

1. Discourse Analysis

The term discourse analysis was first employed by Zellig Harris as the name for “a method for the analysis of the connected speech or writing for continuing descriptive linguistics beyond the limit of a single sentence at a time and for correlating culture and language” (Harris 1952)

Discourse analysis (sometimes named discourse studies) is a **qualitative research method** that involves an in-depth examination of any written, spoken, non-verbal, and visual language in **context**.

Discourse analysts are interested in how language can impart meaning. This could be vocabulary, use of grammar, gestures, facial expressions, imagery, language techniques, and many more. They analyse whole chunks (rather than individual utterances) of both planned and spontaneous written, spoken, and visual language.

An essential part of discourse analysis is examining language use within its **social context**. This means the societal norms, political climate, time, place, intended audience, and the speaker's socio-cultural background must all be considered as they can play a role in the meaning of language and how it's interpreted.

2. Why conduct discourse analysis?

We analyse discourse to understand the world better and how language is used in real life. By examining the social use of language, we can appreciate its multiple functions, such as creating meaning and maintaining certain social norms and common knowledge.

A discourse analyst may examine the written language and images used on the front page of a newspaper to see what narrative it might be trying to portray and why. To understand this, they would have to consider the owner of the newspaper, the intended audience, and the current political climate and world events.

3. When to use discourse analysis?

Discourse analysis is the perfect method for looking at the relationship between language and broader social issues, such as language and power, language and gender, language and inequality, and language in the media.

We can also use discourse analysis to see how people interact with each other in different situations and the impact language can have on society and vice versa.

Common examples of discourse we can conduct discourse analysis on are;

- Newspapers
- Novels
- Conversations
- Song lyrics
- Adverts
- Speeches

4. Discourse analysis: what to analyse

There are no guidelines on what aspects of language you should analyse when conducting DA. How you undertake your analysis will depend on your research question and the purpose of your study. However, here is a list of language features that are commonly analysed as they can impart meaning.

- **Vocabulary** - e.g. word choice, jargon, special lexicon.
- **Grammar** - e.g. type of sentences, grammatical voice, use of affixes.
- **Punctuation** - e.g. use of exclamation marks, capital letters etc.

- **Genre** - Is it a newspaper, song, novel, etc.
- **Non-verbals** - e.g. facial expressions, body language, pauses.
- **Paralinguistic features** - e.g. tone, pitch, intonation.
- **Pragmatics** - what are the extended or hidden meanings?
- **Grice's conversational maxims** - are useful for reviewing power relations in spoken discourse.
- **Images and colour** - how do they add to the meaning of the discourse?
- **Relationship between the discourse and the wider social context**
- **Semiotic analysis** : Semiotic analysis is predominantly used for multimodal discourse (usually printed communication mediums containing words, images, graphics, colours, etc.). When conducting semiotic analysis, we take a medium of communication (e.g., a website, poster, textbook, or advertisement) and interpret the denotative (literal) and connotative (implied) meaning of the different types of discourse working together in context. Semiotic analysis recognises that written and spoken language is not the only part of discourse that can carry meaning, and it's important to consider how things such as imagery can significantly impact how we interpret things. A poster with the words 'knife crime kills' next to a black man may make the audience associate knife crime with black men. We would then have to question whether this was the author's intention and if so why.

5. Types of discourse analysis

The two main types of discourse analysis are **language-in-use analysis** and **socio-political analysis**.

Types of discourse analysis		Purpose
Language-in-use analysis	discourse	Focuses on the technical details of language/ linguistic properties.
Socio-political analysis	discourse	Focuses on the relationship between language and society.

5.1. Language-in-use discourse analysis

Language-in-use discourse analysis focuses more on the technical details of language, such as grammar, syntax (the arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses), phonetics, phonology, and prosody. A language-in-use approach to DA involves a highly descriptive and in-depth examination of linguistic properties.

A discourse analyst may examine the speech patterns of teenagers to see when they use contractions (shortened word forms), double negatives (e.g. *I ain't got no time*), neologisms (a newly created word) etc. In this case, the researcher is interested in the minor technicalities of the language.

5.2. Socio-political discourse analysis

This approach is less concerned with the technical details of language, and more focused on the impact language can have on society and vice versa. Socio-political discourse analysis looks at the relationship between language and society, such as language and power.

The most common socio-political discourse analysis approach is **critical discourse analysis**.

6. Discourse analysis methodology

Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary research method (i.e. used across many subjects); therefore, research methods will vary depending on the subject, purpose of the study, and research question.

There is no right or wrong way to conduct discourse analysis - which is good news as it's difficult to get it wrong. However, this doesn't help when the time comes to conduct your analysis, and you don't know where to start!

With this in mind, we've compiled a useful 'tool kit' based on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model to help you get started.²

Fairclough's model proposes discourse be analysed in three stages:

- **Description** - analysis of the text itself, including grammar, syntax, lexicon, phonological features, literary devices (e.g. rhetorical questions), and images.
- **Interpretation** - how discourse is produced and distributed and then consumed by the reader/listener, i.e. who is the author and the audience.
- **Explanation** - viewing the discourse as a social practice and placing it in the context of wider society.

When we view discourse as a social practice, we consider it as something we perform or 'do', typically within a community. The philosopher Foucault stated that discourse as a social practice is often used to control or repress people by legitimising some practices and disqualifying others.

When conducting discourse analysis, you should also ask yourself the following questions;

- Who wrote this text, and who is it intended for?
- What narrative is being promoted?
- Who benefits from this text? Who is marginalised by it?
- Is the evidence credible?
- What ideas are normalised by this discourse, and what are disqualified?
- How do the images, colours, text, etc., work together if it is a multimodal text?

7. Discourse analysis example

For this example, we will conduct a discourse analysis on song lyrics using Fairclough's three-dimensional model. The chosen song is 'British Bombs' by Declan Mckenna (2019).

'Great snakes are we moving already

Good gravy did you say it cost a penny or two

For you

Well talking bout the bad starts

My baby brother has already got a gas mask

It's a good old-fashioned landslide

Killing with your hands tied

In the homemade rope

Set sail babe we read it in the mail - no hope now

Great way to fool me again hun

Great acting, it's good what you tell em

Great Britain won't stand for felons

Great British bombs in the Yemen'

We have decided to undertake a **socio-political analysis** due to the genre of the discourse (a song) and the evident political influence behind the lyrics.

1. Description (analysis of the language itself)

This is a pop/rock song with somewhat emotive language, which can be seen in thought-provoking words and phrases, such as '*My baby brother has already got a gas mask*' and '*Killing with your hands tied*'. Repetition of the word *great* and alliteration of the letter *B* have been used to draw connections between '*Great Britain*' and '*Great British bombs*'.

The terms '*Great snakes*' and '*Good gravy*' were common phrases in 1920-30s Britain. McKenna may be trying to allude to British attitudes and society during the World War era, which are often described as being ignorant and overly patriotic.

2. Interpretation (the author and the audience and their potential interpretation)

The song was written by a young British musician and will likely be listened to by predominantly young British people. McKenna may be using his music to draw his audience's attention to the use of British bombs in Yemen.

The lyrics '*Set sail babe we read it in the mail - no hope now*' may be criticising the British newspaper *The Daily Mail*, which has often been accused of presenting a biased view of British politics. In doing this, he may influence listeners to consider where they get their news.

McKenna uses slang associated with younger generations, such as '*hun*' in the line '*Great way to fool me again, hun*'. Using recognisable language may engage his audience and potentially encourage them to think more about politics.

3. Explanation (placing discourse into wider societal context)

The line '*Great British bombs in the Yemen*' is likely referring to the UK's sale of British-produced bombs to Saudi Arabia, which they have dropped on civilians in Yemen since 2015.³ Yemen is a country in the Persian Gulf that borders Saudi Arabia and Oman.

By placing the lyrics into a socio-political context, we can interpret that McKenna finds the use of British bombs hypocritical, which is arguably highlighted in the following lyrics, '*Great Britain won't stand for felons. Great British bombs in the Yemen.*'

References

N. Fairclough. *Language and Power*. 1984.

N. Fairclough. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. 1995.

BBC News. *Yemen: UK to resume Saudi arms sales after humanitarian review*. 2020.

[discourse \(uchicago.edu\)](http://discourse.uchicago.edu)

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