WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘DISCOURSE ANALYSIS’?

Many papers submitted to our discourse journals are rejected because they do not, or insufficiently, engage in what we call ‘discourse analysis’ (DA), including conversation analysis (CA), a requirement that is the first on which all articles are being evaluated.

We are aware that there are many ways of "doing DA/CA", and that also different scholars may have different opinions about what is or is not (good, adequate or simply acceptable) DA/CA.

But still, there are some criteria most discourse analysts will follow, so that they can tell apart a discourse analysis from other kinds of analysis (like content analysis, or social analysis), or indeed from no analysis at all.

Discourse Structures

The main criterion is the special attention paid to discourse structures or strategies of any kind, especially those beyond the level of words, clauses or sentences, such as structures of sequences of sentences or turns, structures of narrative or argument, or the schematic organization of news reports or scientific articles, among many others. Analysis of these structures should be explicitly formulated in terms of some theory of discourse/conversation structures. This analysis may focus on --for instance-- structures of expression (sounds, image, movement, etc.), on the one hand, and structures of meaning and (inter)action, on the other.

Thus, structures of meaning may involve such diverse ones as overall topics and their organization in text or talk, local patterns of coherence between propositions or the functions of propositions in a sequence, as well as implication or entailment, presupposition, vagueness, allusions, more or less detailed descriptions, the ways acts or actors are being described, reference to sources (‘evidentiality’), the management of knowledge and opinion (appraisal), and so on.

Similar observations hold for the analysis of action and interaction in talk, for instance in terms of turn taking, interruptions, hesitations, pauses, or the overall organization of a conversation (beginnings/endings, conventional categories that appear in a specific type of talk, such as greeting and leave taking at the beginning and end of a conversation, or formulas being used when opening or closing a session or meeting, but also typical categories of telling a story, and so on). Indeed, many other forms of (inter)action may thus be identified in discourse, such as promises and threats, agreements and disagreements, mitigating and exaggerating, self-presentation and other-presentation, and so on.

Such attention to ‘structure’, ‘form’, ‘organization’, ‘order’, or ‘patterns’, is characteristic of virtually all contemporary approaches to discourse or conversation analysis. Some of these approaches are very sophisticated and detailed, and may be very technical -- as is the case of much work on the formal grammar of structures of sentences and sequences of sentences in discourse, or
studies of narrative or conversational organization. Contributions to our discourse journals should of course be aware of the contemporary literature about different types of structural patterns text or talk may exhibit.

**Strategies and moves of discourse as (inter)action**

Note that such a "structural" analysis need not be limited to "fixed" or "abstract" structures, but may also focus on the more dynamic aspects of discourse organization, such as the mental, interactional or social strategies participants engage in. Thus, we may analyze the abstract structures of a story or news report, but also strategies of credibility enhancement, persuasion, impression formation, derogation, legitimation, and so on. And each of such more global strategies that may characterize a discourse as a whole, may again be analyzed in smaller, functional components, that is, in terms of moves, as we also know from a game of chess. For instance, a journalist may locally enhance the credibility of a news report by recurring to the semantic moves of mentioning numbers or statistics or quoting credible sources.

**Discourse Processing**

Especially in a more psychological perspective, an analysis may not only focus on structures or strategies but also on (mental) processes and representations, such as those involved in production and comprehension of discourse, the activation of knowledge or opinions during such processing, the way discourse or its meanings are represented in memory, or how mental models of events are formed or activated during production or comprehension. Such a process analysis may very well be combined with an analysis of structures or strategies. Indeed, processes involve structures or strategies of mental representations.

In other words, typical of discourse analysis is an explicit, systematic account of structures, strategies or processes of text or talk in terms of theoretical notions developed in any branch of the field.

This means that merely summarizing, paraphrasing or repeating (sample fragments of) talk or text is NOT a form of discourse analysis for our discourse journals. Since readers also read the examples there is no need to repeat what discourse participants have written or said. Crucial is that you analyze what they have said or written and especially HOW they have said or written it.

The same is true for merely commenting ABOUT a fragment of discourse without any regard for structural or dynamic properties, even when such comments, for instance about the ‘content’ of a passage, may well be relevant in a social perspective. A fragment of discourse (and its contents) does not speak for itself: it needs explicit analysis, in accordance with the aims and the theoretical framework of your paper.

Many papers submitted, especially by social scientists, merely cite discourse fragments as self-explanatory examples of some social issue studied, without analyzing the structures or strategies of such fragments, and instead limiting observations to mere comments on the content of such examples. This is NOT discourse analysis as we understand it. Nor are general studies of the ‘discourse’ of (say) Modernity, Late Capitalism, Neoliberalism, the peace movement, or racism, as systems, movements, or ideologies, without actually studying and analyzing concrete instances of text or talk defining such more abstract societal structures.

**The majority of papers submitted to our journals are rejected for this reason: They do not go beyond repeating, paraphrasing, summarizing or (merely) commenting upon fragments of text or talk – or because they do not cite any concrete samples of text or talk at all.**
In practice this will usually mean attention for structures that are not trivial or irrelevant in interaction and communication or that are so obvious that any native speaker may observe them. A scholarly article observing only such ‘obvious’ properties of discourse loses much of its point of providing new insights. This is admittedly a very subjective criterion, but all scholarly journals and publishers use it in judging a paper or book. That is, descriptions of structure, strategy or process should also be at least somewhat interesting, new or original.

It is important that you make explicit -- before the section in which your present your discourse analysis -- which properties of the discourse fragments you are going to examine (structures, categories, dimensions, levels, processes, etc.).

**Context**

Text and talk are socially situated in events of communication, social structure, history and culture. Participants represent and make relevant aspects of such ‘environments’ in the contexts that control the appropriate production or interpretation of discourse in the current communicative situation — one of the crucial pragmatic aspects of all discourse. This means that explicit discourse analysis may also require partial analysis of some of the relevant dimension of the context, such the Setting (Time, Place), Participants (and their identities, roles and relations), the ongoing communicative or social Action, activity type or social practice, the Goals of the action, as well as the (mutual) knowledge (Common Ground), and even the attitudes or ideologies of the participants. As is the case for discourse itself, also these contexts may be dynamic, and hence develop and change during communication and interaction (indeed, if only the time of the event and the knowledge of the recipients). Context analysis may thus contribute to more adequate understanding of (the functions of) discourse as a form of communication or social interaction and how language users are able to make their discourse appropriate in the current communicative situation. Context analysis is nearly always necessary to explicitly study properties and strategies of interaction, speech acts, politeness, communicative functions of text or talk, and other pragmatic and social aspects of discourse.

**Further reading and reference**

For examples of such analyses the best recommendation is to carefully read some other papers contributed to the journals. There are also many introductions to discourse/conversation analysis which discuss the kinds of structures and strategies referred to here, such as Teun A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse studies, 2nd* edition (London, Sage, 2011), which features chapters on the major areas of discourse studies, written by prominent international scholars in the field.

For more advanced information about discourse studies, see, e.g., Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen & Heidi Hamilton (Eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

For other introductory books to discourse studies, consult our list of recommended readings: [http://www.discourses.org/introductions.pdf](http://www.discourses.org/introductions.pdf).

Authors who want to contribute a paper but are not familiar with contemporary discourse analysis, are recommended to have their paper read first by a discourse analyst.

For (other) general criteria of our journals, authors are urged to check the general pre-review criteria of the journals: [www.discourses.org/journals/pre-review.pdf](http://www.discourses.org/journals/pre-review.pdf).

See also Criteria for Preferred Papers for each journal on the website of the Editor: [www.discourses.org](http://www.discourses.org)