



Nicola Woods

# DESCRIBING DISCOURSE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Nicola Woods

Hodder Arnold

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*For Peter*

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# Introduction

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## Language

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Language is integral to the fabric of our daily life: we talk, we listen, we read and we write. We learn – at school, at home, in our work and our leisure time – and this learning is achieved largely through language. In our jobs or professions and in our everyday experience we deal with people: we may have to manage them, teach them, heal them, defend them or bargain with them; we may have to convince them, counsel them, reassure them, dissuade them, break bad news to them or justify our actions to them. In our human relationships, invariably, we all need to explain things to people, tell them our stories, consult with them about a problem, make plans either with them or on their behalf, or complain to them of unfair or unjust treatment. We make friends, try to please them, entertain them and amuse them. Alternatively, we may want to exert power over people or grant power to them; we may want to negotiate our position with them or renegotiate it at some later stage. All these activities, these social relations of ours, involve language; most of them, in fact, are more or less wholly circumscribed by linguistic communication.

For language is a social practice – and many would want to say that it is the defining social practice. Our social relationships are almost wholly realized in language; language leads us to act and behave in certain ways, and it is a powerful shaping force in how we think about and construct the world we live in. It would certainly be a mistake to believe that our social practices consist of nothing but language; but it is equally certain that the way we use language is an essential part of our human experience. It may even be largely through the social practice of language that we actually ‘construct’ ourselves as we negotiate our way through life.

Our language has different levels of structure: sounds, words, grammar, and so forth. But just as language does not exist in a social void, so the elements of language do not exist in a vacuum either. Words do not ‘contain’ meaning in themselves and meaning is not ‘discovered’ in them: meaning is something we construct, as social beings, in our own minds. We all have different minds, personalities and individualities, and so we also construct different meanings, for ourselves and for each other, in our use of language. And if it is through our social and linguistic relationships with the rest of the world that we construct meaning, then without the context of those relationships our language is essentially meaningless.

Since meaning is constructed – negotiated, if you prefer – in our social practice of language, rather than simply contained in words, then it follows that the relationship between the forms and functions of our language is necessarily flexible. No linguistic form – be it a word, a phrase or a sentence – can simply be associated with one particular function or meaning. Our utterances mean what we intend them to mean, and the essentially cooperative practice of our social behaviour ensures that

our linguistic intentions are, for the most part, understood by those with whom we interact – regardless of their syntactic form or their dictionary definitions. Thus, while the utterance, ‘It’s getting late’, may be classified as *declarative* in its syntactic structure, it may not necessarily perform a simple *informing* function. If uttered by a speaker waiting for a lift at the end of a long night, it will quite reasonably be understood as a *request* to be taken home. The speaker is (syntactically) *declaring* something to be the case, yes, but the intention of this linguistic item of social behaviour – the meaning negotiated in this context – is to *ask for* something to be done.

By the same token, any particular communicative function, whether informing, questioning or commanding, may be fulfilled by a variety of linguistic forms. A teacher who wishes to maintain order in her class may exclaim, ‘Who’s talking?’, using an *interrogative* form to perform the function of *ordering* someone to stop talking. Her intended meaning will be understood perfectly – in the context.

Indeed, the reason that this complex and fluid arrangement actually works in practice lies in the crucial concept of *context*. We understand that ‘Who’s talking?’ functions as a command, but only when we know the context in which it is uttered: in this case, by a schoolteacher in a classroom. If the same expression is articulated (even by the same teacher) in a different context – perhaps apprehensively asking a friend in the kitchen if her dinner party guests are getting on with each other – then the function and meaning of the interrogative form, ‘Who’s talking?’, will be correspondingly different, and yet will be understood just as readily. Similarly, if the same expression is used in a classroom, but not by a teacher, then different functions and meanings again will be associated with the utterance.

The ability to communicate competently requires us to learn and understand the dynamic and shifting system of communication in context, and we learn it by becoming familiar with patterns and routines of language usage. Without necessarily realizing it at a conscious level, we follow socially and culturally constructed communicative conventions. Even a simple task such as buying a newspaper will involve us in a complex and carefully observed routine of communicative etiquette; handling relationships with our intimates entails correspondingly more intricate patterns of interaction.

How easy is it, for example, to finish a conversation with a friend? There is often much more involved than a simple exchange of farewells. In order to close the conversation without giving offence we may have to make excuses: ‘Anyhow, I have to run now, I’m late’; or make an excuse on our friend’s behalf: ‘I won’t stop here chatting; I know you need to get on’. We may adopt the strategy of arranging the time for our next meeting: ‘I’ve got to go now, but I’ll see you at Sue’s next week’; or choose to leave the arrangement merely implied, as in ‘See you later’ – a form of farewell that has now become so conventional that we sometimes say it to people we are unlikely ever to meet again, in spite of what the words suggest that it *ought* to mean.

Our use of language, then, depends on an ability to negotiate our way through a complex network of conventions, assumptions and expectations. If an interaction departs from the patterns that our expectations lead us to predict, it can be an uncomfortable experience. Our first instinct, in fact, is to try to find some explanation for this departure from usual custom; for example, we will wonder if we have

misunderstood the context in some way, or whether perhaps the person we are speaking to is 'suggesting', in an indirect manner, something that we would normally expect them to express more directly. If no explanation can be found (that is to say, if nothing in the context of our assumptions and expectations can reasonably be shifted to accommodate the departure from conversational convention), we conclude that communication has broken down and we adopt whatever language strategy we consider appropriate to deal with this. The importance of context, and its effect on our interpretation of discourse, will be a central theme in this book.

## Discourse

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The relatively recent adoption by linguists of the term 'discourse' for the subject we study when we examine 'language in use' – the real language that real people use in the real world – is at least partly a recognition of the fact that language is very much more than just the sum of the linguistic elements that compose it. Discourse is, at the very least, language plus context – by which I mean the context that we bring with us when we use language; the context that includes our experience, assumptions and expectations; the context we change (and which is itself changed) in our relationships with others, as we both construct and negotiate our way through the social practices of the world we live in.

Even if you are approaching discourse analysis for the first time, it may be that you have come across definitions of discourse already: you may have brought your own meaning with you to this book. You may already have certain assumptions and expectations of what the study of discourse involves. But discourse analysis is practised and studied by people working in a variety of academic fields – including linguistics, philosophy, anthropology and sociology – as well as by many working within related professions. This wide diversity in both practice and practitioners has led to an equally wide diversity of aims and approaches to discourse analysis, and it is generally recognized that there is neither a single coherent theory nor a single definition of discourse.

Some would define discourse as language use above the level of the sentence. I have just characterized discourse, rather figuratively, as language plus context. In this book we will examine discourse in its broadest sense, as real language in use. Discourse analysts examine spoken, signed and written language, and may focus on any aspect of linguistic behaviour, from the study of particular patterns of pronunciation, through word choice, sentence structure and semantic representation, to the pragmatic analysis of how we organize speech encounters.

A wide array of linguistic 'texts' are explored in the study of discourse. These might consist of a conversation or a letter; a speech, a memo or a report; a broadcast, a newspaper article or an interview; a lesson, a consultation or a confrontational encounter; an advertisement, a flyer or a piece of gossip. Discourse analysts are as concerned (if not more so) to examine the way in which meaning is constructed *throughout* the text, as with the way this is achieved at any one point *in* the text. Intertextuality is important too: that is to say, how language is used not only throughout a single text, but also *across* a set of different but related texts. Texts have histories, and so discourses created at different times stand as reference points for each other; when, for example, a politician makes a

promise, it will often be viewed in the light of pledges made in a former discourse.

But what is it that analysts are looking for when they analyse a piece of discourse? I have suggested that they are interested in the way that language is used, but what does this mean in practice? One answer is that it depends on which approach they are taking. The process of discourse analysis can be characterized (although I am simplifying now) in terms of two approaches, and we might think of these as the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' aspects of analysis.

In the top-down approach, discourse analysts begin from an understanding or a conceptualization (their own) of the context in which the discourse is taking place. This understanding of the context informs and colours their analysis, and they look 'down' from this position into the utterances produced and rehearsed, in the expectation of finding evidence – linguistic evidence – of the assumptions, expectations and social constructs that create and define that context. A top-down approach to political discourse, for example, will be informed by the analyst's own characterization of the political realities against which the discourse is happening. If the analyst believes, or has reason to believe, that the electorate is being hoodwinked by a politician's manipulation of the meaning of certain political constructs, then it is evidence of this manipulation that the analyst will be seeking and endeavouring to make apparent.

A bottom-up approach, by contrast, will tend to begin with an analysis of the language – the sounds, words, utterances, interactional routines, and so forth – that are used in the discourse. Here the analyst will look for evidence that discourse is being constructed in a particular way. Rare words might be used especially frequently, for example, or words and phrases might apparently be chosen more for their sound than for their meaning; constructions might seem to be particularly complex; or certain phrases might appear to favour one set of 'specialized' meanings rather than another more 'everyday' set. An analysis of such distinctive language in the discourse will lead the analyst to speculate as to its motivation, and thereby to arrive at some understanding of a context that may account for it.

In reality, of course, the distinction between the two aspects, top-down and bottom-up, is not even remotely as clear-cut as I have dared to suggest. No analysis is ever entirely free of the analyst's own view of the context, and a totally bottom-up approach would certainly be an oddly formal and mechanical affair; equally, a top-down approach will almost always want to concern itself at some stage – and often in quite a detailed way – with the particular linguistic items that seem to stand as evidence of the manipulation or other device that the analyst has set out to expose.

In case you happen to be involved already in one of the methods of discourse analysis that already uses notions of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' in another sense altogether, then I should point out that my characterization could just as easily have been framed as 'outside-in' and 'inside-out', respectively. The point I want to stress is that there is an intricate (and almost symbiotic) interplay between the approach that interprets utterances from the starting point of the context in which the discourse takes place, and the approach that takes as its starting point the linguistic level at which the utterances are produced. They are, more precisely, two essential aspects of discourse analysis; and not at all two different ways of doing it.

So, while the focus here is on the practical analysis of the language of certain

professional discourses, at particular points we will naturally touch on a number of theoretical perspectives. Since we are most interested in real language in real use, the approaches that we will find most useful are those that focus on the dynamics of speech (and writing) as situated social practice.

## Theoretical approaches to language use

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As we have already seen, it is a fundamental principle that language is more than just sounds, words and sentences. In fact, when we speak (or write), not only do we say something, but we also do something, and not merely in the trivial sense that speaking and writing involve physical actions or movements. In using language we intend to convey particular meanings, and our utterances have a certain force that has consequential effects on our addressee(s). These ideas lie at the heart of **speech act theory**, an approach to the explanation of language pioneered by the philosophers Austin and Searle in the 1960s. The approach grew from original observations by Austin that there is a class of utterances for which the act of uttering them is genuinely the act of performing the process in question: 'I apologize', 'I promise' and 'I deny' are typical examples of such **performative** utterances. The exact form of words is not the issue here; it is simply that the process of apologizing, promising or denying is performed verbally, and it is the uttering of the words that constitutes performing the action. The words, in a real sense, are the deed.

In contrast to this use of language that does what it says, much of our linguistic interaction is implicit and indirect. What a speaker *means* may deviate from what is literally *said*, and in order to interpret indirect speech the addressee must draw upon a number of interrelated and interwoven factors, including the nature of the speech situation, the larger linguistic context of the utterance, the aims and goals of the conversation and the background 'knowledge' shared between participants in the interactional episode. The philosophical work of Paul Grice (1975) is often invoked in discussing conversation and indirectness. Grice argued that conversation does not (normally) consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, but rather is a cooperative endeavour in which conversationalists mutually acknowledge the direction and purpose (or purposes) of speech exchanges. In accepting the **cooperative principle**, we seek to make our conversational contributions appropriately truthful, informative, relevant and clear. These four aspects of conversational cooperation – which are descriptive rather than prescriptive, incidentally – are often set out as Grice's **maxims of conversation**. In simple terms, they can be summed up thus:

- *Maxim of quality*: speakers' contributions should be truthful and speakers should not make statements for which they do not have evidence.
- *Maxim of quantity*: speakers should make their contributions as informative as required, but no more.
- *Maxim of manner*: speakers should make their contributions in a brief and orderly manner and avoid obscurity and ambiguity.
- *Maxim of relevance*: speakers' contributions should be relevant and relate to the purposes of the speech exchange.

What is important for us here is that, because of the essentially cooperative nature of conversation, if one or more of these maxims appears to be flouted or broken, we nevertheless still endeavour to interpret some meaning from what is said: we will try to infer the **conversational implicature** of the speaker's utterance. So it is that when a doctor tells her unfortunate patient, 'There's only so much more that we can do,' the patient knows that the prospects for her future health are likely to be poor.

In settings such as medical consultations, indirect speech can be used to soften the impact of harsh news. But we all use indirect speech in our everyday interactions and it is a strategy that we rely on particularly when we wish to phrase our utterances in a polite form. As we mentioned earlier, 'It's getting late' is more indirect than 'Give me a lift home now'; it is also more polite.

**Politeness theory**, as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), examines the way in which people conduct conversations and other types of interaction in a way that engages with what Goffman (1967) refers to as 'face-work'. In everyday speech encounters we often have to ask for favours, issue demands and make promises, as well as carry out an array of other communicative tasks which involve making 'face-threatening acts'. For example, the act of borrowing something from a friend may threaten both our own face (we do not wish to appear to be in need) and also that of our friend (who may not wish to part with the object we want to borrow). Brown and Levinson distinguish between two types of 'face-wants': **negative face**, relating to our need to act without impediment, and **positive face**, relating to our need to be approved of by (at least some) others. In order to soften the blow of face-threatening acts we employ particular linguistic strategies. For example, when making a request to a friend, we may use politeness strategies that pay attention to their positive face: 'Please can I borrow your beautiful red dress? You have such good taste in clothes.' Alternatively, we may employ negative politeness strategies by, for example, making a request in a deferential way that seeks to mitigate the threat that a request entails: 'I know it's an imposition, but could I possibly borrow your red dress?' And, as we have seen, indirect speech itself is also a useful politeness strategy: 'I'd love to go to the party, but I've got absolutely nothing to wear.'

As well as engaging with culturally constructed conventions in how we say something (being, for example, polite, indirect or relevant), we also have to manage carefully the sequential structure of our speech exchanges. Conversation is orderly, and so an utterance is interpreted by reference to its turn within a sequence. In everyday interactions we follow a particular etiquette of taking turns at speaking and, in these turns, we raise and rehearse certain topics. Patterns of turn-taking and topic management, along with many other aspects of the structuring and sequencing of social interaction, are studied in the approach of **conversation analysis**. This research tradition, which grew out of ethnomethodology (the study of how social order is constructed in the socially organized conduct of the members of a society), seeks to examine the competences that speakers rely on in participating in interaction: how do we construct our own conversational behaviour and how do we deal with and interpret that of others? Conversation analysis deals solely with 'naturally occurring' speech and, while recognizing that there is no value-free observation, is careful not to impose

pre-established structures and definitions on how speakers talk in interaction. In this way, conversation analysis aims to study how conversational behaviour relates to the creation of social roles, social relationships and a sense of social order.

The importance of avoiding social and cultural bias in studying the language customs and conventions used in different contexts also underpins an approach to language called the **ethnography of speaking** (also referred to as ethnography of communication). Arguing against the dominant position of the time, in the 1960s and 1970s Dell Hymes claimed that linguistic theory should not only be involved with explaining a speaker-hearer's knowledge of grammaticality, but also with the examination of communicative behaviour in the context of culture. Those who take an ethnographic approach to language and discourse focus on the cultural values and social roles that operate in particular communities. They are particularly concerned not to impose their own cultural presuppositions on other societies, and use intricate methods of participant observation to study the language habits and customs of different cultures: for example, researchers may live among the community of speakers for lengthy periods of time in order to observe the minute, culturally defined details of language use.

In this book I have focused on the discourse constructed in the culture of which I am a member. Apart from the limitation that the analysis presented is naturally restricted to the culture being studied (if I had chosen to look at advertising discourse in Egypt, for example, or political rhetoric in Japan, then I would certainly have identified different discourse customs and conventions), the study of the language and discourse of one's own culture poses a particular methodological problem. As ethnographers point out, we are all so entrenched within our own culture that it is often difficult to achieve the (social) distance required to identify accurately its customary social practices (including socially conventionalized linguistic behaviour and discourse practices). To overcome this difficulty it is essential that the examination of language and discourse should be undertaken from an evaluative and critical position.

It is precisely such an examination that lies at the heart of work undertaken by discourse analysts such as Norman Fairclough, Tuen van Dijk and Ruth Wodak. The interdisciplinary analytical perspective known as **critical discourse analysis** seeks to examine language as a form of cultural and social practice, and it is an approach which allows the description and interpretation of social life as it is represented in talk and texts. Critical discourse analysis focuses particularly on the relationship between power and discourse, studying the way in which 'social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (van Dijk 2001: 352). The critical approach aims to challenge social orders and practices that we accept as 'natural', but which are, in fact, 'naturalized'; in other words, when one way of seeing and interpreting the world becomes so common (and so frequently constructed in discourses) that it is accepted as the *only* way. In casting light on this process, critical discourse analysts seek to make visible the 'common-sense' social and cultural assumptions (or ideologies) which, below the level of conscious awareness, are embedded in all forms of language that people use (Fairclough 2001).

Keeping this in mind, examine the following:

## Corridor E2

Please vacate your rooms between 10 and 11 a.m. on Thursday mornings.

Your cleaner will need access to all rooms to carry out her duties at this time.

Thank you.

At a relatively superficial level we are able to make a number of immediate assumptions, I think, about the discourse transcribed above: for example, that the original form of the data was written, and quite possibly that it was presented as some type of notice. In examining its format, we might observe that the notice is composed in three parts, which we could characterize as heading, main body of text and closing. If we go into further detail, we see that the main body is itself composed of two sentences, which include an array of vocabulary from different word classes: nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, and so on. Looking at it with a rather more 'comparative' eye, we might feel that the choice of the verb 'vacate' rather than, for example, 'leave', gives the notice a somewhat formal tone. The use of the polite forms 'please' and 'thank you' might even lead us to categorize the notice as a polite request.

Would this be a correct classification? The word 'polite' does seem to crop up in all manner of settings, and indeed often signals discourse that is neither particularly polite nor even, strictly, a request:

Polite notice: No smoking

Polite notice: No parking

Polite notice: Turn off all mobile phones

Leaving aside for the moment whether the notice addressed to Corridor E2 represents a request or, like the above examples, a command, there are still other assumptions that we make when reading and interpreting the communication. For example, our knowledge and experience allows us to be fairly confident that the notice was not posted in a hotel: hotel guests do not normally reside in corridors; and anyway, in seeking meaning from the notice, we apply our knowledge that, in hotels, cleaners tend to accommodate guests rather than the other way round.

The original location of the notice (as you will probably have worked out) was in a university hall of residence. One of my students became curious about, and critical of, the message, primarily because of the use of the pronoun selected by the producer of the discourse to refer to the cleaner. Note that the pronoun selected is 'her'. As it happened, the cleaner for Corridor E2 was male, and this is why the notice had caught my student's attention. As she said herself, had this not been so, the cultural suppositions and stereotypes betrayed in the notice might well have passed her by. However, while the influence of discourse, and the cultural assumptions that it constructs about our world, may sometimes work at a level below conscious awareness, this is not to say that they do not influence our perceptions of the social world in which we live – in this case, a world in which all cleaners are female.

Just as we construct ourselves and our world through the social practice of language, so the discourse presented to us also seeks to construct us in particular ways, to fulfil certain social roles – usually roles that are of benefit to the producer of the discourse. Advertising discourse, we might say, constructs us as

consumers; the discourse strategies of police interviews construct us as suspects; and medical discourse constructs and maintains the relationships that define our social roles of being a doctor or a patient. Of course, this is to take a rather narrow view of advertising, legal and medical discourse; it ignores, for example, discourse between advertisers and their corporate clients, between solicitors and barristers or barristers and judges, and between doctors and hospital administrators (to name but a few examples). In this book, though, the focus is placed on the interface between institutions and 'ordinary people'; and so we restrict ourselves to those areas of professional discourse where the professional is dealing with 'members of the public'.

## Professional discourse

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Every profession has its own way of speaking and writing: its own particular styles of language (its *register*) and its own conventions for the construction of discourse – the professional discourse analyst, for example, uses language in a way that the vast majority of ordinary people would find more or less impenetrable. It is clear that when a professional speaks to a non-professional, their use of language can be a barrier: there is an asymmetry between the knowledge, experience and understanding of the participants in the field; and since the speech exchange (if it is a speech exchange) is so circumscribed by language, a differential of power and authority is created and maintained.

This is not to say, however, that we are always merely passive receivers of discourse. By taking part in discourses we are able to change them. In the chapters that follow, while we will often look at how the asymmetrical relationships that hold in discourse give some participants power over others, we must also bear in mind that dimensions such as power are not static and can shift in moment-by-moment negotiation. The inherent asymmetry can, and often needs to be, reduced if the non-professional participant is to acquire any kind of equity in the proceedings, and in some cases the non-professional can genuinely negotiate a shift in this differential. There are cases, however, where this is scarcely possible: in the context of the police interview, or sometimes of the classroom, the differential may be so institutionalized and engrained as to make negotiation more or less impossible for all but the most articulate or resourceful.

In this book we examine the discourse typical of five professional fields, and we begin in chapter 1 with an analysis of the discourse of advertising. This is arguably the most 'planned' form of discourse that we will consider; it is also (at the moment) a more or less totally one-way channel of communication, in which the producer and receiver are relatively distant – indeed, one of the central challenges for advertisers is create a relationship across this divide. How they rise to this challenge is the main theme of the chapter. The language of advertising is widely characterized as *persuasive* and *seductive*, and its discourse exploits linguistic devices that are cleverly designed to attract us to a lifestyle of aspirational consumerism; so successfully, indeed, that it both reflects cultural and social values and also contrives to create new attitudes and needs.

In chapter 2 we examine the discourse of politics and consider the ways in which politicians use *rhetorical* and *deceptive* linguistic devices – including many borrowed

from the field of advertising – to lead us towards a particular view of political reality. We consider the increasing influence of the media on politics over the past decades and examine how we have all become the victims of ‘spin’. Although much of the chapter is concerned with political speech-making – which is a discourse very nearly as planned as an advertisement – it also takes some account of the discourse that is characteristic of the political interview, where utterances are not able to be rehearsed so rigorously.

In chapter 3 we turn to the discourse of the law. Here we observe a sharp distinction between the language of written legalese – the *impenetrable* and *forbidding* language of contracts and deeds – and the spoken language of police interviews and courtroom interactions, both of which are widely seen as *coercive* and *manipulative*. We consider especially the implications of the complexity of the discourse for those caught up within the legal system; and, in focusing on spoken legal interviews, we explore specifically the ways in which discourse reflects and maintains asymmetrical power relationships. We note how spoken police interviews of suspects are ‘reinvented’ into written statements to be taken to court; and we conclude by examining the manipulative, linguistic cut and thrust that is characteristic of the courtroom.

In chapter 4 we examine the discourse of medicine and explore the gulf between the professional ‘voice’ of doctors and the personal speech of patients. A study of the written discourse of medical information materials reveals that, while they are presented as informative, they actually adopt many of the forms of persuasive social advertising and tend to be shaped within a paternalistic model of ‘doctor knows best’. The patronizing attitude towards patients is also found to be a feature of the interactional discourse constructed in medical consultations: analysis of these face-to-face spoken exchanges also suggests that the fracture between the medical voice of the doctor and the ‘lifeworld’ voice of the patient results in a discourse in which miscommunication and misunderstanding thrive.

Finally, in chapter 5 we turn our attention to the discourse of education, where again we examine written as well as spoken interaction. We cast a critical eye on conventions for academic writing and find that the demand for an impersonal, detached style entails the removal of the writer’s values, beliefs and opinions. Examination of classroom interactions reveals the extent to which teaching is talking and learning is largely linguistic: we look at the ways in which both teaching and learning are constructed in classroom discourse, and how ideas of legitimate knowledge and its representation are encapsulated in distinctive discourse.

## About this book

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I hope that the book will be accessible to people coming for the first time to the study of discourse, regardless of their age or background. I have therefore not assumed any prior knowledge of linguistics or terminology, nor any prior exposure to the various theories or rationales of discourse analysis. In restricting my examination of the professional fields to those areas where the professional is interacting with the non-professional, I have, I hope, also ensured that no specialist knowledge of these professions is needed on the reader’s part.

I believe that it should be possible for a reader interested only in one of the five professional fields to pick up the thread of the book at the beginning of that

particular chapter. Nevertheless, I feel it will be of much greater benefit to treat the book as a piece in itself, and consequently I should warn that anyone starting the book beyond the halfway point is likely to find the treatment a little brisk. I do not by any means attempt to cover every aspect of discourse in every chapter, and themes are developed as the book proceeds.

In each of the five fields we examine, we begin by characterizing the discourse of the profession more or less from the layman's point of view. We then proceed to analyse the linguistic elements of the discourse, with the aim of building up a picture of how these contribute to its characterization and form an image of the professional context of assumptions and expectations that the discourse creates and maintains. In this respect, the treatment of discourse in this book can be characterized as 'bottom-up'.

Each of the chapters takes a fairly enquiring tone. I have assumed that readers will see themselves as joining with me in a collaborative analysis of the various examples of data that we examine together. I have established several analyses in each chapter as semi-formal exercises, but have never ventured to suggest that there is a 'right' answer to any of the questions they contain – let alone that I might be able to supply it. These exercises are not accompanied by 'answers'; rather, the reader is invited to accompany me, in the text that follows each exercise, in looking at how we might go about finding interpretations of the data. At an early stage in each chapter I have tried to set up an exercise designed simply to suggest to the reader what some of these analytical techniques might look like, and to create a shared context in which our work might ground itself. I have also added some 'further exercises' at the end of each chapter; these tend to be more concerned with what an interested reader might do next, rather than with assessing any knowledge acquired.

One final note: context, as I have already emphasized, is crucial. Inevitably this book is grounded within my own personal context, which happens to be Britain in 2006. In examining some of the professional fields I have felt able to extend that context across the Atlantic; in others I have felt less confident of doing so. The chapter on political discourse, for example, reflects (and casts a critical eye on) the dominance in Britain of the centre-left project headed – as I write this, anyway – by Tony Blair.

All the same, British and North American politics owe so much (as we will see) to the linguistic devices contrived by the copywriter that we make the discourse of advertising our first port of call.

# 1

*Come and get it*

## The discourse of advertising

*Advertising is the rattling of a stick inside a swill bucket*

George Orwell (1936)

### Introduction

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Well, how would you define advertising? And what exactly counts as an advertisement? Most dictionaries focus primarily on its function as a public notice or announcement, but the art of advertising clearly extends much further than this. In our everyday lives we meet advertising in many forms, from the well-known media of press promotions, television commercials or billboard posters, to the less obvious devices of advertorials, product placements, event sponsorships, junk mailings or carefully staged large-scale public relations exercises – all, incidentally, requiring very much more time and effort (and language) than is needed by Orwell's swineherd calling his pigs to the trough.

Some advertisers choose to address us with direct or hard-sell techniques, while others send us messages which are far more indirect, subtle or even subliminal. There is a trend at the moment, for example, for record companies to pay buskers in busy underground stations to perform acoustic versions of the label's latest releases: the hope is that commuters will find themselves humming the tune on the way home and so be motivated to buy the record. Are the record companies really advertising here? There is some debate about this tactic: detractors call it *stealth marketing*; proponents liken it to the *viral buzz* of internet-led promotions, and indeed many are forecasting that the advertising industry is about to change dramatically along these very lines. Either way, the process certainly accords with Leacock's (1924) famous definition of advertising as 'the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it'.

It goes without saying that the power of advertising is immense – as is the time, money and skill that goes into it. Producers of commercial goods and services routinely pour vast sums into promoting their wares through the advertising media, knowing that a successful campaign can win them vital market share and that failure to advertise effectively can have devastating results on the bottom line and the share price. The stakes are high: advertising agencies command steep fees and a successful brand manager is one of the hottest properties a business can have. Advertising is widely regarded as the driving force behind our consumerist culture;