





# chapter 1

## Introduction



### What is Discourse Analysis?

People in a variety of academic departments and disciplines use the term “discourse analysis” for what they do, how they do it, or both. Many of these people, though by no means all, have some training in general linguistics, and some would identify themselves primarily as linguists. Others, however, would identify themselves primarily with other fields of study, such as anthropology, communication, cultural studies, psychology, or education, to list just a few of the possibilities, and some situate their work in the interdisciplinary endeavor of discourse studies. Discourse analysts pose many different questions and propose many different sorts of answers. In one journal issue devoted to discourse analysis (Basham, Fiksdal, and Rounds, 1999), for example, there are papers by eleven people who all think of what they do as discourse analysis. One of these authors talks about the descriptive terms used of the African-American defendant in the media coverage of a murder trial. One talks about differences between English and Japanese. One describes newspaper coverage of a prison scandal in England. Another discusses metaphor, and another analyzes expressions of identity in Athabaskan (Native American) student writing. One talks about

a poem, and there is a paper about the epitaph of the spiritual master of a sect of Muslims and one about whether the pronoun *I* should appear in formal writing. One paper is about the connection between personal pronouns and the human experience of selfhood, one is about political debate, one is about using case studies as a way of studying sociolinguistic variation. The papers make points such as these: media coverage of the murder trial was racist; the Japanese word *jinkaku*, used in Japan's new post-World War II constitution as an equivalent for the English expression *individual dignity*, both represented and shaped a particularly Japanese way of thinking and talking about the public person; female US college students describing seminars used metaphors of sharing whereas male students used metaphors of competing; poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins operate on numerous levels at once; a Bektashi Muslim community in the United States manages to maintain a sense of cultural continuity despite massive cultural and geographical changes and in several radically different languages; students need a voice with which to write in academia.

It might appear that the only thing all these projects have in common is that, in one way or another, they all involve studying language and its effects. Is discourse analysis, then, simply the study of language and its effects? It has been described that way. It has been suggested, for example, that "the name for the field 'discourse analysis' . . . says nothing more or other than the term 'linguistics': the study of language" (Tannen, 1989: 6). In a way, this is exactly correct: discourse analysis is the study of language, in the everyday sense in which most people use the term. What most people mean when they say "language" is talk, communication, discourse. (In formal language study, both descriptive and prescriptive, the term "language" is often used differently, to refer to structures or rules that are thought to underlie talk.) Even if discourse analysis is, basically, "the study of language," however, it is useful to try to specify what makes discourse analysis different from other approaches to language study. One way to do this is by asking ourselves what we can learn by thinking about what "discourse" is, and about what "analysis" is.

### "Discourse"

To discourse analysts, "discourse" usually means actual instances of communicative action in the medium of language, although some define the term more broadly as "meaningful symbolic behavior" in any mode (Blommaert, 2005: 2). "Discourse" in this sense is usually a mass noun. Discourse analysts typically speak of *discourse* rather than *discourses*, the way we speak of other things for which we often use mass nouns, such as *music* ("some music" or "three pieces of music" rather than "three musics") or *information* ("the flow of information," "a great deal of information," rather than

“thousands of informations”). Communication can of course involve other media besides language. Media such as photography, clothing, music, architecture, and dance can be meaningful, too, and discourse analysts often need to think about the connections between language and other such modes of semiosis, or meaning-making.

Not all linguistic communication is spoken or written: there are manual languages, such as American Sign Language, whose speakers use gesture rather than sound or graphic signs. (It is conventional to use the word “speaker” as a cover term for people who are writing or gesturally signing in addition to those who employ the aural–oral mode. Doing this is convenient, but it also can make it seem as if spoken language is more natural, neutral, or normal than signing or writing are. There are arguments to be made on all sides of this question, and we will return to it when we discuss media of communication in more detail in chapter 6.)

Calling what we do “*discourse* analysis” rather than “language analysis” underscores the fact that we are not centrally focused on language as an abstract system. We tend instead to be interested in what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language, knowledge based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before, to do things in the world: exchange information, express feelings, make things happen, create beauty, entertain themselves and others, and so on. This knowledge – a set of generalizations, which can sometimes be stated as rules, about what words generally mean, about what goes where in a sentence, and so on – is what is often referred to as “language,” when language is thought of as an abstract system of rules or structural relationships. Discourse is both the source of this knowledge (people’s generalizations about language are made on the basis of the discourse they participate in) and the result of it (people apply what they already know in creating and interpreting new discourse).

Scholars influenced by Foucault (1972, 1980) sometimes use “discourse” in a related but somewhat different sense, as a count noun. “Discourses” in this sense can be enumerated and referred to in the plural. They are conventional ways of talking that both create and are created by conventional ways of thinking. These linked ways of talking and thinking constitute ideologies (sets of interrelated ideas) and serve to circulate power in society. In other words, “discourses” in this sense involve patterns of belief and habitual action as well as patterns of language. Discourses are ideas as well as ways of talking that influence and are influenced by the ideas. Discourses, in their linguistic aspect, are conventionalized sets of choices for discourse, or talk. Some discourse analysts distinguish the two meanings of “discourse” orthographically, using Discourse (with a capital D) for the former and discourse (with a lower-case d) for the latter (Gee, 2005). As we will see throughout this book (particularly in chapter 2), the two senses of the word “discourse,” as mass noun (“discourse”) and as count noun (“discourses”), are crucially connected.

## “Analysis”

Why discourse *analysis* rather than “discourseology,” on the analogy of “phonology,” “discourseography,” on the analogy of “ethnography,” or “discourse criticism,” on the analogy of “literary criticism” or “rhetorical criticism”? The answer has to do with the fact that discourse analysis typically focuses on the analytical process in a relatively explicit way. It is useful to think of discourse analysis as analogous to chemical analysis. Like chemical analysis, discourse analysis is a methodology that can be used in answering many kinds of questions. As we have already seen, discourse analysts start out with a variety of research questions, and these research questions are often not questions that only discourse analysts ask. Instead, they are often questions that discourse analysts share with other people, both in linguistics and in other fields. Some discourse analysts ask questions that are traditionally asked in linguistics: questions about linguistic structure, about language change, about meaning, about language acquisition. Other discourse analysts ask questions that are more interdisciplinary: questions about such things as social roles and relations, communication and identity. What distinguishes discourse analysis from other sorts of study that bear on human language and communication lies not in the questions discourse analysts ask but in the ways they try to answer them: by analyzing discourse – that is, by examining aspects of the structure and function of language in use.

Perhaps the most familiar use of the word “analysis” is for processes, mental or mechanical, for taking things apart. Chemical analysis, for example, involves using a variety of mechanical techniques for separating compounds into their elemental parts. Mental analysis is also involved, as the chemist thinks in advance about what the compound’s parts are likely to be. Linguistic analysis is also sometimes a process of taking apart. Discourse analysts often find it useful to divide longer stretches of discourse into parts according to various criteria and then look at the particular characteristics of each part. Divisions can be made according to who is talking, for example, where the paragraph boundaries are, when a new topic arises, or where the subject ends and the predicate begins. Are grammatical patterns different when social superiors are talking than when their subordinates are? Does new information tend to come in the first sentence of a paragraph? Are topic changes signaled by special markers? Do sentence subjects tend to be slots in which events or actions or feelings can be presented as things? Discourse can be taken apart into individual words and phrases, and concordances of these – sets of statistics about where a particular word is likely to occur, how frequent it is, what words tend to be close to it – can be used to support claims about how grammar works or what words are used to mean.

But analysis can also involve taking apart less literally. One way of analyzing something is by looking at it in a variety of ways. An analysis in this sense might involve systematically asking a number of questions, systematically taking several theoretical perspectives, or systematically performing a variety

of tests. Such an analysis could include a breaking-down into parts. It could also include a breaking-down into functions (What is persuasive discourse like? What is narrative like?), or according to participants (How do men talk in all-male groups? How do psychotherapists talk? What is newspaper writing like?), or settings (What goes on in classrooms? In workplaces? In sororities?), or processes (How do children learn to get the conversational floor? How do people create social categories like “girl” or “foreigner” or “old person” as they talk to and about each other?).

## Discussion

- 1.1 One good way to begin to think about what discourse analysis involves is by thinking about, or, if you can, practicing translation. If you know another language well enough, try translating each of the following into it:
  - a. All men are created equal.
  - b. Don't count your chickens before they hatch.
  - c. “We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now.” (Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” speech)

What decisions have to be made as you do this? What cultural resonances are lost as these sentences are taken out of the English (and, in the case of (a) and (c), United States) context? What resonances are added as they are articulated with another language and culture? Are there things you can do grammatically in English that can't be done in another language, and vice versa? What other kinds of texts or utterances does each sentence echo or draw on, in English and in other languages? Who would say things like these, to whom, in what circumstances, in each language? Why would these things be said? Are they usually said in writing, or orally, or in other media? Discuss whether it is ever possible to say the same thing in a different language, in a different style, in a different medium, or in a different situation.

- 1.2 In what other contexts have you analyzed written texts or conversations, systematically or unsystematically? Is the analysis of discourse ever involved in the study of literature? In history? In medicine or the law? What kinds of informal discourse analysis go on in homes and workplaces, when people try to figure out what written texts mean, how best to write or speak, what is going on in a conversation? What kinds of questions do people ask themselves and others as they do such analyses?

## Some Uses of Discourse Analysis

As we have seen, discourse analysis has been used in answering many different kinds of questions. Some of these questions have to do with language.

What is involved in “knowing a language”? How do words, sentences, and utterances get associated with meanings? How does language change? How do children learn to talk and how do people learn new languages? Linguists have long been interested in the structure of words (morphology) and sentences (syntax). Discourse analysts have moved the description of structure up a level, looking at actual stretches of connected text or transcript of talk and providing descriptions of the structure of paragraphs, stories, and conversations. Language scholars also ask questions about meaning (semantics), and in a natural progression from work in semantics and syntax, discourse analysts have asked about what goes where in stretches of talk longer than words or phrases. Discourse analysis has shed light on how meaning can be created via the arrangement of chunks of information across a series of sentences or via the details of how a conversationalist takes up and responds to what has just been said. Discourse analysis sheds light on how speakers indicate their semantic intentions and how hearers interpret what they hear, and on the cognitive abilities that underlie human symbol use. In the field of pragmatics, discourse analysts looking at corpora of actual talk have helped to describe the culturally-shaped interpretive principles on which understanding is based and how people (and sometimes other entities) are thought to perform actions by means of utterances. Work on cohesion examines the meanings of utterances in their linguistic contexts.

Traditional approaches to questions about linguistic variation and language change involve examining internal causes of change (such as speakers’ tendency to treat new words as analogous to old ones, adapting foreign sounds and words to the phonological and morphological patterns of the borrowing language) as well as external causes of change (such as geographical or social isolation of one group from another, which often leads to divergence in the ways they pronounce words and construct phrases and sentences). Discourse analysts have contributed to the study of variation and change from both perspectives. Looking at records of discourse over time, discourse analysts have described mechanisms of change having to do with what happens in talk. For example, forms that regularly serve useful functions in suggesting how speakers intend their words to be taken at a particular moment are sometimes “grammaticalized,” changing over time into required elements of a language’s grammar (Hopper and Traugott, 2003). Discourse analysts have also described external social and material influences that effect changes in patterns of language use, influences such as economic change, geographic mobility, and power relations, and they have studied patterns of variation in how people do things with talk such as making lists, constructing arguments, and telling stories.

Discourse analysts have also contributed to research on language acquisition. They have helped describe how speakers acquire new competence and what it is they are acquiring. In first language acquisition research, discourse analysis has a long history, dating back at least to important work by Charles Ferguson (1977) and others about the special simplified ways in

which some people display the regularities of grammar as they talk to children. This research called into question the claim that innate linguistic knowledge was required for language learning to be possible. Work by discourse analysts on “foreigner talk” and “teacher talk” followed. Among the many discourse analysts who have added to our understanding of *what* language learners acquire are students of “contrastive rhetoric” and “contrastive pragmatics.” They have shown that knowing a language means not just knowing its grammar and vocabulary but also knowing how to structure paragraphs and arguments and participate in conversations the way speakers of the language do, and it means understanding which sentence types can accomplish which purposes in social interaction: what might work as an apology, for example, or how to decline an invitation.

Discourse analysts also help answer questions about the roles of language in human cognition, art, and social life which have been asked for centuries. Students of literary style are discourse analysts (though they may not call themselves that) and they, along with folklorists and ethnographers of communication, have been exploring artistic uses of language, and the role of aesthetics and “performance” in all language use, for many years. Rhetorical study has always involved discourse analysis, explicit or not, as rhetoricians have analyzed relatively self-conscious, public, strategically designed talk and writing to see what makes it work. Discourse analysts have helped us understand why people tell stories, what the functions of “small talk” are, how people adapt language to specialized situations like teaching and psychotherapy, what persuasion is and how it works, how people negotiate the multiple roles and identities they may be called on to adopt.

Discourse analysis continues to be useful in answering questions that are posed in many fields that traditionally focus on human life and communication, such as anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, communications, and sociology, as well as in fields in which the details of discourse have not always been thought relevant, such as geography, psychology, human-computer interaction, medicine, law, public policy, and business. Anyone who wants to understand human beings has to understand discourse, so the potential uses of discourse analysis are almost innumerable. Discourse analysts help answer questions about social relations, such as dominance and oppression or solidarity. Discourse analysis is useful in the study of personal identity and social identification, as illustrated by work on discourse and gender or discourse and ethnicity. Discourse analysis has been used in the study of how people define and create lifespan processes such as aging and disability as they talk, how decisions are made, resources allocated, and social adaptation or conflict accomplished in public and private life. To the extent that discourse and discourses – meaning-making, in linguistic and other modes, and ways of acting, being, and envisioning self and environment – are at the center of human experience and activity, discourse analysis can help in answering any question that could be asked about humans in society.

## Facets of Discourse Analysis

To introduce some of the kinds of questions discourse analysis can raise and help answer, and to lay out the analytical heuristic around which this book is organized, we begin with a set of brief examples. These exploratory analyses of small bits of text all deal with aspects of a familiar genre of discourse, the discourse directed to the public by an institution – in this case, an art museum. My purpose in presenting these mini-analyses is not to make any general point about the discourse and discourses of museums, or about how institutions construct and manipulate their publics, or about how ancient civilizations are commodified, exoticized, or made to seem threatening through the ways we talk about them, or about how condescending educational discourse can be – although all these angles are suggested in this analysis and would be worth pursuing further. My goal is simply to illustrate a few ways in which a systematic analysis of discourse can help illuminate facets of the communication process that are important and not immediately apparent.

The discourse to be analyzed here consists of what might be called popular Egyptology, in the form of advertising for and informational material about a museum exhibit called “Splendors of Ancient Egypt.” (By “popular Egyptology” I mean non-academic talk, writing, and other representations of ideas about ancient Egypt, ranging from serious books about Egypt for general audiences to humorous uses of imagery involving mummies, hieroglyphic writing, body poses taken from Egyptian bas-reliefs and statuary, and so on.) The “Splendors of Ancient Egypt” exhibit traveled to several US museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas (MFAH). The exhibit consisted of over 200 artifacts from all phases of ancient Egyptian history, including coffins and mummy masks, statues, scrolls, and relief carvings in stone. The objects were on loan from the Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim, Germany, and the exhibit was jointly designed and mounted by Hildesheim curators and Houston ones. The material I will discuss comes from the Houston show, as well as from descriptions of and advertisements for the show and for related events.

The MFAH presented this exhibit as a “blockbuster,” advertising it heavily and using it as a tool for raising museum attendance and increasing membership. This effort, and the show itself, gave rise to many texts, including magazine advertisements for the exhibit; articles about it in the bimonthly magazine sent to museum members, *MFA Today*; wall placards and labels in the exhibit; and some material that was available at the special “Splendors” gift shop outside the exhibit. (Because the exhibit took place in 1996–7, before the widespread use of the World Wide Web, there was no online advertising or educational material.) I present brief analyses of bits of this material to illustrate the approach to discourse analysis that will be taken in the chapters to follow. Let me stress again that the point of what



I will be doing here is illustrative. I will not be presenting a complete or coherent analysis of this popular-Egyptology data, just a few examples.

### A heuristic for analysis

Before we start looking at this material, however, we need to consider our methodology. How are we going to proceed with these analyses? What questions should we ask, and how should we go about answering them? Discourse analysts work with material of many kinds, including transcripts of audio- or videorecorded interactions, written documents, texts transmitted via oral tradition such as proverbs, and printouts of online communication. Their material sometimes consists of words alone and sometimes includes pictures, gestures, gaze, and other modalities. But no matter what sort of discourse we consider – we discuss the “data” of discourse analysis later in the chapter – the basic question a discourse analyst asks is “Why is this stretch of discourse the way it is? Why is it no other way? Why these particular words in this particular order?”

To answer these questions, we obviously need to think about what our “text” is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular sociocultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influences what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or media) of production has to do with what it is like. We need to think about the language it is in, what that language encourages speakers and writers to do and what it is relatively difficult to do in that language. We need to think about the text’s structure, and how it fits into larger structures of sets of texts and sets of interactions.

We can divide the questions that need to be asked about a text into six broad categories. Each of these categories corresponds to one way in which contexts shape texts and texts shape contexts. Each of these aspects of text-building is both a source of constraint – a reason why texts are typically some ways and not others – and a resource for creativity, as speakers, signers, and writers express themselves by manipulating the patterns that have become conventional. As we explore pieces of the “Splendors of Ancient Egypt” exhibit we will touch briefly on each of these facets of discourse in turn. We will consider each aspect in more detail in the chapters to follow.

Figure 1.1 lists these six aspects of the shaping of texts. These constitute a *heuristic* for exploring, in a systematic way, what is potentially interesting and important about a text or a set of texts. A heuristic is a set of discovery procedures for systematic application or a set of topics for systematic

- Discourse is shaped by the world, and discourse shapes the world.
- Discourse is shaped by language, and discourse shapes language.
- Discourse is shaped by participants, and discourse shapes participants.
- Discourse is shaped by prior discourse, and discourse shapes the possibilities for future discourse.
- Discourse is shaped by its medium, and discourse shapes the possibilities of its medium.
- Discourse is shaped by purpose, and discourse shapes possible purposes.

**Figure 1.1** How discourse is shaped by its context, and how discourse shapes its context

consideration. Unlike the procedures in a set of instructions (be they instructions for putting together a toy or instructions for analyzing a set of numerical data), the procedures of a heuristic do not need to be followed in any particular order, and there is no fixed way of following them. A heuristic is not a mechanical set of steps, and there is no guarantee that using it will result in a single definitive explanation. A heuristic can be compared to a set of exercises that constitute a whole-body physical workout, or to a set of tools for thinking with. A good heuristic draws on multiple theories rather than just one. The heuristic we use here forces us to think, for example, about how discourse is shaped by ideologies that circulate power in society, but it also forces us to think about how discourse is shaped by people's memories of previous discourse, along with other sources of creativity and constraint. We may end up deciding, in a particular project, that the most useful approach will be one that gives us ways of identifying how ideology circulates through discourse, or that the most useful approach will be one that helps us describe "intertextuality," or that the most useful approach will be one that helps uncover the relationships between the text and its medium, the language it is in, or its producers' goals or social relationships. The heuristic is a first step in analysis which may help you see what sorts of theory you need in order to connect the observations about discourse you make as you use the heuristic with general statements about language, human life, or society. It is a way to ground discourse analysis in discourse, rather than starting with a pre-chosen theory and using your texts to test or illustrate the theory.

Texts and interpretations of texts are shaped by the world,  
and they shape the world

Discourse arises out of the world or worlds that are presumed to exist outside of discourse, the worlds of the creators and interpreters of texts. Whether or not discourse is thought to be about something is relevant to

how it is interpreted. Discourse that is thought not to refer to anything may be seen as nonsensical or crazy; it may be the result of a linguistic experiment like Dadaism in poetry; it may be required in ritual. The Western tradition of thought about language has tended to privilege referential discourse and to imagine that discourse (at least ideally) reflects the pre-existing world. But as twentieth-century philosophers (Foucault, 1980), rhetoricians (Burke, [1945]1969), and linguists (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1941) showed us again and again, the converse is also true, or perhaps truer: human worlds are shaped by discourse.

For example, advertisements for “The Splendors of Ancient Egypt” which the MFAH placed in the *Texas Monthly*, a general circulation magazine, involve choices about how to *describe* the ancient Egyptian world which have the effect of *creating* a particular image of this world. The ancient Egyptian world is seen through the lens of Western “orientalism” (Said, 1978), or habitual Western ways of talking about the East which create the Eastern world of our imagination. Figure 1.2 shows the written parts of two of these advertisements. (The advertisements also include pictures of some of the artifacts in the show, and a discourse analysis could also consider their visual design, which highlights the most exotic and anthropomorphic of the artifacts and makes strategic use of layout and typography.)

Egyptians are depicted in these advertisements as “full of mystery,” “superstitious,” “obsessed with living forever,” “preoccupied with death.” Ancient Egyptians needed “spells” and “curses” and “incantations” to

**For a civilization obsessed with living forever, they sure had a peculiar preoccupation with death.**

The ancient Egyptians felt so strongly about going to heaven, they spent their entire life on earth getting ready for life after death. Now, in the new exhibit, “Splendors of Ancient Egypt,” you can see for the first time the awe-inspiring treasures they packed to take along for the trip. Everything from gilded mummy coffins and gold mummy masks to dazzling jewelry and the 18-foot-long Book of the Dead.

Altogether, over 200 pieces have been assembled for this once in a lifetime exhibit. Why not make plans for a trip of your own?

*(Texas Monthly)*

**If you doubt ancient Egyptian curses exist, be warned. This exhibit is full of them.**

The ancient Egyptians were a superstitious bunch. They had spells for this. Incantations for that. And curses to protect them from harm. So it should come as no surprise to find the new exhibit, “Splendors of Ancient Egypt,” full of mystery as well. You’ll be captivated by the gilded mummy coffins covered with spells, the amulets to ward off evil spirits and the 18-foot-long Book of the Dead. Altogether, over 200 awe-inspiring artifacts have been assembled for this once in a lifetime exhibit. Let it cast its spell over you.

*(Texas Monthly)*

**Figure 1.2** Two magazine advertisements for “Splendors of Ancient Egypt”

“protect them from harm.” Repeated from one ad to the other are the expressions *the ancient Egyptians*, *awe-inspiring*, *gilded mummy coffins*, and *this once in a lifetime exhibit*. The effect of all this is (perhaps exactly as intended) to foreground the “otherness” of the ancient Egyptians, the ways in which they were different from us and both more primitive (their superstitions) and more splendid (their elaborate jewelry and golden sarcophagi). Only a systematically critical reader would be likely to wonder whether some of the advertisements’ copy is not in fact equally descriptive of twenty-first-century Westerners. For example, “For a civilization obsessed with living forever, they sure [have] a peculiar preoccupation with death” could, in another context, be taken as an accurate description of the contemporary United States. In fact, even if not every society is interested in immortality, most human societies have rituals connected with death. In the context of the world that has been created in the advertisements, however, this sounds like a description of an exotic and unusual group of people.

In addition to being shaped by what *is* said, the worlds evoked and created in discourse also are shaped by silence: by what *cannot be* said or *is not* said. One source of silence in the “Splendors” exhibit was the silence of the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. Egyptian writing appeared on a great many of the artifacts in the show. But there were almost no translations in any of the descriptive placards: the Egyptian writing was treated as decoration rather than as language. What the ancient Egyptians said in the many inscriptions was treated as irrelevant. Another interesting silence was evident in many of the informational wall placards, in phrases like these:

*One assumes that . . .*

*It is apparent, therefore, that . . .*

*His corpulence is to be regarded as . . .*

*Such . . . works of art are termed “models” . . .*

These phrases are not all grammatically the same, but all have in common a missing agent (the doer of the action) or experiencer. Who assumes? To whom is it apparent? Who decides how things are to be regarded? Who makes up or chooses terms for things? The use of expressions like these may have the effect of drawing attention to the fact that there are experts deciding how to explain things to the exhibit’s viewers, and that these experts do not need to be identified, presumably because any expert would have come to the same conclusions. The stance taken here is that of someone who is entitled to describe and evaluate things and whose judgments are the correct ones, an art-historical Big Brother, we might say. More generally, making structural choices in which agents or experiencers are left out is one of the many ways people can create a sort of generic opinion (the opinion that “one” holds or that “is apparent”) and thereby discourage others from challenging their claims. This sort of discourse tends to obviate the need for individual responsibility for meaning.

Discourse is shaped by the possibilities and limitations of language, and discourse shapes language

Texts and their interpretations are shaped by the structural resources that are available and the structural choices text-builders make. There are conventionalized ways of structuring texts on all levels. Speaking a language, such as English or Korean, means using conventional ways of structuring syllables (a new English word could start with the syllable *pri* but not with *ngi*), conventional ways of structuring words (the *-s* that shows that an English word is plural goes after the stem, not before), conventional ways of structuring sentences (in declarative English sentences, the subject typically precedes the predicate). Likewise, there are conventional ways of structuring longer chunks of discourse, some culturally specific and others resulting from what human cognition is like. They include ways of moving from familiar information to new information, for example, or moving from examples to general claim or from general claim to examples, or moving from question to response.

Striking uses of conventions of structuring can be found throughout the “Splendors of Ancient Egypt” material. For one example, a poster that was stapled into an issue of *MFA Today* a month or two before the exhibit made strategic use of the English possibility of presenting a claim as uncontestable by putting it in an embedded clause: “Thank you for *being a member of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.*” The poster makes rhetorical use of logical presupposition: it sounds as if the copywriter assumes that the reader of the poster is a member of the museum, just as the question “When did *John stop drinking?*” presupposes that John was once a drinker (and could thus be part of an indirect attack on John), or “I’m sorry that *you don’t agree with me*” presupposes that we disagree (and could be used to position you in opposition to me). The poster, worded as it is, is a nice thank-you gift for people who have joined the museum, whose membership includes the magazine subscription. But the poster is also meant to be seen by other people, perhaps people who are not members of the museum and for whom the presupposition that they are will induce guilt and encourage them to join up too.

Just as the structure of sentences is always, to some extent, rhetorically motivated, so is the structure of larger blocks of discourse. The wall placards describing the artifacts in the “Splendors” show had an almost invariable form, as exemplified in this one:

### Mummy Mask of Paser

*New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, 1570–1320 B.C.  
Cartonnage, which can be compared to papier maché,  
painted and gilded, findspot not known*

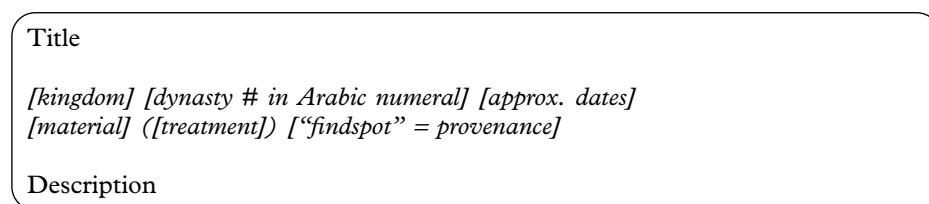
One assumes that the mummy of Paser, which has not survived to this day, was clad in a cartonnage ensemble, to which this mask belonged. The features

are idealizing and are not to be regarded as a likeness, or portrait, of Paser. The mummy, once enveloped in that ensemble, was doubtless placed into Paser's anthropoid sarcophagus which is on display in this gallery as well. The gilding has a distinctly reddish hue and recalls contemporary ancient Egyptian texts from the New Kingdom which mention "the gold which bled." It is apparent, therefore, that the ancient Egyptians recognized this property of their gold and appreciated it.

(Informational wall placard)

The structure of this placard is like that of all the other placards in the show, as well as the structure of wall placards in other museum shows. One way to represent this structure is shown in figure 1.3.

This sort of artifact label probably seems natural to those of us who have seen it many times before – right down to some rather German-sounding elements in the prose. (*Findspot* sounds like a German word, for example, because it is formed out of two Germanic roots using the Germanic strategy of compounding nouns to form new words.) But note how the structure foregrounds some elements of the description and backgrounds others. The first thing, in large type, is a label, not in Egyptian but in English, and not in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing but in Roman letters. This label removes the object from its original context and puts it into a Western frame of reference. (It could be said that the label mimes the action of the archaeologist, the collector, or the grave-robber in this respect.) In the Western cultural context, naming something can be seen as a way of establishing dominion over it, as is represented in the Old Testament story in which God grants human beings control over other species by giving Adam the ability to name things. More generally, naming is like the glossing (interpreting words) and parsing (interpreting grammatical structures) that translators do. It requires fitting things from some other realm into the system of terms and ideas that goes with one's own language. And, like naming, "glossing is clearly a political process. How often do two languages meet as equals, with equal and reciprocal authority?" (Becker, 1995: 232). Note also the order in which facts about the artifact are presented on the wall placard, and what these facts are. History (kingdom, dynasty number, approximate dates) precedes craftsmanship (material, treatment). Place comes



**Figure 1.3** Structure of a "Splendors" artifact label

last: the Egyptian artifacts were taken out of their spatial context in their descriptions just as they are in Hildesheim (where they are usually on display) or Houston.

Discourse is shaped by interpersonal relations among participants, and discourse helps to shape interpersonal relations

The interpersonal relations connected with discourse include the relations among the speakers and writers, audiences, and overhearers who are represented in texts, as well as the relations among speakers and writers, audiences, and overhearers who are involved in producing and interpreting texts. For example, the explanatory material about Houston's "Splendors of Ancient Egypt" gives evidence of several sometimes conflicting visions of the relationships between museum staff and museum patrons. Sometimes the intended audience is clearly youthful, as in the *MFA Today* magazine's "Kaleidoscope for Kids" section, where Egyptian shabtis were depicted and explained in an article that appeared while the "Splendors" exhibit was on display:

### SHABTIS

These small blue figures are called shabtis (pronounced shabtees). They are made of faience, a type of glazed pottery. Shabtis were believed to help people who died. They were placed in tombs to be servants in the afterlife, working for the dead. Hundreds of shabtis have been found in kings' tombs. These shabtis are holding hoes used by farmers for digging. They are standing like wrapped mummies, ready to work in the afterlife.

(*MFA Magazine*, "Kaleidoscope for Kids")

This is not children's language, but language by adults addressed to children. It represents, in other words, an adult's idea of how a child's mind might work. There is something jumpy about the paragraph; a reader has to work a bit to decide how each sentence is related to the previous one. This is in part because there are no explicit links between sentences. There are no conjunctions like *thus* or *so*, which might have clarified the causal relationship between "Shabtis were believed to help people who died" and "They were placed in tombs . . ." Adding a conjunction might also have helped with the unclear reference of the pronoun *they* in "They were placed in tombs . . ." Are *they* the "people who died" or the shabtis? It is not immediately clear. Using *and* might have helped smooth the flow and connect the events that are being represented in "These shabtis are holding hoes used by farmers for digging. They are standing . . ." The primary sentence-linking (or "cohesive") device is instead the repeated sentence subject: *these small blue figures, they, shabtis, they, hundreds of shabtis, these shabtis, they.*

Using repetition rather than conjunction to create cohesion is a feature of the speech of children themselves (Bennett-Kastor, 1994) and a feature of adults' "baby talk" to small children (Snow and Ferguson, 1977). We might wonder, however, about its usefulness in a text addressed to readers who are old enough to interpret conventional phonetic spelling such as "shabtees" (which may not actually reveal any more about how the word is to be pronounced than "shabtis" does) and who are able to understand (and need to know) what faience is. How old is this audience of imagined children? We could say that the text is designed for its readers, and that was no doubt the writer's explicit aim, but we could also say that it designs its readers, putting them in their place by talking to them the way older people talk to babies.

Discourse is shaped by expectations created by familiar discourse, and new instances of discourse help to shape our expectations about what future discourse will be like and how it should be interpreted

"Intertextual" relations between texts and other texts enable people to interpret new instances of discourse with reference to familiar activities and familiar categories of style and form. The uses of discourse are as varied as human cultures are. (For example, one important ceremonial genre for the Kuna of Panama is talk by a healer to small stick dolls, which none of the human participants except the healer understands or is even meant to understand (Sherzer, 1983), and one way of speaking in Tzeltal (a language of indigenous Mexicans) is called *lučul k'op*, which means "talk carried out while sitting on a tree branch" (Stross, 1974).) But often-repeated activities involving discourse give rise to relatively fixed ways of proceeding with the activities, and these ways of proceeding often include relatively fixed, routinized ways of talking and types of texts. For example, when the ads for the "Splendors" exhibit mention "The Book of the Dead," they call to mind expectations about books – what they look like, what they are about, what they are for, how they are produced and distributed and so on – that readers have formed in their own, Western contexts. Mentioning Egyptian "spells" calls to mind expectations about magical incantations, such as the expectation that spells contain Arabic-sounding "magic words" such as "shazzam" or "abracadabra." (This expectation could not, in fact, correspond to what Egyptian spells were like, since the ancient Egyptians were not Arabs and did not speak Arabic.) In these cases, the expectations created by intertextuality may predispose museumgoers to form misleading images of Egyptian "books" and "spells." But intertextuality is crucial for communicative successes, too. The fact that the show's wall placards are in a familiar format makes them relatively easy to read, for example. Museumgoers do not have to spend time and energy figuring out what kind



of texts the placards are, what to expect them to contain, or how they are meant to be used.

Discourse is shaped by the limitations and possibilities of its media, and the possibilities of communications media are shaped by their uses in discourse

Strategic mixing of media is evident everywhere in the material about “The Splendors of Ancient Egypt.” The magazine ads, for example, have a more spoken-like quality than do the magazine articles. For example, punctuation is used to represent the rhythm of speech, as in “They had spells for this. Incantations for that. And curses to protect them from harm.” In all the materials, visual imagery is extremely prevalent and often repeated. It is not the history of Egypt that is on display and for sale, nor a set of lessons about culture or religion or mortuary practices, but a feast for the eyes. (The MFAH is, after all, an art museum; curators designing a display for a history museum might have done things differently.) This is especially clear in popular Egyptology’s enthusiastic adoption of the Egyptian practice of using Egyptian writing as decoration. For the people who designed these texts and the audience they envision, the birds, cups, sphynx-like figures, human arms and legs, and abstract shapes that make up the hieroglyphic writing system are like figures in wallpaper borders. They are to be admired because they are unusual or delicate or colorful, not because they are meaningful. At the “Splendors of Ancient Egypt” gift shop, hieroglyph-themed gift wrapping paper and gold jewelry were for sale. For those who could not afford the popular “cartouche” jewelry, on which the buyer’s name was supposedly spelled out in hieroglyphic characters, a “cartouche computer” would produce a paper one for a dollar, on a background of hieroglyphic decoration. (On these cartouches, names were spelled phonetically, as if the hieroglyphic writing system were an alphabet, with each character corresponding to a single language sound. In fact, the Egyptian hieroglyphic system did not work this way. This use of it suggests the Eurocentric attitude that the default writing system is an alphabet.) Decorative hieroglyphs were used in other ways, too. For example, the designers of a flyer circulated to museum members advertising the 1997 Houston BMW Group Fine Arts 5K footrace (an event with no connection whatsoever to ancient Egypt, except that runners’ entry fees benefited the museum) used hieroglyphs as a decorative background for the heading and to fill in some unused space on the entry form. In all these uses of Egyptian writing, expectations associated with pictorial media (including expectations about visual harmony, beauty, and so on) were meant to override expectations associated with writing, such as the expectation that the symbols would be meaningful and that a reader would need to consider their meanings as a set rather than one by one.

Discourse is shaped by purpose, and discourse shapes possible purposes

The purposes of the “Splendors” show, and the purposes of the material about it, were several. As a result, many voices could be heard in the texts, voices that sometimes appeared to be in competition. For one thing, the exhibit was meant to be educational. In the American context in which the exhibit took place, certain language-use choices are associated with educators, including imperatives (more-powerful people can order less-powerful people around in direct ways), expressions of confidence in the evidence one has for one’s claims (educators are often sure they know what they know, or are at least expected to act as if they were), various sorts of simplification, and various ways of speaking for other people that presuppose acknowledged expertise. This set of habits of speech reflects a set of habits of thought, both in educators and in others: educators are thought of as experts (whether or not they always are). As a result, Americans often accept their simplifying material and allow them to be spokespeople for truth.

This discourse of education was evident throughout the “Splendors” exhibit, as the curators spoke on the wall placards and artifact labels. The curators-as-educators told viewers how to think: “These objects, which *we admire* today for their intrinsic beauty . . .” and described what ordinary people like the viewers might have trouble thinking about: “*It is difficult for a contemporary audience to imagine* that . . .” They simplified, often by providing modern analogs. For example, mummified ibises (a kind of bird) were described as “‘please’ or ‘thank-you’ offerings,” the clothing on the statue of a man was compared to a beach towel wrapped around his waist, administrative scribes in a granary were described as “ancient CPAs” (Certified Public Accountants), and an Egyptian offering tablet was said to resemble “. . . several halves of bread which have been sliced horizontally down the middle the way a modern prepare[s] bread for a hero sandwich . . .”

The curators used imperatives to tell museumgoers what to look at: “*Notice* how the laborers carry the grain in sacks and *pay particular attention* to the three figures . . .” The evidential certainty of educator discourse was created and represented on placards like that describing the Sarcophagus of Kaiemneferet: “the recessed panels recall the niches . . . *doubtless because* . . .” and the uncertainty or error of non-educators was contrasted with it in this description of a group of shabtis: “*Contrary to popular opinion*, shabtis were not placed in tombs in order to wait hand and foot on the deceased in the Hereafter.” (This of course contradicts what the children were told in the magazine article about shabtis which was discussed above.)

But the curators who spoke on the “Splendors” placards also sometimes spoke as archivists. While some artifacts were described with reference to

beach towels and hero sandwiches, other descriptions – and sometimes the same descriptions – included words like *anthropoid*, *polychromatic*, and *physiognomy*. The placard for one jug pointed out “the thick plasticity of its relief decoration.” This is a different voice, one which did not always mesh smoothly with the educator voice. The exhibit information was also characterized by several other clashes of competing purposes which engendered competing discourses. The “Splendors” artifacts were, as mentioned, on loan from a museum in Hildesheim, and curators from Hildesheim helped mount the show. Throughout the exhibit, linguistic choices that sounded German (such as “findspot” in the “Mummy Mask of Paser” example above) competed with ones that sounded English, and sometimes a conflict between German and English ways of talking became evident, as on one somewhat whiny placard describing works of art that “are termed ‘models’ for lack of a better English word.” Additionally, there was a clash between the discourse of high culture and that of commerce, as the MFAH tried to use this show as a way to make money, setting up a special shop directly outside the exit from the “Splendors” galleries that offered hieroglyph-themed coffee mugs and tote bags, tourist souvenirs from Egypt, made-to-order gold necklaces, and so on.

## Discussion

- 1.3 As was pointed out, some of the curators of the “Splendors” exhibit were German. Is there further evidence of this in the “Mummy mask” placard? What would the English equivalents of the German-sounding phrases be? How do the German wordings create different audiences, different authors, different relationships among them?
- 1.4 Does the shabtis paragraph above remind you of other things addressed to children? Does it sound like a textbook? In what ways? On which other models do you think the authors of the “Kaleidoscope for Kids” page might have drawn?
- 1.5 Find a magazine advertisement that violates your expectations about what you will see in a magazine advertisement, and use that as the basis for discussing what magazine advertisements are usually like. Does the language of the “Splendors” advertisements reproduced above violate or play with your generic expectations for magazine advertisements in any way? If so, how? How have magazine advertisements changed since 1996, when these were published? How do they differ from country to country, from language to language?
- 1.6 In what ways, and why, would you expect a website about the “Splendors” exhibit to differ from the print-based modes of presentation we have been examining?

- 1.7 Look again at these examples from the “Splendors” exhibit of sentences with missing agents or experiencers.

*One assumes* that . . .

*It is apparent*, therefore, that . . .

His corpulence *is to be regarded* as . . .

Such . . . works of art *are termed* “models” . . .

In what other types of discourse do you find sentences like these? Why?

## Data for Discourse Analysis

The material with which discourse analysts work consists of actual instances of discourse, which are sometimes referred to as “texts.” With the exception of some scholarship in pragmatics, there is very little work in discourse analysis that relies entirely on non-empirical speculation about what discourse is like. Some “instances of discourse” seem easy to identify and collect. It would appear to make intuitive sense, for example, to treat a letter or an essay as a single, self-contained unit. These are the kinds of units that are traditionally referred to as “texts.” Perhaps the prototypical text, in traditional literary and philological scholarship, is a book. A book is a physical object which stays the same (except for wear and tear) over time. Its beginning and ending are unmistakable: the front cover and the back cover. It is written.

But many discourse analysts work with instances of discourse that do not have all – or any – of these characteristics. For one thing, many written texts, such as webpages, blogs, and wikis, are more fluid than printed discourse once was, co-created by many people, changing from minute to minute, and appearing different on different computer screens. Furthermore, a great deal of discourse analysis is about non-written discourse. Since we cannot analyze discourse in these modes in real time, as it is taking place – analysis requires much more time and distance than a single viewing or listening provides – we study *records* of discourse. For online discourse, these records may be in the form of printouts or screenshots. For oral discourse, they are often in the form of transcripts of audio- or videorecordings. By capturing changing written texts at a particular time or recording and transcribing non-written discourse, we give them some of the characteristics of books and other more prototypical texts: we make them into physical objects; we fix their structure; we convert them into writing, in the case of oral discourse; we give them boundaries. Texts of these kinds do not exist independently of discourse analysts’ choices about how to “entextualize”: how to select and delimit chunks out of the flow of talk or writing, make these chunks into texts, and treat them analytically in much the way we have traditionally treated written texts.

Every choice about what to count as a text for analysis is a choice not only about what to include but also about what to exclude. Such choices about what and how much to treat as a complete unit and where to draw its boundaries have important ramifications for the conclusions we draw. A text, in other words, might be one discussion or a whole series of television debates, a single email or an extended correspondence, one conversation or all the talk that constitutes a relationship. A dinner-table conversation might be defined as starting once everyone is seated at the table (and this might be a convenient way to define it, since it is much easier to record people when they are seated around a table than when they are on the move), but defining it this way would exclude the talk that occurred before that, which could be a vital part of the context. For that matter, even written texts of the most prototypical sort are the result of decisions about entextualization based on culture-specific expectations. A book is a complete text only if it is treated as relatively independent of other texts, independent of the rest of the author's oeuvre, for example, or independent of the ideas about what is natural and right that were circulating at the time the book was written. In order to be treated as a text, a wiki or a blog must be sampled at one or more discrete times – but one of the features of these forms of discourse that makes them different from other forms of writing is precisely that they change much faster and more continuously, so treating them as if they were analogous to writing on paper may obscure one of the things that is most interesting about how online discourse works.

Any analytical move that involves drawing boundaries, pulling out chunks from the flow of experience and treating them as wholes, is somewhat artificial. Nonetheless, such moves are the essential first step of any discourse analysis or any other approach to humanistic or social scientific research. The roots of discourse analysis are in the analysis of traditional texts – in classical philology, literary criticism, and hermeneutics – and the controlling metaphor behind this approach to research, explicit or not, has often been that analyzing human life is a matter of open-ended interpretation rather than fact-finding, more like reading than like identifying data points that bear on pre-formed hypotheses (Geertz, 1973). So it is especially important for us to be aware of the ways in which we may be tempted to treat all discourse as if it were like the writing in a book. It is crucial to be able to uncover the many ways in which texts are shaped by contexts and the many ways in which texts shape contexts. It is partly for this reason that this book is organized around the heuristic introduced above. A heuristic such as this is a good way to ensure that discourse analysis is systematic in its attempt to take multiple perspectives on texts, and thinking about analysis this way keeps reminding us that there are always many right answers to any question we ask about humans and language.

How many texts are enough? Discourse analysis typically starts with a relatively small amount of data. Many discourse analysts use this data to make qualitative claims. In other words, the claims they make on the basis of their

analyses are not about how often something occurs in a language, in a genre, or in interaction in general, but about why or how it occurs in the data at hand, and any suggestions they make about the likelihood that the same thing will occur in other data are simply suggestions. The next step in such a project might be to ask the same questions of another body of data, to explore whether things work the same way there. Alternatively, the next step might be to focus in on a particular aspect of the findings of the qualitative analysis, one that can be defined in such a way as to be identified mechanically, and use a larger amount of data to make quantitative claims about it.

For example, research about language and aging by Coupland, Coupland, and Giles (1991) used detailed, multifaceted, qualitative analyses of conversations between older and younger adults to show that aging is not just a matter of getting older, wiser, or feebler, but is instead in part created in discourse, as people use some terms and not others to describe themselves and their interlocutors, talk about their lives and their abilities in some ways and not others, and so on. Starting from the observation made in such qualitative research that, in some conversations, words like *old* and *elderly* do not just refer to people's chronological age, but carry negative connotations as well, Gerlinde Mautner (2007) explored whether the term "elderly" has such connotations in English discourse more generally, and, if so, what the term suggests. To do this, Mautner used an electronic collection of 57 million words of written text in English, including British, American, and Australian newspapers, books, flyers, catalogues, unscripted speech, and radio broadcasts. Each word in this corpus has been labeled with its part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, and so on), so, using concordance software, Mautner was able to search for cases where *elderly* was part of a string of adjectives, or where it occurred together with the noun *people* and a verb. Whereas qualitative research like that of Coupland et al. justifies the qualitative claim that the meanings of words like *elderly* can be loaded, because people use such words to construct social identities in interaction, quantitative research like Mautner's justifies a different kind of claim, one about what *elderly* means in English. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed approaches all have their place in discourse analysis. Researchers who choose to work with the large corpora of discourse that are increasingly available and easy to use need to make sure that their work is grounded in thorough qualitative analysis, though, so that choices about what to code and count, and how to do so, are well motivated, and people who do qualitative work need to be careful not to make unjustified generalizations about their findings.

## Transcription: Representing Speech in Writing

Many examples throughout this book are taken from other scholars' work. In these examples, I have kept the original authors' transcription conventions,

so that the examples appear exactly (or as nearly as possible) as they appeared in the articles and books from which they are taken. (In cases in which the meanings of special symbols and unconventional uses of punctuation, layout, capitalization, and so on are not obvious, I have explained them.)

Readers will thus quickly notice that there are almost as many ways to transcribe speech as there are researchers who do so. Although somewhat standardized transcription systems are used in some endeavors that involve discourse analysis (such as Conversation Analysis), there is no single generally accepted way to represent speech on the page. This sometimes surprises newcomers to discourse analysis, until they realize that any way of representing speech in writing is necessarily selective, and that different selections highlight (and disguise) different aspects of what speech is like. A transcript is by necessity a partial representation of talk, and transcribers' decisions about what to include and what to omit have practical and theoretical consequences (Ochs, 1979a; Bucholtz, 2000). For example, a transcription system that highlights interruption and simultaneous talk makes it relatively easy to think of conversation as collaborative, whereas a play-script transcription makes it look more as if each speaker had an independent conversational agenda. Practically speaking, highly detailed transcripts are often hard to read, whereas easy-to-read transcripts include less specific information. No transcription system could possibly be ideal for all purposes.

This is not to say that all systems are equally good: if the idea, for example, is (as it usually is) to include all the words that were spoken, a transcription in which a spell-checker has deleted repeated words will be inadequate. A transcription needs to be accurate in the sense that it includes what it claims to include. But it cannot include everything, and the most useful transcriptions in discourse analysis research are those which highlight what the researcher is interested in and do not include too much distracting extraneous detail. Very detailed transcripts may in fact include more information than people are able to process, and this may lead to high rates of error when such transcripts are reproduced (O'Connell and Kowal, 2000). Readers should compare and contrast the systems used in the examples as they go through the book, as a basis for deciding what sort of system they need for their own work.

Transcriptions of speech are representations of speakers as well as being representations of speech. The most literal way to represent a speaker's speech may not be the most desirable way to represent the speaker. For example, casual English, as spoken by almost anyone, is characterized by the pronunciation of "ing" as "in" ([ɪn] in the International Phonetic Alphabet) or "uhn" ([əɪ]), and English speakers almost invariably "drop" certain consonants in consonant clusters. When the letter "s" appears at the end of an English word, it often represents the sound [z]. When they are not stressed, English vowels often sound like "uh" ([ə]). So an accurate way to represent the sound of "I was cleaning out my desk," as casually spoken, might be something like this: "I wuhz cleanin' out muh des."

Notice, though, how the choice to represent sound accurately may have the effect of representing the speaker as stupid, uneducated, rural, or lower class. In general, realistic detail in the representation of speech in a transcription often comes at the expense of accuracy and fairness in how the speaker is represented, so some discourse analysts think it wise not to include any more detail about the sound of speech than is necessary to illustrate one's point. Others think fine detail is crucial because it encourages analysts not to take anything for granted about what particular utterances actually sounded like.

## Discussion

1.8 Here are several written representations of oral discourse. For each, discuss what is added and what is lost in transforming talk into writing and deciding where to begin and end.

- a. Transcript of a joke in a conversation. In this transcript, italics signal louder parts of the talk and capital letters even louder parts. Ellipses represent slight hesitations, their length relative to the number of dots.

VIV: 'Member that time there was a mouse on our phone? on the . . .  
kitchen wall?

RON: Um-hmm

VIV: I went downstairs boy, and turned on the light, and there's this mouse sitting there, and he *jumps*, hits the table, and slides off, and of course I [sharp intake of breath] "*My GOD LOOK at that mouse!*" I said, "Ron there was a *mouse* sitting on *top* of the *telephone* this morning when I came downstairs." Ron said, "Well we'll have to check the bill, see if *he* made any *long distance calls!*" [imitating male voice]

- b. Transcript (made according to somewhat different transcription conventions) of a telephone conversation between an emergency dispatcher (CT) and a caller (C). In the transcription system used in this example, equals signs indicate "latched" utterances, or utterances spoken one after the other without a pause; colons signal stretched-out sounds, as in "gu:ys"; a single period in parentheses signals a slight pause; words inside parentheses are guesses made on the basis of hard-to-decipher parts of the recording.

1 CT: Mid-city emergency

2 C: Yes sir uh go' uh couple gu:ys over here ma:n

3 they thin' they bunch uh wi:se ((background

4 noise))=

5 CT: =Are they in your house? or is this uh business?



- 6 C: They're over here ah Quick Stop (.) They (fuckin) come over here  
 7 an pulled up at thuh Quick Stop slammin' their doors intuh my  
 8 truck.  
 9 CT: Quick Stop?=  
 10 C: =Yeah.  
 11 CT: Okay Uh- were you uh customer at that store?  
 12 C: Yeah.  
 13 CT: What thee address there or thee uhm: . . .  
 (Zimmerman, 1998: 100–1)

c. From a play script.

SCENE: An Island off the West of Ireland.

*(Cottage kitchen, with nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc. Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake, and puts it down in the pot-oven by the fire; then wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel. Nora, a young girl, puts her head in at the door.)*

NORA: *(in a low voice)*. Where is she?

CATHLEEN: She's lying down, God help her, and may be sleeping, if she's able.

*(Nora comes in softly, and takes a bundle from under her shawl.)*

CATHLEEN: *(spinning the wheel rapidly)*. What is it you have?

NORA: The young priest is after bringing them. It's a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal.  
*(Cathleen stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen.)*

NORA: We're to find out if it's Michael's they are, some time herself will be down looking by the sea.

CATHLEEN: How would they be Michael's, Nora. How would he go the length of that way to the far north?

NORA: The young priest says he's known the like of it. "If it's Michael's they are," says he, "you can tell herself he's got a clean burial by the grace of God, and if they're not his, let no one say a word about them, for she'll be getting her death," says he, "with crying and lamenting."

*(Synge, 1935: 83, Riders to the Sea, scene 1)*

d. From a newspaper report. Note that speech is not only "reported" here but described indirectly, via "metalinguistic" verbs (that is, verbs that refer to linguistic actions) such as *say*, *insist*, *react*, *accuse*, *complain*, and *ask*.

**Aboriginals must integrate, says Lib MP**

THE "dysfunctional" Aboriginal community of Palm Island should be abandoned and its residents moved to the mainland unless they integrate into mainstream society, a federal Liberal MP has insisted.

Backbencher Peter Lindsay, whose north Queensland seat of Herbert includes the troubled island community, said that if Aboriginal people on Palm Island could not buy homes and generate jobs then “it would be better to move them back on to the mainland and integrate them that way”.

Mr Lindsay said the same rule should be applied to remote Cape York communities such as Mornington Island, Lockhart River and Aurukun.

Local Aboriginal leaders reacted furiously, accusing Mr Lindsay and the federal Government of neglecting the island.

“He hasn’t got a clue what he’s talking about,” Palm Island Deputy Mayor Zac Sam said. “The Government is always complaining to us about not doing anything. We have been asking about funding that is supposed to help us set up enterprise . . . but nothing has happened.”

But Mr Lindsay said the Government was more than generous. “The fundamental issue that troubles me is that Palm Island is a hopeless dysfunctional community with almost no employment and no prospects of employment,” the MP said.

(Ian Gerard, *The Australian*, January 6, 2006)

1.9 Use the heuristic with which we will be working (figure 1.1) to analyze the poem “Pumpnickel,” which is reprinted below. You will need to ask yourself each of these questions:

- How is the text shaped by the world and how does it shape the world? (Would this poem make the same kind of sense to someone in Japan or Kenya as it does to someone in the US or England? What features of the world are most explicitly represented in the poem? Which are represented indirectly or not at all?)
- How is the text shaped by language – by the fact that it is in English, with English possibilities for sounds and juxtapositions of sounds, English grammar and conventions for structuring texts like this – and how does it shape future possibilities for saying things in English? Does the poet draw on the traditions of other languages as well?
- How is the text shaped by participants (writer, readers, editors, and any others you can think of) and how does it shape, position, define its participants? Is anyone excluded from participation?
- How is the text shaped by prior discourse like it and unlike it, and how does it shape future possibilities for such texts? (You might, for example, want to remind yourself what a sonnet is; you might want to think about other literary representations of Jewish life, prior representations of women’s work, and so on.)
- How is the text shaped by its medium (writing in a book), and how does it shape the possibilities of the medium? (What would be gained and lost by reading the poem aloud? What would be gained and lost by illustrating it with a film or a still picture, or presenting it on a computer screen in moving letters? How does knowing that this poem appeared in a selective anthology affect your understanding of it? Would you interpret the poem differently if you came across it on a student’s website?)
- How is the text shaped by purpose and how does it shape possible purposes? (Why do people write things like this: to persuade, to inform, to

request action, to make people laugh? How is your interpretation of the poem influenced by your guesses about what Schultz had in mind as he wrote it? What might Schultz have intended your intention to be in reading the poem: to learn something, to be moved, to complete this exercise?)

*Pumpernickel*

Monday mornings Grandma rose an hour early to make rye,  
onion & challah, but it was pumpernickel she broke her hands for,  
pumpernickel that demanded cornmeal, ripe caraway, mashed potatoes  
& several Old Testament stories about patience & fortitude & for  
which she cursed in five languages if it didn't pop out fat  
as an apple-cheeked peasant bride. But bread, after all,  
is only bread & who has time to fuss all day & end up  
with a dead heart if it flops? Why bother? I'll tell you why.  
For the moment when the steam curls off the black crust like a strip  
of pure sunlight & the hard oily flesh breaks open like a poem  
pulling out of its own stubborn complexity a single glistening truth  
& who can help but wonder at the mystery of the human heart when you  
hold a slice up to the light in all its absurd splendor & I tell you  
we must risk everything for the raw recipe of our passion.

(Schultz, 1991)

## “Descriptive” and “Critical” Goals

No matter what the overarching research question, all discourse analysis results in description: describing texts and how they work is always a goal along the way. In some discourse analysts' work, descriptions of texts are used in answering questions that arise in the service of what is traditionally known as “descriptive” research, particularly in linguistics. Work of this kind is based in the idea that the primary goal of scholarly research is to describe the world, or whatever bit of the world the researcher is interested in. (In linguistics, the prototypical descriptive project is the description of a language, resulting in the production of a grammar and a dictionary.) To aim to do purely descriptive work presupposes two beliefs: (1) that it is possible to describe the world – in other words, that there is not an infinite number of possible descriptions, any one of which would be valid in some situation, and (2) that the proper role of a scholar is to describe the status quo first, and only later, if at all, to apply scholarly findings in the solution of practical problems.

Some of the foundational work in discourse analysis took place in the context of descriptive linguistics. This includes, for example, work by Pike (1967), Grimes (1975), and other American linguists who attempted to describe the rules that determine the structure of texts in a variety of languages, as well as scholarship in the context of systemic-functional linguistics such as that of Halliday and Hasan (1976) on what makes English texts

cohesive. Work such as this about discourse structure is discussed in detail in chapter 3. At the risk of some oversimplification, we can say that work in this tradition did not call into question either of the two beliefs underlying descriptive research. Important early work by anthropologists (Hymes, 1972; Gumperz, 1982a) and sociologists (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) bearing on the nature of social interaction and the kinds of context that influence text did not overtly problematize the two beliefs, either. We also discuss these scholars' work later on. A great deal of work involving discourse analysis continues to be based on the belief that pure description is possible and desirable. This is not to say that many descriptive linguists do not also have important practical goals for how they want to apply their findings in the world. For example, the descriptive work of Pike and Grimes was aimed, ultimately, at translating the Bible into previously unwritten languages, and much of Gumperz' research has taken place in the context of problem-solving work about intercultural communication.

Both of the beliefs that underlie pure descriptivism have, however, been called into question more and more urgently during the past several decades, under the influence of philosophical relativism and critical social theories such as Marxism. Relativism is the idea that different people live in different worlds, whether because they have different minds, different shared systems of beliefs and norms (this is "cultural relativism") or different languages ("linguistic relativism"). The three versions, all of which have been current in social and linguistic thought, have somewhat different implications for what it is thought possible to describe. A linguistic relativist such as B. L. Whorf (1941), could, for example, claim to describe the worldview of the Hopi as a group, whereas a philosopher for whom relativity was based in different minds would not be able to describe any more than one individual's world. Any version of relativism, however, leads to skepticism about the possibility of "scientific truth" and encourages researchers to take a critical, self-conscious (or "reflexive") stance vis-à-vis their own work and the claims they make. Critical social theory describes the human world not as a system in, or tending to, equilibrium, but as a system characterized by dominance, exploitation, struggle, oppression, and power. People whose grounding is in theory of this sort attempt to show what is wrong with the status quo. They tend to be interested in the dominated groups rather than in those who dominate them; their research about struggles over power is (at least in principle) meant to help empower the relatively powerless.

Discourse analysis has increasingly (though by no means exclusively) come to be used in the service of critical goals. This is to say that many researchers throughout the humanities and social sciences have come to be (1) critical of the possibility of producing a single, coherent, scientifically valid description, and (2) critical of the social status quo and concerned to have their work used in changing things for the better. Two groups of researchers who are particularly identified with this way of thinking (in part because they have been successful in appropriating and arguing for the use

of the term “critical”) have called their ways of working “Critical Linguistics,” or CL (Fowler et al., 1979; Hodge and Kress, 1993) and “Critical Discourse Analysis,” or CDA (Fairclough, 1985, 1992; van Dijk 1993a; Wodak 1996). We discuss their work in detail in chapter 2. It should be stressed, however, that there is far more research using discourse analysis that is critical in this sense than just the work explicitly associated with these two schools. Critical approaches to texts have a long tradition in American anthropology and linguistics (Adams, 1999), and these approaches have had considerable influence. More generally, discourse analysis is, at root, a highly systematic, thorough approach to critical reading (and listening), and critical reading almost inevitably leads to questioning the status quo and often leads to questions about power and inequality. In other words, sensitive discourse analysts should always be casting critical eyes on their own process of analysis and on the situation they study, whether or not methodological or social critique is the end goal.

## Discussion

- 1.10 The words “critical” and “criticism” are used in several ways. “Criticism” can be evaluative. It can mean negative commentary (as in “She is too critical of her children”), or it can mean evaluative commentary whether negative or positive (like much literature, film, music, or theater criticism). “Criticism” can also be non-evaluative (at least in theory): “critical thinking” is careful, systematic, self-conscious thinking, without any necessary evaluative goals, and the goal of academic literary criticism is not always overtly evaluative, either. Would you say it is just a historical accident that the same set of words should be used to refer to description and evaluation, or is there a necessary connection between description and evaluation? Is it possible to describe without evaluating?
- 1.11 What are your goals as a discourse analyst? How do you imagine being able to use discourse analysis to help answer the questions you are asking? Are your goals descriptive, critical, or both?

## Summary

People in many fields, with very diverse research projects, make use of discourse analysis. Although there is no universally agreed-on definition of discourse analysis, most practitioners use “discourse” to mean any actual talk, writing, or signing. To those who use the term, “discourses,” in the plural, are conventional ways of talking that create and perpetuate systems of ideology, sets of beliefs about how the world works and what is natural.

“Analysis” involves various ways of systematically taking things apart or looking at them from multiple perspectives or in multiple ways. Discourse analysis is thus a methodology that is useful in answering many kinds of questions, both questions that linguists traditionally ask and questions asked by people in other humanistic and social-scientific disciplines. All uses of discourse analysis result in descriptions, but the end goal of discourse analysis is not always simply description of the status quo but social critique and, sometimes, intervention. For example, the exploratory analyses of various texts from a museum exhibit that were used in this chapter as examples of some of the things discourse analysis can uncover resulted both in explanations of how a museum’s talk to the public can be designed and how it can be effective, and in critiques of some aspects of how the museum chose to represent itself and its audiences.

Discourse analysts work with “texts,” pieces of discourse that have or are given boundaries and treated as wholes. Discourse analysts work outward from texts to an understanding of their contexts, trying to uncover the multiple reasons why the texts they study are the way they are and no other way. To insure that systematic attention is paid to all the possible reasons for a text’s having the form and function it does, it is useful to refer to an analytical heuristic: a set of broad questions to ask about the texts with which we work. This helps insure that we do not just find out what we hope or plan to find out, and it results in analyses that are multidimensional and as sensitive as possible to all the many reasons why human languaging sounds, looks, and works in the ways it does. The chapters that follow are organized around one such heuristic.

### Further Reading

This analytical heuristic described here is based on the work of A. L. Becker (1995). General overviews of discourse analysis, in addition to the present one, include Blommaert (2005), Brown and Yule (1983), Gee (2005), Mills (2004), Renkema (2004), Schiffrin (1994), Stubbs (1983), and Titscher et al. (2000). Each delimits the field differently, and only Schiffrin and Titscher et al. treat discourse analysis primarily as a set of methods, as I do here. Van Dijk (1997) is a collection of articles by experts about a wide variety of uses of discourse analysis. A reader edited by Jaworski and Coupland (1999) brings together some of the foundational work in the field, much of which is referred to or discussed in the chapters to follow, although some of the selections are so truncated that readers would do well to locate the originals instead. Van Dijk (1985) is an extensive though somewhat dated handbook of discourse analysis; a more recent handbook is Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton (2001). General handbooks of linguistics include Bright (1992), Asher and Simpson (1994), and Malmkjaer and Anderson (1995). (More recent handbooks dealing with subfields of linguistics and other relevant areas will be mentioned in subsequent chapters.) Fairclough (1985) introduced the distinction between descriptive and critical discourse analysis and summarizes the goals of the latter. Recent overviews

include Fairclough and Wodak (1997) and Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000). An interesting collection of papers about the problems and possibilities associated with entextualization, as practiced both by discourse analysts and by the people they study, is Silverstein and Urban (1996). On transcription, see Ochs (1979a), Edwards and Lampert (1993), and Bucholtz (2000). The metaphor of culture as text and humanistic research as hermeneutic interpretation is associated particularly with Clifford Geertz (1973). On corpus analysis, see Sinclair (1991) and Stubbs (1996). Interdisciplinary journals that specialize in work by discourse analysts include *Text*, *Discourse in Society*, *Discourse & Communication*, *Discourse Processes*, *Discourse Studies*, and *Critical Discourse Studies*; many other journals, associated with various disciplines, also include reports of discourse analytical research.