with researchers occupying other branches of the discourse analysis tree. As Philips (1992) reminds us, the viewing of interaction through only one analytical perspective will inevitably obscure other meanings.

At the same time, we cannot be misled into thinking that we can merely cut and paste different perspectives together or that different approaches, when combined, will blend together free of tension (Wood & Kroger, 2000). As discourse researchers, we have within our reach a wide range of methodologies and perspectives to draw upon. This vast array of resources can either deepen our insights or, as I felt during my initial reading of Stubbe et al., overwhelm us.

While our findings may indeed lend themselves to complementariness, there will be times when we must deem the work of one approach to be more meaningful, more insightful, than that of another. Just as we must be open to viewing talk and interaction through different theoretical and methodological lenses, we must also gauge when it is time to focus our attention to those lenses through which we can best see.

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