

Discourse in Action
Introducing mediated
discourse analysis

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From emails relating to adoption over the internet to discussions in the airline cockpit, the spoken or written texts we produce can have significant social consequences. The area of mediated discourse analysis considers the actions individuals take with texts – and the consequences of those actions.

Discourse in Action brings together the leading scholars from around the world in the area of mediated discourse analysis and reveals ways in which its theory and methodology can be used in research into contemporary social situations. Each chapter explores real situations and draws on real data to show how the analysis of concrete social actions broadens our understanding of discourse. Taken together, the chapters provide a comprehensive overview to the field and offer a range of current studies that address some of the most important questions facing students and researchers in linguistics, education, communication studies, and other fields.

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interested in literacy to answer questions like how *attention structures* developed in on-line interaction affect students' responses to school-based activities, and help those interested in sexuality or public health understand how the *attention structures* that gay men make use of in on-line interaction affect the ways they orient towards each other when they finally meet. In this sense, sites of engagement, and the *attention structures* that activate them, are *heuristic* devices, both for participants and analysts. They are points where social practices and social identities converge, and where a single action like inviting somebody to chat in a chat room can be traced to the interplay of larger Discourses and relations of power in the socio-cultural environment.

Notes

- 1 Computer Mediated Communication and Youth Literacy in Hong Kong: A Participatory Ethnographic Approach (Principal Investigator in collaboration with Dr David Li). Hong Kong RGC Competitive Earmarked Research Grant # 9040856. www.personal.cityu.edu.hk/~en-cyber/Cyberkids/Home.htm.
- 2 An Ethnographic Study of Computer Mediated Communication among Gay Men in Hong Kong. City University of Hong Kong Small Scale Research Grant # 9030988. www.personal.cityu.edu.hk/~en-cyber/cybertongzhi.htm.

15 From anticipation to performance: sites of engagement as process

Ingrid de Saint-Georges

Process in discourse analysis

With its aim of contributing knowledge to the understanding of agency, social action and social change, mediated discourse analysis has sought since the beginning to develop concepts and ideas to show how actions and discourses acquire their meanings from the positions they occupy within historical sequences of events. In this perspective, one important notion in mediated discourse analysis is that people, objects, tools and discourses have a *history* and project a *future*. They move, each at their own rates and on their own *timescales*, along *trajectories* (Scollon and Scollon, 2004; S. Scollon, 2001; R. Scollon, this volume). This focus on trajectories has come to be an important component of *nexus analyses*. It naturally invites us to enlarge the scope of traditional discourse analysis and to move beyond the level of single events to start addressing issues such as how social realities are constituted across time and spaces, and what kind of methodological and theoretical tools we need to conceptualize how events, people, ideas, objects and knowledge evolve over time.

In this chapter, I explore how the *sites of engagement* that constitute a research process are constructed by researchers and participants and connected to one another through actions and *anticipatory discourses*. I examine how distant discourses and actions become linked to constitute this research process and attempt to describe how, as a researcher, I fit into time myself as my research evolves. I outline various moments where I enter into relationships with the participants, and sketch the evolution of the research process from determining a *zone of identification* to interacting in complex tasks with the participants. Finally, I reflect in more general terms upon the kind of topics diachronic data may lead linguists to examine and discuss some of the implications that adopting a processual view of discourse may have for discourse analysis. I hope to show how mediated discourse analysis can help us think about how to construct more complex process-oriented studies.

Trajectories as data

To ground my reflections on how a research process is constituted across time and space, I have chosen to examine three threads of linked actions and interactions. These threads are drawn from ethnographic research I carried out at 'Horizons,' a vocational center located in Belgium which provides training in manual trades to long-term unemployed youth. This data consists of excerpts from fieldnotes, shots from video-recorded actions and excerpts from documents collected in the course of my observations of the activities of a group of individuals being trained in sheet-rocking. My description and analysis of this data will partly take the form of an introspection since, as a researcher, there are many times where I have only access to the chain of mediated actions I carried out myself. I cannot reconstruct the other participants' trajectories towards a particular moment of work since I was not present to observe how they prepared or oriented to this work outside of the moments when we met.¹

Looking at these documents and notes as material traces of my history of dealings with the sheet-rocking group, the following timeline can be reconstructed, with several landmark events or sites of engagement conceived as *space/time stations*:

- *Space/time station 1. June 18, 1999. Horizons/Namur, Belgium.* In June 1999, I begin pilot fieldwork at Horizons in view of developing a research project to meet doctoral requirements at Georgetown University. On June 18, I ask Henry, the monitor in sheet-rocking for permission to carry out observation on the work site when he and his group are working. This is my very first encounter with a member of the group.
- *Space/time station 2. June 23, 1999. Arch Town, Belgium.* On June 23, 1999, I join the sheet-rockers' group and spend one day observing their work, which consists in the building of an arch in a house. I video-tape part of the work done on that day.
- *Space/time station 3. December, 1999. Washington, DC, US.* In August 1999, I return to Georgetown and start writing about my time with the sheet-rockers. In December of 1999, I hand in a proposal with my 'action-plan' for my actual fieldwork, which will begin in January 2000. This proposal recontextualizes some of the moments lived with the sheet-rockers.
- *Space/time station 4. Early March, 2000. Horizons, Belgium.* I resume fieldwork in January 2000. At the beginning of March, I request from Henry the permission to visit his group again. This is the point at which my trajectory and the group's trajectory meet again after a long interval without interactions.
- *Space/time station 5. March 5, 2000. Namur, Belgium.* I prepare the material I will need for carrying out observations with the group.

- *Space/time station 6. March 6, 2000. Apartment Town, Belgium.* I spend the day observing activities linked to partitioning a mansard-roofed apartment.
- *Space/time station 7. Between June 2000 and May 2003. Namur, Belgium/Washington, DC, US.* I carry out my analysis and write up my research work on the basis of the data gathered.
- *Space/time station 8. December-July, 2004. Brussels, Belgium.* I transform and revise my analysis and write up the current chapter.
- *Space/time station 9.* After editorial transformation by the authors of this book you are now reading this chapter somewhere else as a part of your own trajectory.

I view sites of engagement as *space/time stations* (Gu, 2002) and follow Hägerstrand and Gu who propose that individuals' trajectories sometimes diverge and sometimes converge. When they converge, they cross paths on specific 'social occasions' or *stations*, which can be thought of as spatially and temporally bounded experiential spaces (a home, a work site, a city, etc.) within which individuals can engage in individual or joint actions. Individuals can open up a variety of sites of engagement within these *space/time stations*. Thus, *stations* are not 'practico-inert containers of action' (Crang and Thrift, 2000: 2). Rather, through the actions of the participants these *space/time stations* are both constituted and transformed over time. They are thus best conceived 'as process and in process (that is space and time combined in becoming)' (Crang and Thrift, 2000: 3, emphasis in original). What I would like to consider now is how these *space/time stations* become connected so as to start integrating into trajectories. I would like to propose that one methodological way in which we can attempt to capture the unfolding of trajectories is by looking at the relationship between what people anticipate they will do (*anticipation*) and how these chains of anticipation and action start weaving the threads of practice and mediational means across sites of engagement.

In the next section, I will show through the analysis of the empirical data how sites of engagements become connected through the anticipatory discourses and the actions of the participants.

Anticipatory discourse: from anticipation to performance

One of the ways in which actors in the world construct events across time and space is by first projecting those events and then trying to find ways to realize them. An overwhelming part of our everyday behavior indeed consists of consciously or unconsciously projecting outcomes and finding means for accomplishing them. We set agendas, plan, prepare and organize courses of action; we anticipate events and processes and work to avoid or realize them. Our plans

follow their courses or are disrupted. Noting that very few studies had been done regarding how individuals orient towards the future, Scollon and Scollon (2000) have proposed that closer attention should be paid to studying what they have called 'anticipatory discourses' (see also S. Scollon, 2001; de Saint-Georges, 2003; Filletaz, 2004c). The analysis of anticipatory discourses could be defined as the study of 'the ways in which discourse may be used to produce possible or impossible actions in the future' (R. Scollon, 2002c: 5). It invites us to explore how discourses about future actions figure in the production of these social actions: are they simply a part of the mechanisms through which we reason about actions or do they play a part in 'generating' actions? These issues can be explored through the analysis of three threads in the empirical data.

Thread 1: the trajectory of a practice

The very first traces I have of an encounter with a member of the sheet-rocking group are a few notes in my fieldnote book:

(1)

Friday night. 06/18/99
make an appointment → Monday: masons. Wednesday: sheet-rocking with Henry, who asks me who I am, if I work as a social worker; seems open to my presence on the work site no problem. Will give me a cap and overalls; we change clothes on the work site to not dirty his van. Direct. To the point

Let us concentrate on the three future-oriented propositions, 'Wednesday: sheet-rocking with Henry,' 'will give me a cap and overalls' and 'we change clothes on the work site,' and the actions that emanate from this first encounter. First, while I write the text above to record an encounter prior in the day, this note is also a reminder to myself about a future engagement (the plan to meet on Wednesday). Ladrrière notes that, for an activity involving a plurality of actors to occur, the actors must at some point develop convergence in their understanding of the activity in question (Ladrrière, 2001: 277). This includes communicating to each other the timing of the activity. Making an appointment thus forms part of a 'dynamic of occasions' (de Fornel, 1993: 97) and appears as a mode to start constituting an intersubjective future between the parties scheduling the encounter. This 'scheduling discourse' is linked to the site of engagement opening on Wednesday June 23 (space/time station 2) when I join the group to do observations of their work. Our project to meet thus concretizes into a real encounter, enabling me to pursue my research and establish a relationship for future encounters.

The 'intention' expressed by Henry to bring me cap and overalls does not present the same degree of commitment since this discourse does not lead to action.

Henry actually forgets to bring them (intention does not lead inevitably to action) and as a result I do not change clothes on the work site as I have been instructed to in this first encounter with Henry. Many months later, however (space/time stations 5 and 6), as I prepare to resume observations of the group's work, I put in my bag work clothes I intend to wear on the work site as I have been directed to do in this June encounter with Henry. As I groom myself for work the next day, Henry's initial discourse about changing clothes on the work site has now been 'submerged' as part of my practices (Scollon and Scollon, 2004: 18). This practice has moved from the explicit level of discursive explanation to the more implicit appropriation of the meanings of this discourse on a behavioral level.

Thread 2: the trajectory of a mediational means

On my first day with the sheet-rockers (Wednesday June 23, 1999 – space/time station 2, construction of an arch), Henry asks me if I would agree to film the work done during the day. He would like to produce pedagogical materials for future trainees who might not have the opportunity to learn how to construct an arch hands-on. They could learn about it through viewing the video. One of the effects of this request is to change significantly my perception of what is 'possible' or 'practicable' for my ongoing research. I can start designing a research project that takes this technological possibility into account. I state these ideas in the proposal I write in December 1999 (space/time station 3). The data collected during pilot fieldwork has now become a resource to design an 'action-plan' for the actual fieldwork I aim to begin in January 2000:

(2)

Regarding the video-recording of the data, it should be noted that the Center has recently acquired a video-camera. The purpose of this purchase is to be able to document the work on the different work sites... I learned of this project in the course of doing my pilot fieldwork, when one instructor requested that I video-tape the different stages of the work for that day... By using this video-camera, I will thus be able to fulfill [the following] function... record the mediated actions necessary for my analysis. To ease the analysis of the discourse dimensions, I also plan to tape-record verbal activities taking place on work sites and use this audio-recording for the discourse analysis aspect of my research.

Proposals usually qualify as text of the 'rational planning' type: they are usually produced in anticipation of carrying out research and have discursive characteristics of rationalistic texts. As Dant and Francis (1998: 3.3)² note, the 'traditional model of rational planning would suggest that these plans stood as directives to

future action.' However, viewed in this historical perspective we see that this plan has as much a retrospective character as a prospective one. On the one hand, the 'working plan' of video-taping activities became a 'rational plan' only 'after [it] acquired a coherence during courses of action, not in advance of such action' (Dant and Francis, 1998: 4.2). On the other hand, as a plan, the proposal fails to detail what exact course of action should be taken on the work site (e.g. when to begin and stop video-taping, how to approach asking participants if one can video-tape, etc.). It does not in fact so much create 'strategies' for action as it 'programs the strategies [I] already have' (Mintzberg, quoted in Dant and Francis, 1998: 2.10) and present them formally, leaving it to the moment of situated actions to find practical ways to implement these strategies.

In fact, the implementation of the plan is not without difficulties. Bridging the gap between the formal plan and the actual realization of the action of video/audio-taping on the work site becomes an object of struggle as indicated in a note I write to myself in the morning of March 6, 2000 on my way to Horizons. I write in my fieldnote book as an injunction for the day:

(3)
I must manage to tape record more on the work site; I am afraid to ask and to impose; I must; I must; I must;

While the repeated 'I must' does not generate the fact that I later taped exchanges on the work site, I would suggest, however, that it stands in a determinate relationship to my action of taping. For Campbell (1996), sociologists have on the whole been more concerned about the meanings of action rather than on the way in which action is constructed. For him however:

Truly to adopt the actor's perspective is to regard action as an accomplishment and to recognize that it is the outcome of a struggle: something which has to be achieved against resistance, being in effect the end product of a willed effort involving certain given processes of 'determination.'
(Campbell, 1996: 158)

Understanding the subjective meanings of an action suggests Campbell (1996: 160), moreover 'involves ascertaining the role played by emotion, imagination, effort, attention and will':

In this respect the actor's capacity to create and manipulate meaning has to be regarded as a critical resource employed to accomplish acts and not simply that which 'gives' actions their meaning.

(Campbell, 1996: 160)

What these comments from Campbell highlight is that, in writing this note to myself, I am neither seeking to "make sense of things", or "render them accountable" (Campbell, 1996: 159) as for example ethnomethodologists might suggest, nor does it constitute a form of decision-making (my decision is already made). I am trying to exert agency as a researcher despite the difficulties I perceive for realizing my goal. I am thus not so much using discourse to reflect about a future action as I am using it as an impetus to accomplish an ordinary action.

Later in the course of the day, I write as an evaluative afterthought in my notebook:

(4)
Finally, I feel quite free to film and to tape.

I am performing smoothly the audio-taping I had feared I would not be able to perform in the morning.

Thread 3: from design to production: the trajectories leading to a site of engagement

All the actions mentioned above (the pilot fieldwork, the filming, the proposal, the preparing of clothes to change on the work site, the decision to audio-tape) constitute anticipatory actions and discourses leading to my observations of actual work on the work site. On March 6, the work to be carried out is the renovation of an apartment where the sheet-rockers have been asked to construct interior walls. This work inscribes itself in numerous other trajectories than my own: the trajectories of the various workers, the trajectory of the architect's planning of the work, the trajectory of the apartment's history etc., such that we could consider this moment of work as:

a point at which historical trajectories of people, places, discourse, ideas and objects come together to enable some action which in itself alters those historical trajectories in some ways as these trajectories emanate from the moment of social action.
(Scollon and Scollon, 2004)

Let us consider two phases in the realization of this work: its *design* and its *production*.

The design of the work

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: Chapter 3) distinguish between what they call the faculty of 'design' of individuals – which is to say their ability to draw on available

semiotic modes and resources to conceptualize, project and imagine how a given semiotic structure should be produced – and the ability for ‘production,’ which is to say their ability to implement the design in a given form. In the case of construction work, the ‘design’ is often the task of the architect and is couched in blueprints and set of specifications, such as this one, produced for the realization of the interior walls:

(5)

Article Ø8.03:

non-bearing partitions

1. Work description.

Fixed partitions made of metal frames with internal insulator and plaster board coating.

2. This work comprises.

This work concerns the carrying into execution of light dividing walls.

The characteristics of this partition are conceived as to meet the requirements of the NBN S01-400 and reach at least category 11b.

The on-site trial of a partition with simple frame coated with two boards on each side, insulated by 50 MM glasswool – 16 kg/M³ (MS 100/2.50.2.A) falls within category 11a-Rm (100–3150 Hz) 52 dB.

A. METAL FRAME

Simple metal frame composed of iron sections galvanized by heat, Ø6 MM thick, METAL STUD MSH (U) type and MSV (C) from GYPROC, which is to say:

- tracing of the work in the presence of the architect;
- depending on situation, punctual clearing of the coat at the butt and ceiling maintained in order to bond the finishing touches;
- implementation of peripheral break-away bands constituted, depending on the thickness to be reached, of compressed glasswool, or padding;
- Assembling of the frame according to the manufacturer's prescriptions, width of the iron sections L = 50 MM;

[CONTINUES]

Even without understanding the professional jargon used by the architect in referring to materials that are to be used in the work process, it is clear that this document refers to an ensemble of norms and requirements, which either indicate how to use the material (usually according to manufacturer's prescription) or specify legal requirements (e.g. regarding sound proofing [52 dB]). The document thus functions as a set of *instructions*, which carry a number of *responsibilities* with them and which are caught within a larger normative Discourse of construction work. The document however remains rather sketchy about the work processes that the workers should effectively carry out to produce the partitions. If the

specifications can remain under-determined in this way, it is because they rely on precise and well-known scripts within the domain of practice of sheet-rocking and make sense in relation to regular, organized, socially meaningful occupational practices. It is also these practices and scripts that the trainees have to learn if they want to become sheet-rockers in their own right.

The production of the work

The physical production of what the blueprint represents – its articulation in a material form (a wall partition) – includes moving from modes and resources understood abstractly to examining how actors use their embodied skills to accomplish the physical actions necessary to implement the design. The excerpt described below was filmed during the construction of the partitioning walls and is one example of this recontextualization of the architectural discourse into action. In this sequence, Henry, the monitor, is making measurements, while Billy (standing) and Norbert (sitting) are watching. Then, Norbert starts looking around before uttering, ‘The drill, Billy,’ and he is scanning the room to try to locate the drill. Henry then intervenes and turns towards the back of the room. Pointing towards the window-ledge with his measuring stick he says, ‘it's there’ and then resumes his work. At this point, Billy starts his move to fetch the drill.

In this moment of work many practices are engaged and multiple agendas interact to construct a unique site of engagement. For example, the measuring is in compliance with the normative Discourse of the blueprints and specifications; my filming inscribes itself in the academic Discourse of research; the action of measuring is just one step in a highly scripted sequence of actions which will constitute the higher level of action of ‘partitioning a room’ and is constitutive of the nexus of practices of sheet-rocking. In bearing responsibility for the measurements, Henry acts as the one in charge of fulfilling the contract he has with his client but, in monitoring the actions of the trainees, he also acts within the pedagogical Discourse of training. Through concentrating his attention in multiple directions and engaging in several lines of action simultaneously, Henry thus seeks to fulfill his several agendas.

Norbert's request for the drill can, in the same way, be shown to have multiple functions. In anticipating the tool ahead of the moment of drilling, the request is meant to move the sequence of action forward. But anticipating the next step in the action sequence has also another function. Through the request, Norbert also displays that he has knowledge and expertise about this action sequence. The request thus also positions him as a worker taking initiatives. The form of the request also has an impact on the manner of acting. In requesting the drill, Norbert uses a direct request which in other kinds of circumstances could appear face-threatening. However, Dumas (2001) proposes, in certain contexts such as this

one, the direct form may cue the need to comply with the request without delay. Likewise, the utterance seems here almost to 'generate' the immediate reaction of Billy to look around the room for the drill. The form finally indexes a certain form of power over Billy. Although Norbert is a trainee like Billy, he is already an old-timer at Horizons. Through requesting Billy to perform a task for him (rather than performing it himself), Norbert displays qualities of leadership and initiative that are usually regarded as a sign of progress and good evolution at Horizons. As a newcomer, Billy does not question the old-timer authority of Norbert and responds by complying with the request. Anticipatory discourse (the directive) in this case is used to prompt an action (compliance with the request), as well as construct an identity.

Implications for discourse analysis

In this chapter, I have suggested one way in which a processual outlook on data could be developed. To capture the dynamic evolution of discourses and actions, I have drawn from the theoretical notion of anticipatory discourse. Methodologically, I have used ethnographic field notes and other artifacts collected during fieldwork to document moves from anticipation to performance.

In my view, the trajectory approach put forth by mediated discourse analysis is intellectually attractive because of its ability to shed light on new and important areas of inquiry. The data analyzed suggest a few directions that could be fruitfully taken to further our understanding of discourse in ways that we have not done much so far.

First, in the domain of *genre analysis*, it calls for developing a better understanding of texts oriented towards the future (procedures, specifications, plans, agendas, etc.) as opposed to the past (narrative accounts). Paying attention to how actions and discourses are located in time also promises to renew the discussion regarding the *functions* of discourse in relation to action (can it 'generate' action in the strong sense or is it part of the mechanisms through which we reason about action?).

Another area for study it opens up is to pay more attention to the specificities of *time as a semiotic mode* mediating social interactions. In this area, we need to construct a much more complex understanding of how humans are 'organizers of complex temporal arrangements and assessment' (Star, 1997: 6.4). We also need to get a better grasp of how objects, representations, institutions, etc. and their respective timescales oppose resistance to individuals' actions. As Star (1997) puts it:

We organize ourselves in time, guessing, modeling, depending on the timings of other people and things. Sometimes things unfold as planned; more often,

there are twists and tangles along the way. How we manage these twists is in some sense what makes us quintessentially human, what ties us to the world. (Star, 1997: 6.2)

A truly ecological approach to interaction must thus necessarily involve developing a much more complex and solid understanding of this dimension.

Paying attention to the specificities of time as one mode of becoming of things, events, identities, representation is also the only way to proceed if we want to address seriously the issue of *change*, a process that necessarily consumes time. In this chapter I have considered very local changes (the transformation of the physical space of an apartment, the semiotic transformation of my representations over time, etc.); but what scales do we have to take into account if we consider more important changes?

In a world that is ruled by the 'cult of urgency' (Aubert and Roux-Dufort, 2003), it will probably be a challenge to carry out the long-term longitudinal studies required to make an epistemological breakthrough in this domain. Studying time and its effects may be, in this way, a form of resistance to the short-term views that characterize so much of the discourses and actions of our time.

Notes

- 1 This introspective approach as a methodology was first suggested and developed in S. Scollon (2001).
- 2 Dant and Francis (1998: 3.3; 1998: 4.4; 1998: 2.10) and Star (1997: 6.4; 1997: 6.2) are references to paragraphs of an electronic document.