

# Anticipatory Discourse

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Researchers interested in anticipatory discourse are, generally speaking, concerned with discourses in or about the future. They investigate how individuals, texts, or utterances project representations of future events, states, or relations. Unlike other areas of applied linguistics, the study of anticipatory discourse is still very much in its infancy. As yet, there is no set tradition or school for the study of such discourse, even if it has often been linked with critical discourse analysis. Given this state of affairs, this article focuses on research by authors who take the study of futurity as central to their work, although not all of them designate this work as “anticipatory discourse.” The study of anticipatory discourse thus makes a central claim: futurity is an inevitable component of text, talk, and more largely of social life, because human action has an intrinsically forward-looking nature. The study of anticipatory discourse thus proposes to add to the existing body of knowledge in discourse analysis by casting light on this future dimension of text and interaction.

With its focus on the future, the study of anticipatory discourse contrasts with the more well-known field of narrative studies, which has traditionally focused on the recounting of the past and on the historical processes through which events, identities, and actions come to be constructed. Even in this field, however, a number of authors have noted that narratives can be used in reference to the future as well as to the past. For example, research has shown that recollections of the past can be an opportunity for interlocutors to think about what might, could, should, or should not happen in the future (Ochs, 1994). Recounting of past events can also be used as a tactic for co-opting interlocutors into performing actions at a future point in time (Goodwin, 1990). Alternatively, such recollections may serve to explore innovative solutions to old problems or situations (Al Zidjaly, 2006). As used in the more general field of discourse analysis, however, the study of anticipatory discourse typically encompasses a range of linguistic phenomena besides narratives. It potentially includes research on any forward-looking behaviors, such as intention, action, planning, negotiating, decision making, and so forth.

## Origin and Scope

The term “anticipatory discourse” was first coined by Scollon and Scollon (2000), who proposed that a theory of anticipatory discourse should be developed as part of a more general theory of human action and agency (see also Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). The authors’ initial goal was to contribute to an understanding of how individuals take action, how they use discourse and texts to do so, and how (discursive) actions might have the performative function of producing changes in the world. Because social actors predominantly act in anticipation of outcomes, Scollon and Scollon (2000) argued that the work of discourse analysts should adopt a future-oriented perspective, in order to do justice to the actors’ perspective at the moment of acting. From their work, several features of anticipatory discourse can be highlighted (Scollon & Scollon, 2000), although not all researchers adopt the same way of defining anticipatory discourse. Depending on the researcher’s orientation, one or more of the following aspects are generally emphasized:

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1. First, anticipatory discourse can be defined as the study of texts or utterances that are oriented toward future events, actions, or states.
2. Second, the study of anticipatory discourse is often concerned with discursive strategies which open or shut down particular lines of action at particular moments for particular individuals or social groups.
3. Third, analyzing anticipatory discourse usually involves paying attention to the stances constructed in text and talk regarding two domains: (a) *knowledge* and (b) *agency* asserted in future-oriented propositions:
  - (a) Because the future is the domain of what has not yet happened, any statement about the future should, in theory, be hypothetical and marked by epistemic uncertainty, as events can always intervene to derail even the most predictable course of action. In reality, however, speakers have the broader choice of presenting future states of affairs not only as hypothetical, but also as if they were knowable or already known. Because of this, part of the analyst's work is to identify what claims are being made with regard to knowledge of the future, and, more importantly, to investigate for what purposes these claims are being constructed.
  - (b) In terms of agency, anticipatory discourse not only reflects how much a speaker feels "in the know" about the future, but also reveals how empowered that speaker feels to act and affect situations to come. Hence, another part of the analyst's work is to investigate whether the speaker's position is portrayed as agentive or fatalistic, regarding the possibility of bringing about a particular outcome at a subsequent point in time.

With this context in mind, then, studying anticipatory discourse amounts to an examination of where the cursor is placed on the knowledge axis (from oracular to agnostic) and on the agency axis (from fatalistic to agentive) in constructing stances about the future (Scollon & Scollon, 2000). Within a critical discourse analysis perspective, this study also includes consideration of who gets to be the primary definer of the future, how it gets to be defined, and what power relations are involved in this definition.

From an analytical point of view, the study of anticipatory discourse often covers a variety of phenomena, ranging from the linguistic structures involved in constructing future representations to the social processes and practices that constitute specific "horizons" for action at a particular time for a particular individual or group. As such, the focus of anticipatory discourse research need not be limited to representations of the future as they are articulated in verbal communication. The analyst can also investigate cultural, material, or social structures and the extent to which they embody specific futures or make (im)possible certain courses of action. Whatever the perspective adopted, the researcher can draw from a variety of sources. For example, many areas of applied linguistics have provided important insights for the study of futurity. These have rarely been brought together as part of a more general theory of anticipatory discourse and are discussed below.

Conversation analysts, for instance, have identified numerous forms of verbal and non-verbal projection-related phenomena in interaction. Gestures, mimics, pre-sequences, prefaces, and so forth can all be means of signaling upcoming actions to interlocutors, in order to give them a chance to anticipate a next turn or production, or to invite preferred turns or reactions (Streeck & Jordan, 2009). Researchers of pragmatics have provided detailed analyses of speech acts that are implicatives (e.g., forecasts, warnings, prescriptions, advice, orders, requests, etc.), as well as discourse markers that are cataphoric (which signal, for example, reorientation toward a new topic or subtopic, such as "so" or "now"). Research on verbal tense, mood, and modality as well as on linguistic and paralinguistic means of expressing (un)certainly (e.g., hedging, hypotheticals) reveals how a speaker might feel about future events (Fleischman, 1982). Studies of genre and rhetoric are likewise useful

for investigating future-oriented types of text (e.g., instructions, procedures, mission statements, policies, laws, fortune-telling, weather forecasting, etc.), and it is also worthwhile to examine how speakers make use of these genres to persuade interlocutors to adhere to some proposed course of action. On a macroscopic level, investigating anticipatory discourse entails consideration of larger-scale, future-oriented projections and how they come to constitute a horizon or matrix for possible actions (Sparke, 2000; Scollon, 2005). For example, the discourse of the slow food movement does not delimit the same kind of attitudes, actions, or daily consumption choices as the discourse of the globalized free market economy. Each of these discourses pre-shapes in part how individuals will position themselves with regard to the future. Finally, multimodal approaches to discourse can also be fruitfully utilized, in recognition of the fact that material structures also influence future behaviors and actions. For example, in a supermarket, the deliberate display of food, sales labels, and aisles converging toward the cashier is intended to generate certain responses from the shopper. This type of material incarnation that is designed to produce preferred lines of action constitutes a way of delimiting possible behaviors in the present or immediate future.

Regarding the domains that have so far been focused upon by researchers of anticipatory discourse, analyses of futurity in “news reporting,” “political discourse,” “health and counseling,” and “education and work” can be singled out. However, since anticipatory discourse is very much an emergent field, its scope should not be regarded as limited to these domains alone. The areas of investigation highlighted here should be viewed as a selection of important contributions to the field rather than an exhaustive review.

### Media Discourse

The media is an important source of anticipatory discourse. Events such as upcoming elections, wars, trials, and so forth, the outcomes of which are not fixed or entirely predictable, generate their share of future-oriented discourse on the radio, on television, and in printed news. The reporting of these events requires careful managing of the uncertainty associated with them, and it is this very element of suspense which in part makes these events so newsworthy in the first place. Researchers have thus noted that news reporting often includes as much speculation as it does objective facts. Analysts of this type of anticipatory discourse have paid attention to how different groups comment on events to come (e.g., politicians, experts, media organizations, the general public, etc.), often to fulfill specific agendas or to maintain a plurality of scenarios (Jaworski & Fitzgerald, 2008). This research has focused on the status of assertions about the future and on the authority and reliability of the message (examining, for instance, *hedges*, *modality*, and *conjectures* in the presentation of news items) (Dunmire, 1997). These analysts have also studied *substitutive discourse*, which is the reporting that occurs when there is not yet reportable information, but there is a demand that events be reported with minimal time delay. This injunction to report events “as they are happening” often leads to the *manipulation of timeframes* (Jaworski, Fitzgerald, & Morris, 2003). Overall, this research has both described media practices and underlined some of the consequences for the democratic process, given how the present, past, and future are dealt with in the media.

### Political Discourse

In the field of political discourse, researchers have proposed that an important part of politicians’ work is to project their vision of the future, notably through articulating the policies and decisions they plan to enforce (Dunmire, 2005). Moreover, the aim of politi-

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cians' rhetoric is usually to enroll the general audience in sharing their positions. One important aspect of political discourse is that the views of the future presented are often consequential, in that the policies articulated may have practical consequences once adopted. They might even lead to wars. In this context, investigations of anticipatory discourse focus on the rhetorical mechanisms through which certain descriptions of the future are promoted over others, contributing to expanding one's area of control. Among the studies conducted, Dunmire (1997), for example, investigates how subjective perspective—representing the views of a few—can be transformed into objective, factual, almost commonsense reality by using linguistic strategies which erase clues indicating the source of the message, the uncertainty of the events presented, or the subjectivity of the view promoted. In the context of the 1990 Persian Gulf conflict, Dunmire's research discusses how, as some futures are presented as inevitable, alternative descriptions disappear, and contexts are created for particular actions and policies (1997). Another line of research has examined how major political changes, because they create unpredictable futures for some of the population, often move individuals caught in these changes toward new learning and improvisation (Scollon, 2001). Overall, research on futurity in political discourse has sought to make visible the ideological stakes intertwined with representing and projecting particular futures.

### **Health and Counseling**

Another area concerned with the study of anticipatory discourse is the field of health and counseling. Many communicative situations involving medical or health professionals have a link to future decisions and behaviors. For example, doctors not only diagnose illness and disease but also prescribe interventions and medications. They sometimes make prognoses about the likely evolution of a condition or about the consequences of medical choices. Counseling sessions, too, often involve conversations about difficult situations to come, such as in genetic counseling or in therapeutic exchanges of all kinds (Sarangi, 2002). Peräkylä (1993), for example, examines sessions between AIDS counselors and their clients, when the counselors need to prepare their clients for sometimes dreadful upcoming phases in their illness, including possible death caused by the virus. The study looks at the design of turns for introducing invocations of the "hostile future" and for creating a favorable environment for discussion. It also investigates the use of hypothetical questions to frame discussion about the unwanted future and explores how counselors, by emphasizing the hypothetical and conditional nature of these futures, manage the epistemological framework of their interventions. More broadly, Peräkylä's study investigates the function of future-oriented discourse in alleviating some of the psychological effects of living with the end in mind. Another line of research has focused on patients' control and agency. Al Zidjaly (2006), for example, documents the interactions between a quadriplegic man and his primary caregivers. She analyzes the verbal tactics he employs to lead others to carry out specific courses of action on his behalf and thus to retain some of his agency despite his handicap. Her study considers the use of "hypothetical future-oriented narratives" to explore best- or worst-case scenarios and to solicit help in fulfilling certain agendas.

### **Education and Work**

Education and work are also fruitful terrains for the study of anticipatory discourse. Concerning education, the purpose of school is usually to prepare learners for future situations and circumstances, most of which are unknown at the time of learning. Curricula, for

example, are generally geared toward making available an ensemble of social, cultural, technical, and linguistic resources meant to facilitate successful trajectories into the future, even when the specifics of that future remain unknown (Kress, 1996). Detailed studies of learning and training contexts have shown, however, that not only do representations of “successful trajectories” vary among the stakeholders involved in the educational process (trainers, learners, institutions, etc.), but also educational practices often serve to exclude or include participation in future contexts (de Saint-Georges, 2008). Some researchers have thus opted to examine “both ends of the trajectory”—not only preparing learners for future circumstances but also adapting social circumstances so that they benefit those learners most likely to be excluded from them (O’Connor, 2008). In the field of workplace studies, although productive actions are always done in anticipation of some outcome, it is only indirectly that the question of anticipatory discourse has been addressed, through studying, for example, operational talk through which things get done (Neville, 2005) or negotiations and decision making in meetings and how these direct specific courses of action (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). Another area of research has been document design and, in particular, the study of procedural texts (e.g., prescriptions or instructions) and their association with actual actions (Filliettaz, 2004).

### Implications

As researchers begin to integrate the future dimension into their work, many of them find it necessary to stretch this work beyond the traditional boundaries of linguistic analysis. For example, the study of future-oriented discourse often involves an examination not only of unique instances of texts, as is generally the case in discourse analysis, but also of chains of texts constructed over the course of several speech events, in order to trace incremental processes of meaning construction (de Saint-Georges, 2005). Only by considering what actually happened at a given point in time can the researcher unveil whether the discourses previously articulated about that point in time were in sync with reality or not. Likewise, for several researchers the study of anticipatory discourse involves an exploration of how this discourse figures in the production of concrete actions (de Saint-Georges, 2005; Al Zidjaly, 2006). In this way, research on anticipatory discourse goes beyond the study of language alone, exploring the performative functions of communication (its annunciative and constitutive capacities) and not just its referential dimension (Dunmire, 2005). Moreover, the study of anticipatory discourse requires the development of ad hoc and, at times, innovative methodologies. Over time, authors have thus proposed all of the following: auto-ethnographies designed to access the researcher’s own intentions and orientations toward the future (Scollon, 2001); multisited ethnographies to trace how a discourse produced in one situation can lead to the performance of linked actions at another place and time (de Saint-Georges, 2005); and, finally, personal engagement by the researcher in actions which document the relationship between future-oriented discourse, agency, and processes of social change (Al Zidjaly, 2006). These methodologies have all added a more dynamic dimension to traditional approaches to discourse analysis. Finally, the study of anticipatory discourse raises in many cases “ethico-practical” questions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 34). Because the future is up for the making, studying future-oriented discourse raises the ethical question of responsibility for foreseeable consequences to one’s actions (Adam & Groves, 2007). It is both this ethical dimension and the potentially performative dimension of anticipatory discourse which are responsible for the fact that the critical slant has been dominant in research on futurity, although other approaches to future matters in discourse are clearly possible.

**SEE ALSO:** Critical Analysis of Political Discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse in Action; Medical Discourse; Modality; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Narrative Discourse; News Discourse; Pragmatics in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Scollon, Ron

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