CONSTRUCTIONISM AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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The term “discourse analysis” (DA) is best understood as an umbrella designation for a rapidly growing field of research covering a wide range of different theoretical approaches and analytic emphases. What discursive approaches in different disciplinary locations share, however, is a strong social constructionist epistemology--the idea of language as much more than a mere mirror of the world and phenomena ‘out-there’, and the conviction that discourse is of central importance in constructing the ideas, social processes, and phenomena that make up our social world. The discourse analysis described in this chapter is particularly influenced by discussions and developments within discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards 1997, Potter & Wetherell 1987, Potter 1996). Key theoretical underpinnings, starting points and traditions of discursive constructionism are discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume (see, for example, Chapter 16 by Leslie Miller and Chapter 18 by Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn). The scope and topic of the current chapter is therefore also more notably aimed at practical implementation and upon numerous empirical examples of ‘doing discourse analysis’.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I briefly discuss some underlying commonalities, analytic themes, and guiding principles of discourse analysis. In the process, I provide a thumb nail sketch of the scope of different analytic emphases and of the data sets available for a discourse researcher. Second, I discuss two empirical examples, one from a research project focusing on constructions of age and ageing in interview data, followed by an example of the analysis of naturally occurring videotaped materials from institutional decision-making in meeting settings. These examples from
my own work hopefully will clarify some of the key questions of conducting discursive research on different types of materials. They also show how constructionist epistemology guides the formulation of research questions and explicate the various decisions and considerations that go into the process of analysis and writing-up. The final section of the chapter takes stock of the practical and evaluative side of analysis: transcription, reliability and validity.

The Field of Discourse Analysis

Specifying discourse analysis as a method in any traditional way is difficult, if not impossible. Instead, the status of discourse analysis is often described as a methodology or as a theoretical perspective rather than a method (e.g. Phillips & Hardy 2002: 3), as a general epistemological perspective on social life containing both methodological and conceptual elements (Wood & Kroger 2000, 3), as an analytic mentality (Schenkein 1978; Gill 1996, 144), or as craft skill or form of scholarship (Billig 1988, Potter 1997). Discourse analysis cuts across academic and disciplinary boundaries and neighbouring methodological traditions in the fields of rhetoric (e.g. Billig 1996), membership categorisation analysis, and conversation analysis (Silverman 1998). To add to the variety, discourse analysis as an academic enterprise and construction is itself astir and emerging. Researchers’ philosophies, research interests, and assumptions as to how discourse analysis should be defined also vary and different analytic interests, schools of thought, and understandings of “discourse” can easily be identified both within and
across disciplines (e.g. Burr 1995, Nikander 1995, Parker 1998, Wetherell 2001b, Wodak 2006)).

The range also bridges critical perspectives. For example, critical discourse analysts adopt an explicitly socio-political or ideological stance toward data and analysis (e.g. Burman & Parker 1993, Fairclough 1995; Fairclough & Wodak 1997). Some emphasise the applied and transformative nature of analysis (e.g. Willig 1999), while others, particularly those closer to the conversation analytic tradition focus more explicitly on the fine-grained microdynamics of interaction and on speakers’ orientations instead of analyst’s concerns.

The different styles and analytic dimensions in discursive research are conveyed by the following figure.
Any particular discourse analytic study can be located within this field that represents different analytic emphases. Critical DA, for instance, aims at explaining the processes of power from the outset: how power is legitimated, reproduced and enacted in the talk and texts of dominant groups or institutions, while more pronouncedly data driven bottom-up approach to discourse only attends to features that participants themselves clearly orient to. Power, in the latter case, is limited to in vivo references to notions of oppression and power in ways that make them analysable and hearable in interaction.

Common Themes
Given the heterogeneity of the field of discursive research, we need to ask what is common to the variety. What themes, in other words, hold the enterprise together? The foremost theme is the habit of attending to discourse and talk in a multitude of interactional contexts and texts as the topic and focusing on the close study of language use. Regardless of the particular form it takes, DA interrogates the nature of social action by dealing with how actions and/or meanings are constructed in and through text and talk. In practice, a discourse researcher looks for pattern and order in how text and talk are organised and for how intersubjective understanding, social life and a variety of institutional practices are accomplished, constructed and reproduced in the process.

How do people for instance make sense of their own identity and how are collectives and groups - various types of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is you wish - discursively formed and maintained through text and talk? Another potential layer for analysis focuses on the construction of psychological categories in interaction. How do we make sense of and use (references to) emotions or memories in interaction and what are the social functions of psychological categories in interaction (Harré 1986)? A discourse researcher may also focus on historical and longer-term features of discursive formation, for instance on how meaning-making concerning a particular institution such as the university or the European Union have developed over time. In general, topics such as hospital culture, attitudes, everyday descriptions and opinions, institutional practices, emotions, and identity are not approached as abstract structures or as separate from the interactions, conversations and textually mediated practices that are an intrinsic part of their make-up. Instead, discursive researchers prefer to approach these phenomena in terms of how they are talked-into-being, and in relation to their social and interactional functions.
Potential data sets in discourse analysis include all forms of talk transcribed into written format from audio or video recordings and a wide variety of written documents. Data in DA range then from naturally occurring dyadic or multi-party conversations in everyday and institutional settings to interviews and focus groups, the analysis of documents, records, diaries and newspaper items, media products like political gatherings, speeches or interviews and, increasingly, to the analysis of visual materials and semiotic structures of place (Scollon & Scollon 2004).

A second common theme is the consideration of everyday language for its occasioned and situated functions. The action orientation of discourse refers to the notion that people do things with words (Austin 1962), they account for, explain, blame, make excuses, construct facts, use cultural categories, and present themselves to others in specific ways taking the interpretive context into account. The discourse researcher is interested in identifying recurrent patterns in language use, not some internal psychological or in-the-world entity that lies ‘behind’ and explains it. Explicating the dynamics and dilemmas of people’s active sense making, the detail of people’s practices of categorisation, accounting and explaining all lie at the heart of this analytic task. Consequently, the focus is on how versions of our social realities are achieved in and through texts and talk.

Consider for instance the following exchange between an attorney (A) and a witness (W) in a rape trial cross-examination.
The business at hand in this courtroom is to establish- on the basis of evidence given - whether characteristics of rape apply to the case at hand. In the extract above, the attorney and the witness produce alternative descriptions of the location where the victim and the defendant met. Their mutually competing versions clearly project different motives, scenarios and interpretations of the actions on the night in question, and the witness’ choice of words works to dispute those of the attorney’s. Formal institutional contexts like courtrooms or meetings are typical sites where people clearly do things and establish facts with words. In such contexts, talk is often rife with discourse that is carefully crafted to fit the context. The same holds true - perhaps less dramatically and obviously – for our everyday discourse where on the surface neutral descriptions, accounts and categorisations are in similar ways about the ‘facts of the matter’, possibly about our moral character or trustworthiness and about orienting to the particular interpretive context and recipient. The process of becoming a skilled discourse analyst thus includes making the familiar strange (Gill 1996: 144) and taking a step back from the taken for granted nature of language. This requires developing a constructionist analytic eye and ear--an appreciation of the detailed artfulness of text, talk and interaction. In other words the task of the discourse analyst is to study “how people do the transparently obvious” (Sacks 1974).
The third common theme in discourse analysis, which takes a special emphasis in discursive psychology, is a focus on rhetorical organization, on the persuasive and morally consequential aspects of language use. DA is sensitive to the notion that discourse is guided towards persuasion and that this typically results in the argumentative organization of talk and texts (see Billig 1996). In practical terms this means that talk and texts can be analysed in terms of how they orient to or take into account culturally available opposing argumentative positions. Such mutually contrastive argumentative positions were evident in our earlier data extract from the rape trial, but similar rhetorical structures – particularization and categorisation (Billig 1985) – also form the basis of our everyday argumentation and discourse. In addition, newspaper reports, parliamentary discussions, election campaigns and debates, which are materials that discourse researchers commonly work with, all represent further potential data sets where the analysis clearly stands to gain from rhetorical analysis. The construction of facts in the news coverage on 9/11 and its aftermath, the political discourse of New Labour, and the political argumentation concerning European Union expansion are thus all examples of potential data for a discourse analyst.

**Doing Discourse Analysis**

A constructionist epistemology leads the discourse analyst towards a specific kind of analytic orientation and interpretative take on data. Discourse and interaction are topics in their own right, and language use is constructive action with specific rhetorical
characteristics. At the same time however, there is no one method in the sense of some
formally specified set of procedures or calculations, and constructionist theory does not
directly guide discourse analysis in particular ways. Instead, discourse researchers often
argue that the best way to learn the analytic craft skills is through practice and example
(e.g. Widdicombe 1993: 97; Potter and Wetherell 1994).

Analysis of Age in Interaction

Accordingly, consider first a study of the construction of age identities in interaction. In
this project, I wanted to look at how people talk about, make sense of and manage their
membership in a particular age category (Nikander 2000, 2002). To do this, I analyzed
interview accounts: the answers, anecdotes and stories by men and women who by their
chronological age had, or were about to turn fifty. My motivation for investigating this
topic was the fact that social scientific studies still largely seemed to treat age as an
unproblematic, independent and uninteresting background variable, as a simple
quantifiable individual denominator. Unlike discursive research on other social
categories such as gender (e.g. Stokoe 1998; Wetherall 2002; Wilkinson and Kitzinger
1995), or race and national background for example (Rapley 1998; Wetherell and Potter
1992) research on age and ageing seemed relatively slow to adopt language-centred,
discursive or interactional approaches. The study was thus geared to elucidate the
advantages and analytic mileage resulting from more systematic cross-fertilisation of
discursive analysis and life course research.

Formulating explicit research questions
Formulating clear-cut, creative and precise research questions provides a basic frame for any successful research project (Phillips and Hardy 2002: 60). Setting out to look at how baby-boomers ‘do age’ in interaction, my research questions were first formulated broadly and clumsily into how do people position themselves and others in lifetime terms? How are age identities ascribed and rejected, displayed and refused in interaction? These questions already convey the basic constructionist starting point that categories of age, like any cultural categories by which we understand and organise the world around us, are ‘for talking’ and sense-making (Edwards 1991, 1998). After going through literature from the identities-in-interaction tradition (e.g. Antaki & Widdicombe 1998; Shotter & Gergen 1989; Widdicombe & Wooffitt 1995) and empirical and theoretical work on age in interaction (e.g. Coupland & Nussbaum 1993; Gubrium, Holstein & Buckholdt 1994) I formulated more explicit questions that also defined and guided the analytic take and the theoretical and methodological contributions I wished to make to the existing literature. Important revelations as to the nature of the object of my study, and the analytic niche available came from various sources. Consider the following example on age-in-interaction.

A: How old are you Mr. Bergstein?

In this example from his lectures, Harvey Sacks points out how the speaker’s list of added modifiers to the discloser of his chronological age: ‘I’m 48’ does discursive work to pre-empt possible negative attributes applied to someone in that age category (that someone who is 48 is past their prime, over the hill etc.). With the help of empirical
research literature and examples like the one above, I started to acknowledge and incorporate the positioned and factual characteristics of stage of life categories into my research questions. Reading my data, I also began to understand that they could be approached as a showcase of moral and factual discourse in interaction (see Bergman 1998, Jayyusi 1984, Nikander 2000). In the end, the study was framed as one making empirically grounded observations (Nikander 2002: 15)

(i) On how people orient to, and display the factual nature of the human life course as a progression, and how overlap between age categories is managed
(ii) On the discursive practices through which membership in an age category is either warranted or resisted
(iii) On the discursive formulations of personal change and continuity, and
(iv) On the patterns of moral discourse in age-in-interaction

*Working with interviews in DA*

The data in the baby-boom study consisted of interviews. The field of discourse research is however, of two minds when it comes to using such materials as data. In the *natural vs. contrived debate* the relative advantages of using ‘naturally occurring’ or ‘naturalistic’ data as opposed to ‘researcher-provoked’ or ‘artificial’ data have been explicitly contrasted with each other. In a recent thorough overview of the debate, Speer (forth.) recommends caution in applying the natural/contrived distinction too rigidly and suggests that strict and hard lines not be drawn in haste. Justification towards this line of argument can in fact be found from the appreciation that much of the influential work in discourse analysis originate from studies using interviews. Dorothy Smith’s (1987) and later Wooffitt’s (1992) groundbreaking work on fact construction and factual discourse, analysis of construction of authenticity (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995), work on the
construction of professional and gender identity (Marshall & Wetherell 1989) on gender
discrimination (Gill 1995) as well as analysis of interpretative repertoires in talk about
race (e.g. Wetherell & Potter 1992) are all ample examples of the analytic force and
richness of findings that originate from interview data.

The discursive field is unanimous however on the point that in contrast to realist or
factist social science perspectives (ten Have 2004: 73) interview data within discourse
analysis is viewed ‘as interaction in their own right’ (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987;
Wetherell and Potter 1992). This entails understanding questions not as a medium into
the inner world or opinions of respondents, but rather, as a central part of the data. DA
also addresses and analyses participants’ orientations to the relevance of their talk as
interview talk (e.g. Baker 1997). In recent texts the constructed nature of interviews as
interaction is also embraced as a specific social context; as constituting a specific
category of institutional talk that can be studied in itself. As a result, the research
interview as a discursive act opens up to a rich variety of analytic and theoretical
perspectives (e.g. van den Berg, Wetherell & Houtkoop-Steenstra 2003). It seems then
that interview data continues to yield analyses that alongside work on other types of
similarly important data enrich the discourse analytic tradition.

Creating data collections from materials

Data collection in discursive research is always followed by a time consuming period
during which the researcher immerses in the materials by thorough reading and re-
reading. When audio or videotaped interaction is in question, it is recommended that this
is done side by side with the original recorded material. Next, the body of texts or the
transcribed talk is coded according to the researcher’s interests and initial analytic questions are often further specified and refined at this stage. Developing and finessing a coding system and coming up with suitable organizing principles for the material is where DA practice turns into a craft skill. Precise procedural guidelines are impossible to come by in any conventional sense and the sorting of materials is always more or less specific to the data and research questions. Familiarity with choices made in earlier empirical research, method textbooks as well as software packages can be of assistance at this stage (see e.g. Taylor 2001, Phillips & Hardy 2002, Wood & Kroger 2000).

Coding in DA is more that simply a mechanical procedure that precedes analysis proper. It is guided by constructionist sensitivities and assumptions about language, interaction and society, and by theoretical underpinnings and research questions. Reading of the data may in part also take place in joint data sessions with colleagues. This affords multiple opinions and observations to emerge and functions as a sounding board for preliminary coding, analysis and interpretations. Reading the data may include asking specific questions such as the following. What do speakers produce as relevant in this account? How do participants interpret what is being said, what is their uptake? Why this particular category/detail/silence here? Is the speaker doing some extra discursive work or accounting? Why do I feel that some topic is avoided or only alluded to? What are participants orienting to in their talk? Posing such questions to the material, as well as reading for variation, detail and pattern all work as gateways into analysis and the actual writing-up (see also Potter & Wetherell 1994; Wood & Kroger 2000).
The reading of materials often takes place in phases. The researcher first reads or observes variation in the text, or notices particularly striking moments in the interaction. Very soon one might start reading and searching for recurrent patterns and gathering these into collections that then become a corpus of data. Collections are pieces of text and talk with several discrete components in common that warrant their examination together. According to Wood and Kroger (2000: 117), discourse patterns may be synchronic (e.g. used by a particular participant) or diachronic (recurrent in the turn-taking of participants). They may be found across participants, within or across sections and occasions and so on. In the case of the fifty-something interviews, this work stage involved first, reading the 800 pages of transcribed interview talk in detail and identifying and developing a coding system for the variety of points where age, in various ways, became topical in the interaction. Further immersion yielded several recurrent discursive patterns that the analysis subsequently focused upon. For instance I identified one particular recurrent discursive structure by which speakers seemed to both acknowledge physical, psychological, and other change as a common norm and fact of life and ageing, while at the same time placing themselves at least temporarily, outside such change. The following extracts, transcribed in both English and Finnish, provide examples from this collection.

**Extract 1.**

**PN: M4: Mikael (Cas 1, A: 3.2-3.9)**

1. M: Well I’d (.) this is still quite a good age when you’re healthy
   No mää (.) täähän on vielä ihan hyvä ikä kun on terve
2. PN: mm
   mm
3. → M: There’s like nothing yet Eihän tässä vielä mitään oo
4. (. ) otherwise to worry about (. ) muute häitä oo
5. PN: ye-es joo-o
6. → M: mm (0.2) you of course (.) little mm (0.2) sitä tietysti (.) pikkuhiljaahan sitä
7. by little start to calm down and rupee ihminen vähän rauhottumaan ja
What struck me in these extracts and others like them, was how notions of continuity (in the present day) and impending change and decrement (possibly in the future) are constructed using a three-component structure (marked by arrows). Note how in the first part of this format, personal change with age is denied, often by using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) of the type: ‘nothing has changed yet.’ This statement is followed by an account that works to soften the extremity of the previous claim, by acknowledging the impending possibility of change, or by acknowledging that some change may have happened. The second part also typically includes reference to...
common sense with acknowledgement tokens such as ‘of course’, or ‘surely’. The third part is then produced contrastively with a *but* and a temporal marker (yet, at least at this moment). This re-establishes the speaker’s no-change status in the present. This recurrent pattern in my data seemed, in other words, to function as an excellent practical tool for the discursive management of the factual commonsense existence of change in the life course.

*Making cross-reference to other studies and findings*

One additional subject that I wish to address in relation to this research is the use of existing discourse studies as a comparison point for one’s own material and analysis. This is where reading and being familiar with the literature and other pieces of analysis not only helps to build the analytic acuity needed, but also to make relevant and sustainable interpretations in ways that add to existing body of analyses. Returning to the baby-boom interview material, this meant that the identification of specific patterns like the one described above, led me to look for instances as to how it might apply across different contexts. What I found was that the discursive pattern identified carried considerable family resemblance to what Charles Antaki and Margaret Wetherell (1999) call ‘show concessions’ as well as to other data, where speakers are talking about change. The following extract comes from Sue Widdicombe and Robin Wooffitt’s (1995, 168) study on youth subcultures. Here is an exchange between the interviewer and a participant that identifies himself as a punk rocker.

A comparative extract from Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995, 168)

1. I: is being a punk very ((smiley voice))
2. important for you?
3. R: yeah very indeed
4. → I couldn’t imagine myself being straight at all
5. (.) like dressing neatly in tidy nice clothes an’ having my hair down and all that ‘hh
6. → na I can’t imagine=probably
7. in a couple of years times
8. → I’ll be like that but I-I-
9. at the moment I can’t imagine it at all

Note how a discursive formulation somewhat similar to those found in my data functions here. This time the linguistic pattern is used to describe one’s personal style of dressing as open to possible change in the future, but as something that nonetheless remains continuous and unchanged in the present day. The point I wish to make here is that using earlier research and analytic observations as a reference and comparison point can render research more generalizable. More importantly, it gives credit to earlier findings, supports the analytic choices made and helps form new, more solid bases on which future empirical observations can be built.

**Perspectives on institutional decision-making**

Resonating with concerns for the institutional contexts of interaction, the same data set often affords multiple analytic angles and points of interrogation. I use an empirical study of institutional decision-making as a case in point. The data derive from a project where extensive naturally occurring video data were collected in the same institution during a period of one year (see Nikander 2003, 2007). The data consist of 42 hours of team meetings between professionals within the social and heath sector, including
doctors, nurses, home-help personnel, social workers and a secretary. The practical task for the team meetings is to make concrete decisions either on financial support to elderly clients still living at home, or on long-term nursing home placements. The data thus represents one focal interactional site where the practical work of people processing in human service organisations gets done, largely through talk. The study can also be located within the construction of social problems tradition (e.g. Holstein and Miller 1993) in that the data concerns the social processes of situational definition and claims making by institutional actors in interaction.

The normal flow of interaction in the team meetings consists of a chain of client case descriptions. Case presentations that are normally produced in monologue are followed by collegial discussion that varies in length, and usually by a turn that marks that a decision about a client case has been reached. After this, the next client case is introduced. The aim is to go through a number of client cases and to provide criteria and arguments either for or against placing a particular client into a category of care recipiency.

Below we have an example in both English and Finnish of a case description that is presented in a comparatively short, consensual and uncomplicated fashion.

**Extract 4: M10: C12 21:21**
Speakers: HHH = head of home help, HN = head nurse (district), S = secretary
Pseudonyms: Sunnybrook (Mikonmaa) = hospital, Greyfield (Harmaaharju) = nursing home

1. HHH: yes .hhh †well then there’s joo .hhh †no sitten on
2. ((last name + first name)) (0.8) ((sukunimi + etunimi)) (0.8).
3. and she’s er (1.2) now, (0.5) ja hän on tuota (1.2) nytten (0.5)
4. in Sunnybrook hospital and Mikonmaan sairaalassa ja
5. has: ↑gone there on the fifteenth of viidettäähh (0.8) mennyt
6. Mayhh (0.8) ↑due to decline in yleiskunnon laskun (0.5)
7. general condition (0.5) mujistamattomuuden ja sekavuuden vuoksi
8. forgetfulness and disorientation on: sinne viidestoista
9. (0.6) after falling at home (0.6) kaaduttuaan kotona
10. up till now she’s been living hän on tähän asti asunut
11. alone secured by relatives yksin siellä omaistenhh ja
12. and three daily visits from kolme kertaa päivässä käyvän
13. home help (0.5) there’s a kotiavun turvin (0.6) tänne on
14. (2.8) assistant senior doctor N (2.8) apulaisyllääkäri N
15. has been consulted tehny konsultaation
16. on the twelfth of June and (.) kahdestoista kuudetta ja (.)
17. hhh noted that ((the patient)) hhh todennut ettei ((potilas))
18. doesn’t need hospital care tarvitse sairaalahoitoa
19. but that all means of non-mutta (.) avohuollon mahdollisuudet
20. institutional care have run up and on käytetty loppuun ja
21. given this (0.5) he suggests this niin ollen (0.5) ehdottaa tätiä
22. placement (.) in Greyfield (.) Harmaharjun (.) paikkaa (.)
24. (1.2) so I guess we’ll accept° mieltä (1.2) etti hyväksyttäneen°
25. HN: [accepted [hyväksyty]
26. S: [mm [mm
27. HHH: "good? " (4.0) <then> next we have "hyvä?" (4.0) <sitte> meillä on seuraavana

As pointed out already, any DA audio or video data set affords multiple analytic angles. One obvious choice for a unit of analysis here was the detail in which case descriptions were constructed. Analysis of the discursive detail through which individual clients are talked into being in case talk includes analysis of what gets produced as relevant for decision-making (Edwards 1998) and how specific categorisations in themselves already project and index specific outcomes and decisions. In extract 4, the routine mention of the absent client’s name is this time followed by mention of her current whereabouts, medical condition and network of care.

In some cases however, specific categories may be produced early on. Consider the material in Extract 5 for a contrasting case.
Extract 5. M4. Nursing home placements (12.32-)
Speaker: HSW = Hospital social worker, Fairfield (Teukka) = a hospital

1. HSW: Okay the first one is
2. ((last name + first name)) ((sukunimi + etunimi))
3. (0.8) on page what three (0.8) sivulla mikä kolme
4. (3.8) ((page leafing)) (3.8) ((monisteiden selailua))
5. HSW: A: (0.8) er never married female Tämmöne:n (0.8) eh neiti-ihminen
6. who has come to us in joka on meille tullu
7. Fairfield (1.2) in July a:nd Teukkaan (1.2) heinäkuussa ja:

This is a compact example of how specific detail, the marital status and the gender of the client, in an economical way already indicate that this woman does not have a spouse or children to fall back on. Despite its demographic, ‘just ticking a box’ –type character, the categorisation therefore already moves the client into a specific cluster of action-worthy cases and indicates that an institutional intervention may be needed.

Looking at how client cases are discursively constructed is thus one crucial analytic angle to these as well as other data and studies consisting of professional –client encounters.

Other possibilities include reading the data in terms of the social functions of psychological or emotion discourse in decision-making (Nikander 2007), mapping the practices whereby professionals move between written documents or computer files and their own first-hand eye-witness knowledge on the clients, identifying how professional boundaries and power structures are alluded to, constructed and demarcated through discourse, or how moral responsibilities of the community, the professionals and the family of the elderly clients are negotiated (Nikander 2005) and so on. The data may also yield methodological points of view like analysing the data in terms of participants’
orientations to the camera. In DA studies common claims about data contamination can easily be turned around into an analysable topic.

The richness of data and the potential for multiple analytic view points is a further benefit of working with audio and video. Faced with such ample range of choice, the researcher zooms in on particular interactional phenomena with a specific analytic and theoretical contribution to the wider field of DA studies in mind. The richness of data is also a practical issue that concerns writing-up results in separate articles, chapters or in more practice-oriented pieces that help take the analytic observations of a discourse analyst back to the institutional field where they originated from.

Transcripts, validity and reliability

Finally, let me address some key points of producing good quality discourse analysis. Good quality in all social scientific work builds on generally agreed upon norms such as ethically sound starting points and principles (e.g. Taylor 2001). Here the focus however, is more specifically on the validity and reliability in research working with texts and with good practice in our analysis. We can start with a list of questions that is by no means exhaustive.

- What are the specific strengths of working with transcripts?
- Does translating transcripts affect validity?
- What are the special characteristics of the data that are collected through audio or videotaping?
- What kinds of social and interactional processes are missed?
• Are transcripts enough, or should data also be gathered by other means?

*Specific strengths in working with transcripts*

The most common rationale for working with transcripts is that recordings and transcripts based on them provide a highly detailed and accessible representation of social action (Peräkylä 1997: 203). In DA, the detail of empirical material is presented in a form that allows readers and fellow researchers to ‘to make their own checks and judgements’ (Potter and Edwards 2001: 108). Transcripts bring immediacy and transparency to the phenomena under study, and the audience is given almost equal access to inspect the data on which the analysis is based, alongside with the researcher. In addition to immediacy, the analysis of transcripts, particularly conversation analysis, is ‘rigorous in its requirement of an empirical grounding for any description to be accepted as valid’ (Peräkylä 1997: 202). In discourse analysis the requirement to anchor analytic observations firmly in the data is also imperative. Compared to conversation analysis, more latitude is sometimes allowed however, and the final evaluation of the persuasiveness of an analytic claim is left for the reader (see Seale 1999). So in addition to analytic grounding, discourse analysis has emphasized the rhetorical persuasiveness, or the convincing qualities of the research report, as well as the reader's active judgement on its validity.

The reasons and justifications for working with transcripts are typically presented in contrast and comparison to ethnography, particularly in contrast to the use of field notes. According to Anssi Peräkylä, working with transcripts 'eliminates at one stroke many of
the problems that ethnographers have with unspecified accuracy of field notes and with the limited public access to them' (Peräkylä 1997:203, see also discussions in Maynard 1989, 2003 and in West 1996). He is not alone in saying this. The problem with the reliability of field notes is that they are observations turned into texts: they are reconstructions from an observer's notes, and as such based on the memory of their writer. The reader has no direct access to the actual goings-on but must take on trust that the descriptions and observations do justice to the 'reality' and to the initial interactions that the descriptions are about. One can therefore suspect, as Paul Atkinson has done (1992), that field notes are based on rhetorical construction and active selection by the author. Working with transcripts efficiently solves such problems and builds a solid ground for analysis.

Peräkylä also points to (1997: 203) Jerome Kirk and Marc Miller’s definition of reliability as ‘as the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research’ (1986: 20). Securing superior reliability and transparency when working with transcripts, according to Peräkylä, requires adequate and high technical quality of the recordings they are based on and that proper attention be paid to data selection (1997: 205-207). A further source of quality in DA research results from collective analysis in data session. These can be taken as an exercise in inter-rater reliability. That is, results are rarely based on an individual researcher’s reading but rather, collectively produced interpretative testing feeds into and informs the analyses prior to publication.
Translated transcripts

The discourse methods literature has produced several excellent overviews on the best practices in producing transcripts, discussions on the rationale of not producing tidied-up versions of them and on the rationale of using specific transcription notations (e.g. Silverman 1993, Taylor 2001, West 1996). One largely overlooked question in the literature concerns the fact that a large proportion of DA work is done on languages other than English. Discussion on the additional complications that follow from having to produce and translate transcripts of data originally in another language for an English speaking and reading audience remains a rarity in the DA literature (e.g. ten Have 1999, Nikander 2002, forthcoming). A few points deserve mention here. First, it seems that presenting the original data alongside the translation into the language of the publication (often English) is a norm that fits the principle of validity and reliability through transparency outlined above. Second, translating data extracts is not merely a question of ‘adopting’ a ‘transcription technique’ but rather includes a range of practical and ideological questions as to the level of detail in the transcription, and of the way in which the translations are physically presented in print. Third, in case we understand transcripts as central to guaranteeing the publicly verifiable nature of DA research, generally agreed upon rules concerning the layout and publication practices concerning these data should be in place. One example of a possible layout has been used in this chapter.

Special characteristics of data collected through audio or videotaping: Is something missed?
All types of research methods inevitably include delimiting the data in some ways. All data are produced. They are limited presentations of the social world and in themselves already a product of specific choices made by the researcher (e.g. Hester and Francis 1994). Despite the acclaimed accuracy and public access of audio and video materials, some critics argue that the use of such technologies, particularly when studying various work or institutional settings, is in danger of shaping our research questions, the occupations studied and therefore potentially also in danger of producing distorted representations of work practices (Hak 1999). Tony Hak’s criticism is directed specifically against conversation analysis in institutional settings, but can, in part, be extended to discursive research as well.

According to Hak, the use of audio or video recordings sets certain limits to what can be studied and what kinds of questions are asked. For instance, considerable amount of research has been done on relatively stationary situations such as consultations, meetings or ward rounds, whereas the multitude of goings-on in corridors, by the bedside, ad hoc informal discussions between the staff and between the staff and clients are lost to what Hak calls the 'discursive gaze'. Another limitation with working with recordings is that the discursive gaze means that only work situations that get done through a lot of talk are focused upon. Hak claims this also means that research easily concentrates on data recorded amongst professions with a higher status, while menial work, unremarkable aspects of work practices, and certain tasks such as bathing, cleaning, and cooking meals are overlooked (1999: 440). This has some political implications: being a focus of research often brings positive effects for the category of workers studied. According to
Hak it is therefore regrettable that studies of discourse in work settings often focus on professions with higher status.

These are only a few important points made by Hak, but they raise serious concerns worth considering. Simultaneously however, Hak’s criticism clearly misrepresents and does injustice to discursive (and conversation analytic) research and fails to appreciate the rapidly broadening range of empirical analyses. The collection of video-recorded material in institutions inevitably includes field-time similar to ethnography, the non-verbal side of interaction is often an integral part of DA and related technological developments already enable a variety of mobile data collection in different interactional settings. Hak’s criticism is also built on simple juxtaposition between research based on the use of recordings and transcripts and the ethnographic tradition, which in itself is a rather arbitrary distinction.

Other forms of data

Still, the question remains, are transcripts enough or should data also be gather by other means? In practice discourse analytic research rarely limits itself purely to video or audio taped data. In fact, the research literature offers a number of helpful suggestions of combining ethnography and interviews with discursive analysis, of using textual materials, and of following longer term interactional processes. According to Douglas Maynard for instance (1989, 2003: 64-87), analysis of discourse episodes may de-emphasize the institutional context wherein those episodes occur. Similarly however,
granting uncontrolled primacy to ad hoc ethnographic knowledge on the wider social environment and the setting surrounding the interaction may result in data loss (2003, 71). According to Maynard: ‘ethnographic insistence on the relevance of larger and wider institutional structures can mean a loss of data in and as the interaction, for attention shifts from actual utterances in the fullness of their detail and as embedded within a local interactional context to embrace narrative or other general accounts concerning social surrounding’ (2003: 72). He proposes limited affinity between ethnography and discourse/CA research and points to three precise ways in which ethnography can complement close analysis of video and audio data: in descriptions of settings and identities of parties; in explications of key terms, phrases and course of action that the researcher is unfamiliar with; and in explaining “curious” patterns that prior analysis may reveal (2003: 73).

In the end, putting up strict restrictions as to what types of data DA research should be restricted to is futile and discourse researchers continue to vary in the degree and style in which social structure is incorporated and what is granted primacy, set at the foreground or background in their analyses. David Silverman (1999) has argued for collaboration between different traditions and against establishing sectarian armed camps, based on animosity. It is through surprising and ongoing exchange and dialogue between research traditions that new outlooks emerge. Using transcripts, collecting observational data, using documents, and conducting interviews do not rule each other out and in practice DA researchers are encouraged to combine a wide range of different materials.
Conclusion

Translating a skill into a technique (Hepburn 1997: 33) is always a difficult task. Simple linear recipe-book models of discursive analysis can never do justice to the complexity of DA and its different versions, traditions and debates. Instead of attempting to pin down discourse analysis as a ‘constructionist method’, the goal in this chapter has been to give a taste of the rationale for doing discursive research and on providing general guidelines and empirical examples of what the analyses in this tradition have to offer. Critical voices, tensions and ongoing debates are always a sign of lively and fruitful academic enterprise. Therefore such voices were also included, not silenced.

The future development of the field of discourse analysis depends, however, on how members new to the field adopt existing versions and traditions, how they add to, transform and further extend the body of analytic findings and agendas, and on how they find new insightful means of analyzing empirical material. The construction of new forms of discourse analysis will continue as theoretical boundaries shift and new and exciting approaches emerge.
References:


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1 All data extracts in the chapter follow the transcription conventions originally developed by Gail Jefferson (see e.g. Atkinson and Heritage 1984 for details).