Discourse - Deborah Schiffrin

Approaches to Discourse

We can view Discourse Analysis as a methodology through which to analyze language use in text and context. Rather than providing one single means of analysis, however, it provides many different methods, some of which focus more on the relationship between grammar and text (including word order and information structure) and others that focus more on how text co-constitutes context (how it both reflects and creates context). All of these approaches stem from different disciplines, are built upon different assumptions, and have different foci. Below are eight approaches and the questions that each addresses:

- **Pragmatics** (Philosophy): how do we communicate more than our language allows us to mean and say?
- **Speech Act Theory** (Philosophy): how does language perform actions?
- **Variation Analysis** (Linguistics): how (and why) do we say the 'same thing' in different ways?
- **Narrative Analysis** (Linguistics): how do 'story' and 'narrative' underlie text structure and language use?
- **Conversation Analysis** (Sociology) how does talk-in-interaction construct order in our social world?
- **Interactional Sociolinguistics** (Anthropology, Sociology, Linguistics?): how do we use language to manage social interactions, relationships and social life?
- **Ethnography of Communication** (Anthropology): how is our ability to use language part of our cultural knowledge?
- **Critical Discourse Analysis** (Linguistics, Comparative Literature? Literary theory): how does language replicate (or contest) power and privilege?

We can take a sample dialogue from the *Discourse* chapter and use each approach as a means of analysis.

(1)   Mr. Kay: (a) Okay, let's get started.

(b) First we'll review the problems from last night.

Pragmatics.

Although our language allows us to represent information about the world, we are still able to communicate *more* than our language can literally mean and say. Mr. Kay doesn't say exactly who will *get started* and who will *review the problems*. Yet we understand that it is Mr. Kay and his listeners who will engage in these actions. How can we make this inference?

Notice that Mr. Kay does say *us* (in *let's*) and *we* in *we'll*. Although the use of the first person plural pronoun always includes the speaker and someone else, the identity of that someone else can vary: it can be a co-present addressee ('you') or a non-present third party ('he', 'she' or them'). It is possible to imagine a scenario in which Mr. Kay's addressees are *not* included in the *review* of *problems*. Maybe Mr. Kay is putting forward a plan that he and his (non-present) board members of a company are proposing to an audience of stockholders. But it seems more likely that Mr. Kay's addressees are included in the *we*—even though this is not stated explicitly. Rather we infer the identity of participants by drawing upon our expectations about general communicative principles that work in tandem with our shared, often schematic, knowledge of typical scenes, settings and situations. Here we infer that *we* includes the speaker and addressees through a general principle of quantity: if we can find/proximal in the immediate 'here' and 'now' is the default assumption (principle of quantity, relevance to the situation.

Speech Act Theory.

Mr. Kay's first sentence *Okay, let's get started* is a directive: hearers are directed to take a specific action. There are certainly many other ways to direct his hearers: Mr. Kay could have said *Begin!*, *It's getting late, We really need to get started*, or *Ready, set, go!* How we infer that his utterance (as well as the other alternatives) performs this action is based on different kinds of knowledge, including knowledge about speakers' needs and wants, speaker/hearer relationships (e.g. who is able and possibly expected to do what), and the ability of language to directly (or indirectly) index that knowledge. Note, for example, the role of *let's*: rather than say *Get started*, Mr. Kay says *Let's get started*. This use of *let's* is a non literal use of the semantic meaning of 'permit' or 'allow', as when a parent says *I will let you have dessert* to a child. Knowledge of the alternative use of *let's* as a directive is part of our knowledge of how actions can be performed through speech.

Variation analysis

There are numerous ways that Mr. Kay can pronounce, choose, present and arrange the words in (1). Take the use of contraction, for example: instead of saying *let's* (a), Mr. Kay might have used the full form *let us*; instead of *we'll* (b), he might have said *we will*. Contraction is a phonological and syntactic process that has no effect on referential meaning, i.e. the two forms are alternative ways of saying the same thing. The two variants, however, may have different social meanings. If Mr. Kay had used the full forms, for example, he may have been indicating a different level of formality, seriousness and/or a more distant relationship with his addressee(s).

Narrative Analysis

Mr. Kay is not telling a story about what happened in the past. But because Mr. Kay is presenting actions in the order in which they *will* occur, the order of his sentences replicates a common narrative structure: present events in the order in which they occur. This inference of temporal order is supported by the verbs. *Get* has aspectual meaning as an inceptive or inchoative. *Get* then initiates the verb *start* that lexically indicate inception of some other activity. Thus the group will begin to 'do something' (i.e. 'start') and what they 'start' is the activity proper, i.e. 'review.' The words *okay* and *first* also convey time by placing the actions within a still larger activity. *Okay* separates whatever had been going on prior to the first utterance from what is about to happen. *First* (b) indicates that more actions will follow the review. So an underlying textual feature crucial to narrative—temporal order—appears in what Mr. Kay says and the way in which he does so.

Conversation Analysis

Also contributing to the overall sense of an interaction is the order in which sentences—and other units of speech production—appear not just within one person's turn at talk, but also across different peoples' turns at talk. We notice in (1), however, that only one person is speaking. Despite the assumed presence of other people, Mr. Kay is the only speaker. Yet his statement *Okay, let's get started* could very well have served as a closure for his speaking/acting role. Instead of continuing to speak, his statement could have been a summons for others to do something, an utterance with sequential implications for others to act: *Let's get started* could open a musical performance (a choir begins to sing),

a race (runners set off) or an exam (students turn over their exams and begin writing). Instead, Mr. Kay continues as 'current speaker' until the completion of his next statement again allows an opportunity for others to take a turn.

Interactional Sociolinguistics

Numerous features of language provide clues (or indices to) the social situation, identity and activity of participants and their relationships between interactants. The use of *let's* noted above, for example, suggests that the speaker has authority over the hearer, thus evoking a situation in which participants have an asymmetrical power relationship (e.g. doctor/patient, parent/child). We can narrow down the nature of the authority and the situation by noting that the activity being *started* by Mr. Kay (*review*), and the object of the review (*problems*), suggests a learning environment or one in which an expert is instructing a novice. That the problems were from *last night* reveals a cyclical pattern, a structured routine often found in formal institutions. Finally, the discourse marker *okay* (a) closes a prior activity and opens an upcoming activity, again, a possible indicator of a social relationship in a social institution in which the speaker has the ability to guide the activity of the hearers.

Ethnography of Communication

That Mr. Kay has the main speaking role, and that he is directing his audience to take joint action in a way that conveys authority, has already been suggested. But language choices, inferences about meaning, actions, roles, relationships and participation are all embedded in broader cultural matrices of recurrent practices, knowledge and meanings, which include beliefs about who should do what, how they should do so, and the value of particular outcomes of what is said and done. We can thus view both of Mr. Kay's statements not just as directives to take action, but also as reflections of deeper moral imperatives. In addition to opening a new activity and closing another activity, *Okay, let's get started* also implies that the new activity (reviewing the problems) is the main part of the agenda and is thus more valued than prior activity. The collaborative *review* of the *problems* portrays a cultural epistemology in which learning and attaining information arises when novices work on their own (*problems from last night*) and then, at a given point in time, present and review their solutions with an expert.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Just as language, inferences, actions, roles, relationships and participation are all embedded in culture, so too are they intertwined with social processes and structures that sustain (or restrict) power and privilege. Ways of speaking can put those processes into place and reinforce (or challenge) received means of authority, making it difficult for those in marginalized groups (sometimes defined by race, gender, age and class) to gain a voice. Mr. Kay's ability to manage the use of time, select the activity in which to engage, and organize the way in which information becomes distributed as knowledge suggests a school setting. And this institutional setting links his discourse to broader social, cultural and civic agendas. What Mr. Kay says—and more fundamentally, his ability to do so— thus positions him as one who can reinforce social structural norms (who teaches whom? how? when?) and as an arbiter of the official set of values, beliefs and ideologies that are sanctioned means of maintaining a stock of received knowledge