Mediated Discourse Analysis

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In December 1972 Ron and Suzie Scollon lived in Honolulu under the flight path of tankers flying to Guam to refuel B-52 bombers headed for Vietnam. From December 18th through the 29th, especially on Christmas Day, they noticed a great increase in the number of tankers. Ron reported this to friends who were active in protesting the war, but they did not believe his report, saying they had not read about it in the IF Stone weekly. *This event marked an early stage in Ron's thinking about mediated discourse, as he observed that highly educated and well informed people would not believe what they could see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears had they chosen to do so. One, a professor of syntax, telephoned Senator Patsy Mink, who denied any knowledge of escalation. Not until they read about the operation in print did they believe it was happening. We now know that there was a secret "Operation Linebacker II", a massive bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.*

Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an approach to discourse analysis developed by Ron Scollon and colleagues around the turn of the millennium. As a theoretical position, it focuses on linkages between discourse and action and how these play out in complex social situations. It examines two broad kinds of questions that have been left under-theorized by other approaches. It investigates what part texts play in actions undertaken by social actors on the one hand and how texts arise as the outcomes of social interactive processes of production on the other hand. It will often start by asking (R. Scollon 2001a, 2002):

- What is/are the action(s) going on here? What is someone doing here and why?
- What is the role of discourse in this/those actions? By whom is it produced, why is it used, and what motives are behind it?

By beginning with action, rather than discourse or utterance meaning, MDA questions the idea that you can always "read" the meaning of a text from studying the text alone (Jones and Norris 2005: 9). It prefers instead to pay attention to texts as they are used

to mediate the real-time concrete actions of agents in actual social interactions and to examine their relevance to these actions. By doing this, MDA "seeks to develop a theoretical remedy for discourse analysis that operates without reference to social actions on the one hand, or social analysis that operates without reference to discourse on the other" (R Scollon 2001a: 1).

The core ideas of MDA were first articulated by Ron Scollon in the late 1990s (Scollon 1997, 1998, 1999), based on thinking and research dating back 50 years when he read Nishida (1958) then used himself as an informant to study literacy, also using Spanish as a means to learning to play classical guitar and vice-versa. As a graduate student in linguistics in the early 70s, he observed how people were so influenced by news media that printed accounts overrode what they could see and hear with their own eyes and ears. Back in December 1972, Scollon was trying to inform his fellow protestors that the war in Vietnam was escalating, with the intention perhaps of provoking joint action of some kind. He was dismayed that because of the lack of media reportage, his friends did not believe what he told them, thus the first action of informing was derailed. The role of discourse was that pending confirmation of the first action of informing, no further action could be taken. Scollon compared newspaper accounts of a bombing, showing how different details were selected to support varying ideologies.

Scollon's interest in narrative led to work in the ethnography of communication (Scollon and Scollon 1979) and new literacy studies (Scollon and Scollon 1981). These were followed by work reported in *Nexus Analysis* (Scollon and Scollon 2004), in a study of media discourse (Scollon 1998), and a reworking of earlier work on first language acquisition (Scollon 2001a) that theorized the nexus of practice. Thus MDA is in part a culmination of a theorization of research conducted

from 1978 to 1983 in Alaska, reported in *Nexus Analysis* and research conducted from 1992 to 1997, largely in Hong Kong, theorized in *Mediated Discourse as Social Interaction* (Scollon 1998).

Key studies

Scollon (1998) is usually credited for being the springboard from which scholars began doing what became known as mediated discourse analysis. It has led a number of them to engage in concrete, careful attempts at making visible for analysis the connections between discourse and action, a relatively daunting task as actions are rather complex phenomena. They are complex both at the time of their occurrence and even more so if we take into account the historical circumstances that have led to it.

To disentangle these relations, in the spirit of Scollon (2001a) detailing the ontogenesis of language in a one-year-old child, some researchers have found it useful to pay attention to the ontogeny of social practices[i]. S. Scollon (2001), Shroyer (2004), Castillo-Ayometzi (2007), for instance, have asked not only how social practices come about, but what happens when individuals can no longer operate according to the established norms and practices embodied in their habitus[ii] (Bourdieu 1977), and new practices need to substitute for the old ones (S Scollon 2001). Shroyer (2004) takes up the study of the practices through which children in America become "connected" with American heritage in their early school years (daily pledge of allegiance, reading of text books, enacting of landmark events). It raises the question of how children might develop the patriotic dispositions that might elicit strong commitment and loyalty to the nation in later years. Castillo-Ayometzi (2007) discusses adaptation and resilience of undocumented immigrants to the USA.

Analyzing how looking for a network of social support, they fall prey to the proselytizing practices of Baptist church missionaries, she documents how they become forced to embrace new narratives of the self, despite finding vivid contradictions between these and their own beliefs and experience. S Scollon (2002) looks at the adjustments taking place among a group of friends practicing Taijiquan together in a Hong Kong park during the Taiwan Missile Crisis in March 1996 as different actors identify with different political stances. Exploring the links between social practice, habitus and ideology, these studies attempt to clarify how individuals "carry or are carried by political, social or cultural discourses" (S Scollon 2001) and to understand how broad macro-social-political discourses (e.g. religious or nationalist discourse) become part of our embodied life, one prime area of concern in MDA.

Other attempts to render apparent the dialogic connection between discourse and action consider the role of embodied actions in anticipating or producing certain events, action or states. With regards to political discourse again, there was interest in showing that broad policies and regulations do not come out of nowhere but really arise out of a series of embodied actions at the micro-interactional level, with the corollary that these policies and regulations can also be impacted by acting at this level (Scollon 2008). While Al Zidjaly (2006) discusses the strategic uses of narratives and anticipatory discourses through which a quadriplegic man in Oman manages to have his caregivers act on his behalf and transform a law affecting him as a handicapped person, Dunne (2003) studies the making and shaping of Egyptian President Mubarak's speeches by multiple stakeholders and the particular meanings of "democracy" they impart. Both studies show that "politics" and regulations result from a host of local actions and practices, which then circulate on larger timescales to

affect the lives of others. Al Zidjali also advanced the efforts of others (S Scollon 2001; de Saint-Georges, 2003, in press), to study the anticipatory stances individuals take toward their capacity to effect change in the future.

But focus on broad discourses and actions can also point to situations when discourses *fail* to be relevant to the actors targeted by it and the consequences of failure to integrate one group's practices and discourses and another's. Jones (1999, 2007), presenting the key findings of the first extended study in MDA, shows the all but unbridgeable gap between what public media say about AIDS/HIV and the actions and identities of social actors engaged in non-safe sex behavior or drug use. The official stance that 'quality' people do not get AIDS/HIV creates 'imaginary protections', encouraging people to disconnect their sexual behavior from possible infection. This gap makes public health discourses largely irrelevant in producing effective changes in behavior, with easily anticipated consequences. This study and others also show powerfully the nexus of social practices by which individuals build their social identities, impute identities to others or renegotiate the scripts associated with their social roles (R Scollon 1997, 1998, 2001a; S Scollon, 2001; Jones 1999, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009b) and how they select or leave out bits of circulating discourses to piece together these identities (Norris 2005), sometimes with dire consequences.

Transverse to many of the studies in MDA is thus a fundamental interest in human action not just as a theoretical issue, but as the "root of social change" (Johnston, 2004) as well as individual transformation. Thus, many MDA scholars have addressed social issues. They have focused on public health and AIDS/HIV prevention (Jones 1999, 2007). They have examined the grounds on which officers of the Immigration and Naturalization Services approve or deny granting a green card to

non-US citizens (Johnston 2004). They have discussed food, commerce and commodity discourses in the global age (R Scollon 2005a; Scollon & Scollon 2005; de Saint-Georges & Norris 2000), literacy, assessment and inclusiveness in the classroom (Wohlwend 2009b), or processes of marginalization of minority cultures in real-time interactions as well as in urban landscapes (Lou 2010a). They have considered the practices of "translating" a child from one continent and one world of practices to another, as in international adoptions cases (Raudaskoski 2010). They have also explored issues linked to learning and the individual transformations that occur when going through new "semiotic apprenticeships" (Wells 1999) or identity shifts. This has most clearly been shown perhaps in the work of Jocuns (2007, 2009) focusing on the learning of gamelan, a traditional Balinese form of music, in which learning how to be an active participant in how gamelan is learned is part of becoming a gamelan player in its own right. It has been equally studied in Norris (2005) or Jones (in press) when studying the means through which individuals find in their environments and the technologies available around them material for articulating new discourses about themselves, as when a woman needs to rethink her notion of family and agency as a recently divorced individual, or when skaters use video technology to perfect their acrobatic figures.

Although the projects mentioned above may vary greatly in the issues they take up or the aspects of MDA they stress, they have a number of characteristics in common. Firstly, they share a broad definition of discourse, including not only written and spoken texts, but also the broader social and historical "Discourses" (Gee, 1996: 132) embodied in the built environment, in people's demeanor and beliefs, in objects and artifacts, and reflecting sets of beliefs, attitudes, representations, etc. Secondly, since the authors usually explore complex issues and networks of practices, they also

tend to solicit and blend a variety of methodological tools, mobilizing the ones they deem most fit to address the issue under analysis. Lou (2010a, b) or Wohlwend (2009a, b) illustrate this in an exemplary way as they solicit multiple approaches for data gathering and data analysis (linguistic landscaping, multimodal analysis, discourse analysis, ethnographic observations, sociolinguistics interviews, etc.), using some methodologies to strengthen the potential weaknesses of others, a process called in MDA "methodological interdiscursivity" (R Scollon 2000, de Saint-Georges & Norris 2000). Finally, because complex issues usually extend in space and time, the research overviewed often looks beyond the here and now, considering how present discourse relates to past or future ones. They thus "enlarge the classical circumference of discourse analysis" (R Scollon 2001b; de Saint-Georges, 2005), a perspective that few other approaches to discourse have taken thus far.

Theoretical underpinnings

From a theoretical point of view, MDA is wide-ranging and deeply interdisciplinary in orientation, with roots in at least the following frameworks: interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, anthropological linguistics or the ethnography of communication, critical discourse analysis, practice theory, mediated action and activity theory, social semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, the New Literacy Studies and, more recently, cultural geography (Jensen, 2007). MDA does not hesitate to combine frameworks (even if some of them are not always considered compatible elsewhere) for reasons we hinted at above: if social issues are complex, it does not seem viable to approach them by limiting oneself to one particular angle. The frameworks mentioned above are all important pillars of the MDA perspective because each of them illuminates in specific ways the study of social practices.

For example, MDA shares with CDA the goal of understanding societal issues and conflict, both contending that discourse analysis opens a window on social problems largely constituted in discourse, with power relations grounded in social practice. MDA sees discursive practices as *one form of social practice*, not the foundational or constitutive form of practice out of which the rest of society and the resulting power relations arise. MDA takes it that discourse is *among the means* by which society and culture are constituted. MDA also argues that society and culture are constituted in the material products of that society as well as in its non-discursive practices (e.g. handing (R Scollon 2001a), photography, skateboarding (Jones, in press)).

MDA also incorporates the frameworks of the New Literacy Studies (Scollon and Scollon 1981; Street 1984; Gee 1996, Barton and Hamilton 1998). Much prior research reified literacy as an ontological object independent of human action; one "had" or "did not have" literacy. NLS scholars on the contrary have shown literacy to be itself a form of practice, giving off information about individuals' identities and affiliations. For example, in Singapore citizens are schooled in literacy in English and Chinese, Malay or Tamil, each with a different writing system, depending on family origins. Researchers have discussed how different literacies have different currency on the "literacy market" of a community and thus are sensitive to the power relations dominant in the community. MDA seeks to extend this conceptualization to all other meditational means. It is not just literacy that is constituted within practices, but all mediators of actions. Meditational means always index certain identities and express belonging and membership (as in the amateur use of the chisel by the occasional woodcarver or its expert manipulation by the professional cabinetmaker).

From anthropological linguistics and intercultural communication analysis, MDA takes the concern to explicate the sociocultural production of group identities, boundaries, and the discursive process of "othering." From interactional sociolinguistics and ethnomethodology, MDA takes its focus on real-time actions and on the "practical" inference that individuals need to make as they construct and interpret meanings. From "cultural geography" and multimodal semiotics, it borrows an interest in place and in the way we interpret the meaning of public texts as they are materially placed in the world (Scollon and Scollon 2003). For MDA, many useful theoretical tools and concepts have been provided by other traditions, and they can usefully be brought together to illuminate the study of human actions.

Unit of Analysis

While firmly anchored in the various frameworks briefly highlighted above, MDA has also developed a toolkit to focus attention on its own issues. We thus spell out key notions and ontological entities mobilized by researchers working within that frame. In general, social theory takes social groups or social classes as the primary focus of analysis. They are considered the "social units" which constitute the world and society, and individual humans who make up social groups are largely taken as interchangeable. Central questions typically have to do with how struggles between classes or groups form a dialectic to produce ideology which is then absorbed by or embodied by individual members, giving groups a relatively permanent or stable existence. Social institutions, then, are primarily ontological entities where these struggles take place; individual humans become interesting only as they come to represent social institutions (Wertsch 1991).

In contrast to this "social theory ontology" is an "individual ontology"—often called cognitive—that sees everything being built up out of the actions or values or will of individuals. Struggles or conflicts or even successful interactions are primarily thought of as individual or interindividual, though some individuals "borrow" on the power of aggregates of people who have a common goal or interest. For example, a union as an aggregate of individuals may strike in order to obtain higher wages. Within that ontology, cognitive psychology is the primary discipline from which everything else derives.

Instead, in MDA researchers take the primary entity to be the *social action*, taken by a social actor through the use of some *meditational means* (Wertsch 1991). These are all the physical and symbolic "objects", carriers of history and culture, that mediate people's actions and interactions, from technical tools and objects such as drills, bottle openers, pen and papers to the representational tools of language, diagrams, mnemonic techniques, pitch and intonation or genres. Mediational means have both inherent affordances and constraints: they enable certain actions better than others, and to be useful their usage needs to have been internalized at some point in the life cycle of the individual. As R Scollon (2005a: 20) notes, focusing on the mediated action as the unit of analysis is a way of positioning the focus at a point that is neither the individual social actor nor the social groups or institutions nor the meditational means, but at the point at which these are brought concretely into engagement.

In MDA, researchers further distinguish between social action and *social practice*. The former stresses the fact that each action is always unique and irreversible. This action at 5.30pm is different from that action at 5.31pm. Observation of everyday life makes it obvious that there are also kinds of actions that

recur more or less frequently in the lifetime of an individual. These recurring actions usually learned by participating in the everyday social life of a specific community are called "practice" in MDA. Bourdieu (1977) defines a practice as an action with a history. R Scollon defines a practice as "a historical accumulation within the habitus/historical body of the social actor of mediated actions taken over his or her life (experience) and which are recognizable to other social actors as 'the same' social action." (2001b: 149). Unlike its use in sociology and social theory, practice in MDA is understood in a rather narrow sense. MDA focuses not on "nationalism" as a practice but on the myriad local actions that come to constitute over time a nationalist attitude in a particular individual located in a specific community. For example, putting the right hand over the heart, standing and saying the pledge of allegiance every morning in the classroom will be recognized by Americans as such a practice. It might coexist with cooking turkey in a certain way every November, or with wearing small flags and ribbons on one's jacket's lapel, etc.

The material entities constitutive of a mediated action

Some might argue that starting from such concrete units as the fleeting social action or the repeatable social practice is too narrow a focus to address the important social issues of our time (R Scollon 2008, Jones and Norris 2005: 11). The stance taken by MDA, however, is that the broad social discourses of contemporary life circulate through all moments of human action so in that sense looking at practice might be more meaningful than might seem at first glance. These broader social discourses may be most visible when one starts to unpack three essential material entities constitutive of any mediated action (see figure 1):

1) the historical body of the social actor(s) engaged in the mediated action

2) the interaction order (the configuration of people present and the social structuring of their relationships)
3) the discourses in place (the complex set of discourses at the intersection of which the social action is carried out).

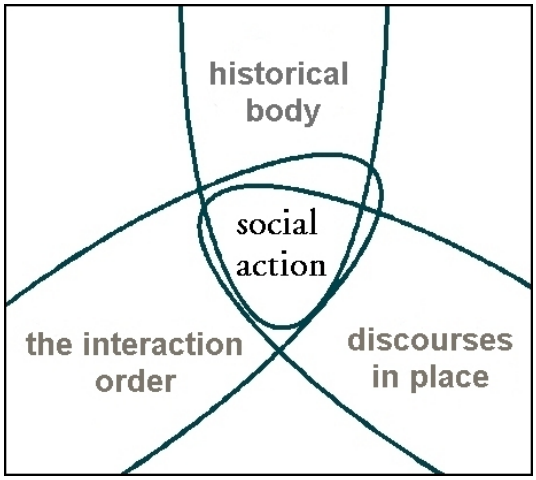

Figure 1. The material entities constitutive of a mediated action (reproduced from Scollon and Scollon 2003)

The *historical body* (Nishida 1958) or what others following Mauss (1936) and Bourdieu (1977) refer to as 'habitus', could be defined as the abstraction of the aggregation of social practices or repeated experiences of the social actor in the course of life. It corresponds to the accumulation of experience that makes people perform actions with greater or lesser facility or dexterity. A lifetime of personal habits feel so natural that one's body carries out actions seemingly without being told. For example, a person might automatically squish ants on her desk. Another might get a spider or a ladybug to crawl onto a piece of paper and then shake it out a window. These actions reveal to spectators a lifetime of habits. Though the same person might do one for decades and then change to the other, the actions are linked by belonging to specific networks, and ultimately are forms of embodied ideology.

The notion of *interaction order* comes from sociologist Erving Goffman (1971). It refers to the social configuration in which actors find themselves: the individuals who are present, the attention they pay to each other, the ecology of the situation. The concern is to identify in what kind of interactional configuration an action is carried out or inscribes itself. As R Scollon (2008: 19) emphasizes, reading a statement criticizing some new regulation constitutes a very different kind of action (and thus carries very different meanings) whether someone is reading this statement alone at his desk, in front of a television camera, or out loud among a group of activist friends sharing the same outlook on the regulation. The impact of the reading will be very different depending on the participants' roles in the situation: whether one is a ratified participant in a talk-show or voices his opinion as a non-invited guest will likely make a big difference in the reception and interpretation of this discourse. As Scollon remarks, the meaning of the text being read might at first have a potential for interpretation that we assume would not vary greatly from one situation to another, but the actual act of reading might transform that meaning given the interactional configuration in which it is accomplished (2008: 19).

The third material entity requiring attention are the arrays of texts actually present in the situation, as well as the mediational means available at the point of taking action: which texts or tools are being attended to? Which ones are being ignored or sidelined? The role of the analyst is to identify which discourses are present and used at the moment of performing a social action. Studying the discourses in place in a classroom for example might include attention to the posters on the walls, the spatial organization of desks and the perspective on instruction they materialize, the words written on the board, presidential portraits or religious crucifix, the textbooks, the "play corner", the architecture of the school, its location in a wealthy or

poor urban suburb, and the way the sun shining through the windows changes the atmosphere and level of concentration. Besides studying these components, the researcher will need to listen to the overt discourses circulating in that space: the private chat pupils have hiding from the teacher's attention, the group discussions in collaborative moments of learning, the way the teacher words his explanations and instructions, the essays written by the pupils or the poems recited by them. She will also need to pay attention to the discourses "submerged" in the historical bodies of participants. A mediated discourse analysis does not seek to make an inventory of the discourses aggregating in one place, but rather to identify which ones constrain the actions of interest to the researcher, and which ones seem on the contrary to facilitate their accomplishment or give them impetus.

Attending to these three interrelated aspects of any mediated action is a way to avoid uprooting words and actions from the historical bodies of the individuals performing them, or disconnecting the discourses and actions from the sociocultural context of their formation and realization, or ignoring the history of these actions and discourses for the individual and in the situation. These three entities—historical bodies, interaction order, discourses in place— are indeed not static entities but "processes in motion over time" (Wortham 2006). The individual accumulates experience in the course of his/her trajectory across time and space, social orders open up and close and are rearranged, discourses in place are transformed as buildings are refashioned, innovative technologies are introduced, new texts and discourses circulate. The trajectory of these changes is unpredictable. Successfully developing a mediated discourse analysis means trying to map when these somewhat autonomous trajectories intersect and meet.

Given this complexity, one last issue that needs to be addressed concerns how researchers can be in a position to identify and analyze the actions most likely to give them a grip on the issue they are investigating. That question is taken up in the next section, as we report in a brief example what an MDA research project might look like.

Doing a Mediated Discourse Analysis: nexus analysis

The historical, ethnographic and methodological arm of MDA is called "nexus analysis". A nexus analysis consists in opening up the circumference of analysis around moments of human action to begin to see the lines, sometimes visible and sometimes obscured, of historical and social processes by which discourses come together at particular moments of human action as well as to make visible the ways in which outcomes such as transformations in those discourses, social actors, and meditational means emanate from those moments of action.

Nexus analyses can take many forms (compare for example Lou, 2010a, b; Wohlwend, 2009a, b, Raudaskoski, 2010, and Jones, 2007). The research may involve close analysis of texts or not, semiotic analyses of visuals, study of the interaction order, ethnographic observations, etc. or any combinations of these. This variety proceeds from nexus analysis as a form of action research, intimately bound to the specifics of situation studied and issue researched. The researcher in MDA is considered an integral part of the nexus she studies. She uses scientific inquiry to engage with the nexus— even sometimes transforming it.

A nexus analysis usually centers on three main tasks or activities: (1) engaging the nexus of practice, (2) navigating the nexus of practice, (3) changing the nexus of practice[iii]. The following report on a project carried out by one of the authors

(together with Yuling Pan, see S. Scollon 2005) on census enumeration illustrates very briefly what is involved.

The opening task, "engaging the nexus of practice," consists in establishing a "zone of identification" with the nexus, that is the researcher must place herself as part of the nexus of practice under study. When and how to identify oneself as part of the nexus is thus an important part of "engaging the nexus". We examine how this step is taken in the "census enumeration project".

A census consists of a series of closely-related activities through which information about the members of a given population are acquired and recorded for statistical purposes for research, marketing or planning. Pan and Scollon sought to understand the moment of enumeration involving Chinese immigrants to the United States, uncovering sociopolitical discourses embodied in census forms and census enumerators as well as immigrants. In particular, they wanted to find out why certain recent immigrants were reluctant to engage in the process. A preliminary step was to enter the nexus of practice. The focus was on determining the kind of interactional configurations in which enumeration happens (interaction order), the history of experience individuals had with census enumeration (historical body) as well as the aggregates of discourses coming into play at the moment when individuals engaged with a governmental discourse such as census enumeration (Discourses in Place). At this early stage, the authors identified as key moments of the process the door-to-door interviews carried out by census enumerators. They decided to observe the small "withs" (Goffman 1971) or configurations of actors in which the process takes place, the history of practice of Chinese immigrants with the forms, and the Discourses in place in homes where census enumeration typically occurs. As researchers sponsored by the U.S Census Bureau, it was relatively simple for the researchers to identify

themselves as participants in interviews of Chinese immigrants and thus to start establishing themselves in a zone of identification with the residents of D.C. urban neighborhoods. This position not only provided a good look-out post from where to study the practices of census enumeration but also allowed them to engage in this practice themselves.

The second stage and main phase of a nexus analysis, "navigating the nexus of practice", consists, beyond identifying key sites and action, of working your way through the "trajectories of participants, places and situations both back in time historically and forward through actions and anticipations to see if crucial discourse cycles or semiotic cycles can be identified" (R Scollon 2008).

To understand why some people might be reluctant to engage in door-to-door interviews, researchers needed to go beyond local actions, to open up the circumference of analysis. This is akin to providing what literary critics term the backstory, a narrative of what has happened in the character's life before the current narrative begins. In the census study, the researchers set out to study how the habits of residents related to forms, languages, gadgets such as clipboards, as part of the discourses circulating in the moment of filling out the form. They attended to the interactional configuration in which enumeration takes place. They also paid attention to the historical bodies of individuals, their different ethnicity or gender and occupational roles.

Looking at door-to-door interviews, the researchers identified a number of potential obstacles. Even before such an action can take place, the enumerator must gain access to a respondent by ringing a doorbell. No questioning can take place if a resident does not recognize the enumerator and open the door. The enumerator must present an adequate "personal front"(Goffman 1971). She must take care to look

professional and somewhat official but unlike a solicitor. But to understand this simple action, we also need to understand the habits of residents. In many big cities, it may not be considered safe to open the door to strangers, and in the experience of many residents, it may simply never have been done.

Navigating the nexus of practice also entailed interviewing a social worker with ten years of experience in working with Chinatown immigrants and helping them deal with the census. They also taught English to recent immigrants, interviewing them in the process. The social worker highlighted that in Chinatown the census workers were typically African American males who had difficulty gaining entry into homes where Chinese immigrant women were home alone. The researchers also found out that recent immigrants from China are accustomed to having forms being filled out by census takers and thus have limited experience with deciphering questions or filling out forms, answering multiple choice questions or interacting with strangers or representatives of the government. This historical memory as well inability to speak or read English, or Census form Chinese, i.e. speaking Mandarin and reading simplified rather than complex characters, made them reluctant to engage in census enumeration (see Figure 2).

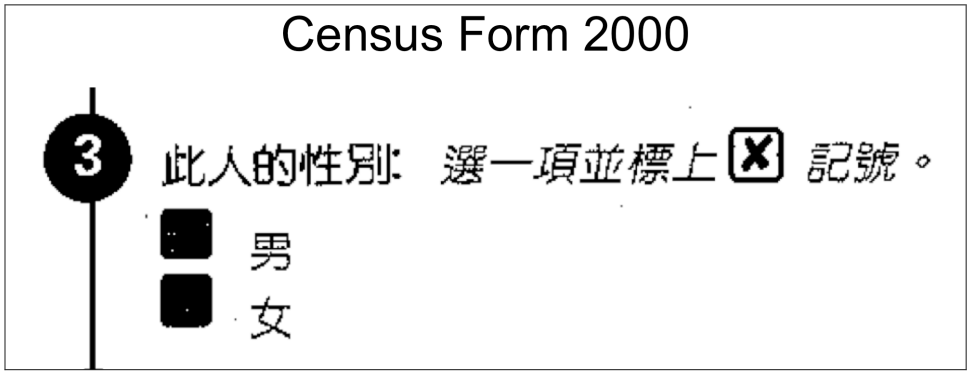

Figure 2 The census form in 2000

Navigating the nexus of practice thus resulted in studying discourse on three different levels. Firstly, it consisted in studying discourse as the complex aggregates of discourses in place, including the discourse on the census forms, the ways of dressing of census enumerators, their technological front (with personal digital assistants, notebook computers, etc.), the design of the form, the characters chosen, etc. Secondly, it included studying discourse as and in the bodies of individual social actors and how they embodied consciously or unconsciously a history of sociocultural processes (opening doors to stranger, filling a form oneself or having it filled by someone else, etc.). Thirdly, navigating the nexus consisted in analyzing discourse as distributed in the bodies of other social actors (the exchanges between census enumerator and residents, between social workers and residents, identity displays, etc.). This analysis allowed the unpacking of various aspects of census enumeration as a situated and mediated process.

The third stage in a nexus analysis is called *changing the nexus of practice* and consists in re-engaging the product of the analysis back into the nexus of practice from where it originates. The researcher has now contributed "time and skills in analysis to open up and make visible links and connections among the many trajectories of the historical bodies, discourses in place, and interaction order" which constitutes the issue under investigation (Scollon and Scollon 2004: 178), and the work of analyzing and disentangling practices and discourses have now become an integral part of the nexus. In the census project, changing the nexus of practice consisted in recommending changes on various levels on the basis of the results of the analysis. These included changes in the discourses in place such as the Chinese characters printed on census forms (see Figure 3), the place of enumeration, and the interactional configuration. Many Chinatown residents were now being enumerated

by a trusted social worker at a nearby social service center rather than strangers at their home. Doing discourse analysis was thus transformative of the nexus of practice.

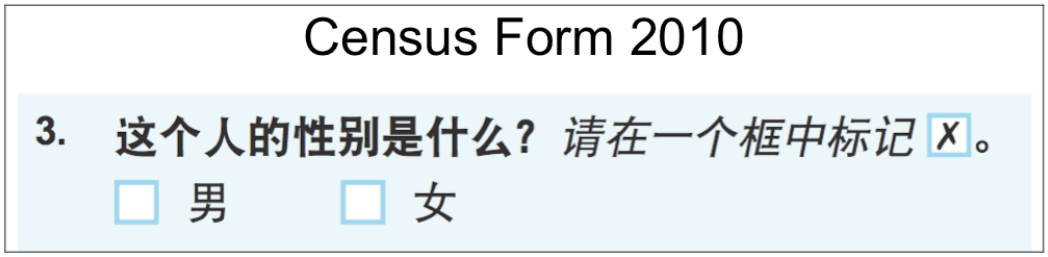

Figure 3：The census form 2010

It may not be evident to the reader how this simple change in the way the U.S. Census Bureau goes about its work constitutes activist sociolinguistics. Taken together with Johnston's work with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Castillo-Ayometzi's work with narratives of undocumented immigrants crossing the Rio Grande into Texas, Shroyer's work on patriotism, and recent moves by the State of Arizona to allow detention of citizens or documented immigrants without cause, it is conceivable that changes in enumeration may be less than trivial. When door-to-door enumeration becomes a form of gatekeeping encounter in which the census taker has power to define significant outcomes for respondents who must account for themselves, it might be important that the respondents keep some agency in the process.

Conclusion

We see discourse analysis as a fundamentally active force. As Ron Scollon concludes in his book *Analyzing public discourse*, ". . . in democratic public discourse positions are stated, positions are argued, positions are negotiated and the actions which are taken and which become policy and practice are the outcome of this

dialectic (2008: 162).” Linguists have a role to play in society because they are adept at using and interpreting language, and language is the means of setting, consolidating or undermining sociopolitical positions. Being part of the process and part of the dialectic, they too can aspire to affect processes in the social world. But this cannot be done without seeing one’s own trajectory altered in the process, and they must keep their wits about them to pay attention to the roar of tankers or clouds of petroleum when others are ignoring them.

Related topics

[Discourse and ‘The New Literacy Studies’] ; [Politics as usual: Investigating Political Discourse in Action] ; [Critical Discourse Analysis] ; [Interactional Sociolinguistics] ; [Multimodal Discourse Analysis]; [The Ethnography of Communication]

Further readings

- R Scollon (1998) is the springboard from which scholars began doing what became known as MDA. In that work, Scollon argues that in the production of texts of mediated discourse, the texts, objects or images are secondary to social interactions among the producers of the texts.
- This conceptual core was further developed in R Scollon (2001a), which detailed the ontogeny in a child of the practice of handing an object in the second year of life. The phrase “mediated discourse analysis” is first found here.

- Scollon and Scollon (2004) outlined the method of nexus analysis retrospectively using data from projects conducted in Alaska from 1979 through 1984. This is the methodological arm of MDA.
- Norris and Jones (2005) introduce MDA with this edition of chapters that address real contemporary social issues, explicating key notions by showing actions taken with texts and their consequences.
- R Scollon (2008) returns to Alaska, the site of the first nexus analysis, showing how MDA can be used to bring about change in the selling of oil leases off the Arctic coast to major oil companies, detailing how the analysis itself can be submitted as public input that the government bureau is obliged to pay attention to. It is an example of "activist sociolinguistics."

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[i] We discuss in the section "Unit of Analysis" below the distinction MDA makes between social actions and social practices.

[ii] Bourdieu's notion of habitus is further discussed below, under the heading "Unit of Analysis". It refers to the dispositions et predispositions an actor has by virtue of his previous conditions and experience and which are generative of specific ways of acting, perceiving or behaving in the world.

[iii] These activities are described in more detail in Scollon & Scollon (2004).