

Discourse Analysis

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Discourse analysis is the name given to a variety of different approaches to the study of texts, which have developed from different theoretical traditions and diverse disciplinary locations. Strictly speaking, there is no single 'discourse analysis', but many different styles of analysis that all lay claim to the name. What these perspectives share is a rejection of the realist notion that language is simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world, and a conviction in the central importance of discourse in constructing social life. This chapter will discuss one approach to discourse analysis that has been influential in fields as diverse as the sociology of science, media studies, technology studies, social psychology and policy analysis.

The chapter is divided into four broad sections. In the first, I consider the intellectual context of the development of discourse analysis, and set out its central tenets. Secondly, I discuss the practice of discourse analysis. The third section is a case study of the use of this approach to analyse a short passage of text from a newspaper article. It gives an indication of the kind of material generated by discourse analysis, and fleshes out readers' understanding of doing discourse analysis. Finally the chapter will offer an evaluation of discourse analysis, highlighting some of its advantages and disadvantages.

Introducing discourse analysis

Intellectual context

The extraordinarily rapid growth of interest in discourse analysis in recent years is both a consequence and a manifestation of the 'turn to language'

that has occurred across the arts, humanities and social sciences. The 'linguistic turn' was precipitated by critiques of positivism, by the prodigious impact of structuralist and poststructuralist ideas, and by post-modernists' attacks on epistemology (Burman, 1990; Gill, 1995; Parker, 1992; Potter, 1996a). The origins of discourse analysis in critiques of traditional social science mean that it has a rather different epistemological basis from some other methodologies. This is sometimes called social constructionism, constructivism or simply constructionism. There is no single agreed definition of these terms, but the key features of these perspectives include:

- 1 a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, and a scepticism towards the view that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its true nature to us
- 2 a recognition that the ways in which we commonly understand the world are historically and culturally specific and relative
- 3 a conviction that knowledge is socially constructed – that is, that our current ways of understanding the world are determined not by the nature of the world itself, but by social processes
- 4 a commitment to exploring the ways that knowledges – the social construction of people, phenomena or problems – are linked to actions/practices (Burr, 1995).

One outcome of this epistemological position is that discourse analysis cannot be used to address the same sorts of questions as traditional approaches. Instead it suggests new questions or ways of reformulating old ones (see below).

57 varieties of discourse analysis

The terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' are highly contested. To claim that one's approach is a discourse analytical one does not necessarily tell anybody much; it is not a simple definitional issue, but involves taking up a position in an extremely charged – though important – set of arguments. Although there are probably at least 57 varieties of discourse analysis, one way of making sense of the differences between them is to think about broad theoretical traditions. I will discuss three.

First, there is the variety of positions known as critical linguistics, social semiotics or critical language studies (Fowler et al., 1979; Kress and Hodge, 1979; Hodge and Kress, 1988; Fairclough, 1989). Compared with many types of discourse analysis this tradition has a close association with the discipline of linguistics, but its clearest debt is to semiotics and structuralist analysis (see Penn, Chapter 13 in this volume). The central semiological idea that a term's sense derives not from any inherent feature of the relationship between signifier and signified, but from the system of oppositions in which it is embedded, posed a fundamental challenge to 'word-object' accounts of language which viewed it as a process of naming. This

has been developed in recent critical linguistic work which has an explicit concern with the relationship between language and politics. The tradition is well represented in media studies, particularly in research on the press, and has highlighted – among other things – the ways in which particular linguistic forms (such as agent deletion, passivization or nominalization) can have dramatic effects upon how an event or phenomenon is understood.

A second broad tradition is that influenced by speech-act theory, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (see Myers, Chapter 11 in this volume; Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks et al., 1974; Coulthard and Montgomery, 1981; Heritage, 1984; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). These perspectives stress the functional or action orientation of discourse. Rather than looking at how accounts relate to the world, they have been interested in what accounts are designed to accomplish, and in looking in detail at the organization of social interaction.

The third body of work that sometimes identifies itself as discourse analysis is that associated with poststructuralism. Poststructuralists have broken with realist views of language, and have rejected the notion of the unified coherent subject that has long been at the heart of Western philosophy. Among poststructuralists, Michel Foucault (1977; 1981) is notable for characterizing his genealogies of discipline and sexuality as discourse analyses. In contrast to most discourse analysis, this work is interested not in the details of spoken or written texts, but in looking historically at discourses.

Themes of discourse analysis

The approach to be elaborated here draws on ideas from each of the three traditions outlined above, as well as from the growing field of rhetorical analysis (see Leach, Chapter 12 in this volume; Billig, 1987; 1988; 1991; see Potter and Wetherell, 1987 for a fuller discussion of the different influences upon discourse analysis). Developed initially in work in the sociology of scientific knowledge and social psychology, it has now produced analyses in a diverse range of fields, and constitutes a theoretically coherent approach to the analysis of talk and texts.

It is useful to think of discourse analysis as having four main themes: a concern with discourse itself; a view of language as constructive and constructed; an emphasis upon discourse as a form of action; and a conviction in the rhetorical organization of discourse. First, then, it takes discourse itself as its topic. The term 'discourse' is used to refer to all forms of talk and texts, whether it be naturally occurring conversations, interview material, or written texts of any kind. Discourse analysts are interested in texts in their own right, rather than seeing them as a means of 'getting at' some reality which is deemed to lie behind the discourse – whether social, psychological or material. This focus clearly marks discourse analysts out from some other social scientists, whose concern with language is generally limited to finding out 'what really happened' or what an individual's

attitude to X, Y or Z really is. Instead of seeing discourse as a pathway to some other reality, discourse analysts are interested in the content and organization of texts.

The second theme of discourse analysis is that language is constructive. Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that the metaphor of *construction* highlights three facets of the approach. First, it draws attention to the fact that discourse is built or manufactured out of pre-existing linguistic resources:

language and linguistic practices offer a sediment of systems of terms, narrative forms, metaphors and commonplaces from which a particular account can be assembled. (Potter et al., 1990)

Secondly, the metaphor illuminates the fact that the 'assembly' of an account involves choice or selection from a number of different possibilities. It is possible to describe even the simplest of phenomena in a multiplicity of different ways. Any particular description will depend upon the orientation of the speaker or writer (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter et al., 1990).

Finally, the notion of construction emphasizes the fact that we deal with the world in terms of constructions, not in a somehow 'direct' or unmediated way; in a very real sense, texts of various kinds construct our world. The constructive use of language is a taken-for-granted aspect of social life.

The notion of construction, then, clearly marks a break with traditional 'realist' models of language, in which it is taken to be a transparent medium – a relatively straightforward path to 'real' beliefs or events, or a reflection of the way things really are.

The third feature of discourse analysis that I want to stress here is its concern with the 'action orientation' or 'function orientation' of discourse. That is, discourse analysts see all discourse as *social practice*. Language, then, is not viewed as a mere epiphenomenon, but as a practice in its own right. People use discourse to *do* things – to offer blame, to make excuses, to present themselves in a positive light, etc. To highlight this is to underline the fact that discourse does not occur in a social vacuum. As social actors, we are continuously orienting to the *interpretive context* in which we find ourselves, and constructing our discourse to fit that context. This is very obvious in relatively formal contexts such as hospitals or courtrooms, but it is equally true of all other contexts too. To take a crude example, you might give a different account of what you did last night depending upon whether the person inquiring was your mother, your boss or your best friend. It is not that you would be being deliberately duplicitous in any one of these cases (or at least, not necessarily), but simply that you would be saying what seems 'right' or what 'comes naturally' for that particular interpretive context. Actions or functions should not be thought of in cognitive terms, for example, as related to an individual's intentions; often they can be global or ideological and are best located as cultural practices rather than confined to someone's head. Discourse analysts argue that all discourse is occasioned.

It is important to note that the notion of 'interpretive context' is not a narrow or mechanistic one. It is used not simply to refer to the gross parameters of an interaction, such as where and when it takes place, and to whom the person was speaking or writing, but also to pick up on more subtle features of the interaction, including the kinds of actions being performed, and the participants' orientations. As a discourse analyst, one is involved *simultaneously* in analysing discourse and analysing the interpretive context.

Even the most apparently straightforward, neutral sounding description can be involved in a whole range of different activities, depending upon the interpretive context. Take the following sentence: 'My car has broken down.' This sounds like a straightforwardly descriptive sentence about a mechanical object. However, its meaning can change dramatically in different interpretive contexts:

- 1 When said to a friend on leaving a meeting, it may be an implicit request for a lift home.
- 2 When said to the person who sold you the car only a few days earlier, it may be part of an accusation or blaming.
- 3 When said to a tutor for whose lecture you were half-an-hour late, it may be offered as an excuse or mitigation.

And so on. One way of checking your analysis of the discourse is to look at how the participants involved responded, as this can offer valuable analytical clues. For example, if the car salesperson responded by saying, 'Well, it was working fine when I sold it to you', this indicates that the sentence was heard as an accusation – even though no explicit accusation was made. But interpretive context does not simply vary by whom you are speaking to: you can talk with the same person – and even use the same words – and generate many different interpretations. Think about how the question 'Are you going out tonight?' can have multiple meanings when said by someone to their partner. The key point here is that there is nothing 'mere' or insubstantial about language: talk and texts are social practices, and even the most seemingly trivial statements are involved in various kinds of activities. One of the aims of discourse analysis is to identify the functions or activities of talk and texts, and to explore how they are performed.

This brings me to the fourth point: discourse analysis treats talk and texts as *organized rhetorically* (Billig, 1987; 1991). Unlike conversation analysis, discourse analysis sees social life as being characterized by conflicts of various kinds. As such, much discourse is involved in establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions. This is obvious in some cases – politicians, for example, are clearly attempting to win people round to their view of the world, and advertisers are attempting to sell us products, lifestyles and dreams – but it is also true of other discourse. The emphasis on the rhetorical nature of texts directs our attention to the ways in which all discourse is organized to make itself persuasive.

The practice of discourse analysis

It is much easier to discuss the key themes of discourse analysis than it is to explain how actually to go about analysing texts. Pleasant as it would be to be able to offer a cookbook style recipe for readers to follow methodically, this is just not possible. Somewhere between 'transcription' and 'writing up', the essence of doing discourse analysis seems to slip away: ever elusive, it is never quite captured by descriptions of coding schemes, hypotheses and analytical schemata. However, just because the skills of discourse analysis do not lend themselves to procedural description, there is no need for them to be deliberately mystified and placed beyond the reach of all but the cognoscenti. Discourse analysis is similar to many other tasks: journalists, for example, are not given formal training in identifying what makes an event news, and yet after a short time in the profession their sense of 'news values' is hard to shake. There really is no substitute for learning by doing.

Asking different questions

Discourse analysis is not an approach that can be used 'off the shelf' as a substitute for a more traditional form of analysis – for example, content analysis or the statistical analysis of questionnaire data. The decision to use discourse analysis entails a radical epistemological shift. As I have indicated, discourse analysts do not regard texts as vehicles to find out about some reality assumed to lie beyond or behind language. Instead they are interested in the text in its own right, and therefore ask different questions. Faced with a transcript of a discussion among vegetarians, for example, the discourse analyst would not seek to discover from this why the people involved gave up eating meat and fish, but instead might be interested in analysing how the decision to become vegetarian is warranted by the speakers, or how they orient to potential criticisms, or how they establish a positive self-identity (Gill, 1996b). The potential list of questions is endless; but, as you can see, they are rather different from conventional social scientific questions.

Transcription

Unless you are analysing a text that already exists in the public domain – for example, a newspaper article, a company report or a record of a parliamentary debate – the first requirement is a transcript. A good transcript should be as detailed a record as possible of the discourse to be analysed. A transcript should not summarize speech, nor should it 'clean it up' or correct it; it should record verbatim speech with as many features of the talk as possible. The production of a transcript is hugely time-consuming. Even if only the grossest features of talk are noted – such as emphasis and hesitation – the development of the transcript can take as much as 10 hours for each hour of taped material. Conversation analysts

and some discourse analysts argue that much more detailed transcripts are essential if key features of the speech are not to be missed. A transcription system that notes intonation, overlapping speech, intakes of breath, etc. – like the one designed by Gail Jefferson – may involve a time ratio of 20:1 (see Chapter 11 in this volume).

However, as Jonathan Potter has argued, the production of a transcript should not be thought of as ‘dead’ time before the analysis proper begins:

Often, some of the most revealing analytical insights come during the transcription because a profound engagement with the material is needed to produce a good transcript. (1996b: 136)

For this reason, it is always useful to make analytical notes while you are doing the transcription.

One of the things that strike new discourse analysts most forcefully when they look at – or, better, have to produce – a transcript is the sheer *messiness* of speech. Aspects of speech that are so familiar that we often literally do not ‘hear’ them, become visible in transcripts. This includes multiple ‘repairs’ to speech, changes of gear or topic, pauses, overlaps, interruptions and liberal use of phrases such as ‘you know’. Indeed, doing discourse analysis makes one realize the extent to which we all habitually ‘edit’ the speech we hear. The second thing that becomes striking is (seemingly contradictorily) how *orderly* the speech is. Repairs and changes of gear happen as speakers orient to the interpretive context; overlaps and interruptions are attended to conversationally; and so on (see Myers, Chapter 11 in this volume).

The spirit of sceptical reading

Once the transcript is produced (or other data are obtained), the analysis can begin. The most useful starting point is the suspension of belief in the taken for granted. This is analogous to the injunction by anthropologists to ‘render the familiar strange’. It involves changing the way that language is seen in order to focus upon the construction, organization and functions of discourse rather than looking for something behind or underlying it. As Potter and Wetherell have pointed out, academic training teaches people to read texts for gist, but this is precisely the *wrong* spirit in which to approach analysis:

If you read an article or book the usual goal is to produce a simple, unitary summary, and to ignore the nuance, contradictions and areas of vagueness. However, the discourse analyst is concerned with the detail of passages of discourse, however fragmented and contradictory, and with what is actually said or written, not some general idea that seems to be intended. (1987: 168)

Doing discourse analysis involves interrogating your own assumptions and the ways in which you habitually make sense of things. It involves a spirit of scepticism, and the development of an ‘analytic mentality’ (Schenkein,

1978) that does not readily fall away when you are not sitting in front of a transcript. You need to ask of any given passage: 'Why am I reading this in this way?', 'What features of the text produce this reading?', 'How is it organized to make it persuasive?' and so on. In my opinion, discourse analysis should carry a health warning, because doing it fundamentally changes the ways in which you experience language and social relations.

Coding

Like ethnographers, discourse analysts have to immerse themselves in the material being studied. A good way of starting is simply by reading and rereading your transcripts until you are really familiar with them. This process is a necessary preliminary to coding. The categories used for coding will obviously be determined by the questions of interest. Sometimes they will seem relatively straightforward: for example, one part of my analysis of interviews with broadcasters involved examining the accounts they gave for the lack of women working in radio (Gill, 1993). The initial coding for this involved going through the transcripts and highlighting or selecting out all occasions when the broadcasters referred to female broadcasters. On other occasions coding can be much more difficult, and the phenomenon of interest may not be clear until after some initial analysis. Potter and Wetherell (1987) describe how, in their study of white New Zealanders' accounts of racial inequality, their understanding of what should be coded changed repeatedly as their analysis became more sophisticated. And, indeed, in my own study of accounts for the lack of women DJs, it became clear that many other aspects of the interview material, besides direct references to female broadcasters, were relevant to the analysis: for example, references to the 'qualities' that 'all good DJs should possess' turned out to contain a number of hidden assumptions about gender.

This highlights an important point about coding: that in the initial stages it should be done as inclusively as possible, so that all borderline instances can be counted in rather than out. People use various strategies for coding, and you will develop your own, but essentially it is a way of organizing the categories of interest. For example, if we were interested in looking at how people accounted for their decision to become vegetarian, then one way of coding initially might be to sort out the transcripts into different kinds of account: some people may claim that they stopped eating meat for health reasons, others may discuss animal welfare, still others may have ethical concerns about the use of global food resources, and so on. It is important to note that individuals may draw on and combine different accounts, and that discourse analysts' interest is not in individuals' attitudes but in the cultural construction of vegetarianism.

Analysing discourse

With the initial coding complete – and your piles of photocopies or filecards in place – it is time to begin the analysis proper. It can be helpful to think of

analysis as being made up of two related phases. First there is the search for pattern in the data. This will be in the form of both variability (differences within and between accounts) and consistency. Secondly, there is the concern with function, with forming tentative hypotheses about the functions of particular features of the discourse, and checking these against the data (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Of course, presenting it like this makes it sound easy, and it glosses over hours of frustration and apparent dead-ends. In practice, identifying the patterning and functions of discourse is often difficult and time-consuming.

One useful analytical strategy, suggested by Widdicombe (1993), is that of regarding the ways in which things are said as being potential solutions to problems. The analyst's task is to identify each problem and how what is said constitutes a solution. In my study of how broadcasters accounted for the small number of women in radio, one of the discursive problems to which the broadcasters had to orient was that of being heard as sexist while still wanting to offer 'legitimate' reasons for the lack of women. The transcripts are full of disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) such as 'I'm not being sexist but . . .', which preceded the expression of remarks that could easily be heard as sexist. Staying with our example about vegetarianism, we might expect to find our vegetarian speakers orienting to a variety of potential criticisms – for example, sentimentality, 'political correctness' and inconsistency.

Although suggestions like Widdicombe's are helpful in thinking about analysis, in the end there is no escape from the fact that discourse analysis is a craft skill that can be difficult and is always labour-intensive. As Wetherell and Potter (1988) have noted, it not unusual to work with one analytical schema for several days, only to have to revise it or discard it because the linguistic evidence does not fit precisely. Unlike some styles of analysis which suppress variability or simply gloss over instances which do not fit the story being told, discursive analyses require rigour in order to make analytical sense of texts in all their fragmented, contradictory messiness.

As well as examining the way that language is used, discourse analysts must also be sensitive to what is not said – to silences. This in turn requires a significant awareness of the social, political and cultural trends and contexts to which our texts refer. Without this broader contextual understanding:

we would be unable to see the alternative version of events or phenomena that the discourse we were analysing had been designed to counter; we would fail to notice the (sometimes systematic) absence of particular kinds of account in the texts that we were studying; and we would not be able to recognise the significance of silences. (Gill, 1996b: 147)

However, to argue that a familiarity with the context is vital is not to suggest that this context can be neutrally and unproblematically described. When a discourse analyst discusses context, he or she is also producing a version, constructing the context as an object. In other words, discourse

analysts' talk is no less constructed, occasioned and action oriented than any other. What discourse analysts do is to produce readings of texts and contexts that are warranted by careful attention to detail and that lend coherence to the discourse being studied.

Case study: 'Death of the Dad'

In order to demonstrate the kinds of insights produced by discourse analysis, I am going to present a preliminary analysis of a short passage extracted from a current newspaper article ('Death of the Dad' by Melanie Phillips, *The Observer*, 2 November 1997). The article, which I came across while writing this chapter, is in many ways typical of the kind of 'think pieces' that are to be found in British Sunday broadsheet newspapers. Situated in debates about the Blair government's attitude towards single mothers, the article excoriates the architects of a crisis that apparently threatens the survival of fatherhood, men in general and the very future of the 'traditional family'.

The short passage I have extracted could be analysed in many different ways. My interest in the extract is in examining how the nature of the threat is discursively constructed and made persuasive. In analysing this, as you will see, I will touch upon other questions, beginning with how Phillips constructs her own identity, and moving to explore her characterization of the target of her attack. The text is as follows:

- 01 Many women want to work, and do. This is not an argument
- 02 for forcing women to stay at home. Nor is it an argument
- 03 for 'male domination'. This is an argument for
- 04 acknowledging the need for a balance of responsibilities.
- 05 This desire to eradicate sexual and gender differences
- 06 in order to re-engineer men arises from a kind of feminism
- 07 that has flowed into Britain from America to become the
- 08 orthodoxy among social science researchers, public
- 09 sector professionals and much of the chattering classes.
- 10 This feminism sees women only as victims of male
- 11 domination. It advocates the use of state power to
- 12 promote the independence of women from partnerships
- 13 with men, at least until men have redefined their role
- 14 and identity so that they become more like women.
- 15 This female supremacism, rather than feminism,
- 16 fundamentally despises, distrusts and dislikes men.
- 17 Female supremacism has placed the idea of
- 18 fatherhood itself under siege. Men in general and
- 19 fathers in particular are increasingly viewed as
- 20 superfluous to family life. There are no longer key
- 21 roles that only fathers can fill. Indeed, it holds that
- 22 masculinity is unnecessary or undesirable. It tells us
- 23 men are important as new fathers. But it undercuts
- 24 this by claiming that lone parenthood is perfectly

- 25 acceptable – and in some cases preferable.
- 26 Fatherhood must become surrogate motherhood, and
- 27 fathers and mothers must be turned into unisex parents.
- 28 But most men and women don't want to be unisex parents.
- 29 That's because there are profound sexually based
- 30 differences between mothers and fathers. Motherhood is a
- 31 biological bond fuelled by hormones and genetic impulses.
- 32 Fatherhood, on the other hand, is to a large extent a social
- 33 construct, but founded – crucially – on a biological fact.

Constructing the writer's identity

In the first few lines of the passage, Phillips lays the groundwork for her argument by telling her readers what it is *not*: it is 'not an argument for forcing women to stay at home. Nor is it an argument for "male domination".' This is a common rhetorical move, designed to protect or 'inoculate' an argument from criticism and to offer a 'preferred reading', indicating the way the argument should be interpreted. Implicit in these assertions is the idea that she is not against women's rights, nor is she against feminism *per se*. She rejects the extremism of those who would force women back into the home, and instead presents herself as moderate and reasonable – someone merely making a plea for 'acknowledging the need for a balance of responsibilities'.

The notion of 'balance' accomplishes considerable rhetorical work here. Positioned at the centre of a discursive organization which has few (if any) negative meanings, and used to sell everything from bottled water and breakfast cereal to religion and politics, 'balance' has connotations of health, harmony and, above all, naturalness. Like 'community', it has overwhelmingly positive meanings which can be managed and reworked in particular instances of use. Here the notion is tied to 'responsibilities', a word with particular resonances in discussions about lone parenthood, where much is made by politicians and journalists of people's *irresponsibility*. The idea of a balance of responsibilities, then, conveys a sense of moral rightness, and, because it is virtually platitudinous, is very difficult to rebut: who could mount a case against 'a balance of responsibilities'? Phillips's case is further strengthened by the suggestion that what she is calling for is merely an *acknowledgement* of the need for balance, implying, as it does, the existence of a pre-existing true or natural need (which we must simply not deny any more).

The targets of the attack: feminism and . . . female supremacism

As we have seen, Phillips is careful to construct her argument as one that is not straightforwardly anti-feminist. The opening passage of the extract can be read as a way of disclaiming an identity hostile to women's independence. In Widdicombe's (1993) terms, one of the problems to which she is orienting is that of being heard as attacking women. When she first elaborates the target of her critique it becomes clear why this disclaimer

was necessary, because her target is precisely 'a kind of feminism'. It is not, however, all feminism that she berates, but a specific type that has 'flowed into Britain from America'. Here, 'America' is invoked to index a long-standing British fear of insidious Americanization, but it also references more recent concerns about the spread of 'political correctness' and a particular type of 'victim feminism' (lines 10–11) that is frequently perceived to accompany it.

One of the basic points made by discourse analysis is that description and evaluation are not separate activities. In most discourse, descriptions are produced that *contain* evaluations. A clear example of this is to be found in line 15. Here feminism is recast as 'female supremacism', a phrase which comes 'ready evaluated', replete with resonances of racism and fascism and of shadowy organizations whose goal is to elevate one group of people above all others. No exponent of female supremacism is identified in the article, nor yet is any source or reference for female supremacist ideas indicated. Indeed, part of the rhetorical force of 'female supremacism' is that it evokes ideas of chilling, all-encompassing threat, while protecting Phillips from critique by denying any leverage for criticism.

Orthodoxy and state power

A common way of attacking opponents' ideas is to call them dogmas, ideologies or orthodoxies. In this context, though, the notion of orthodoxy has particularly significant connotations, suggesting a set of ideas which cannot be challenged but must be unthinkingly accepted and adhered to. Again, fears about the spread of 'political correctness', with its perceived policing of thought and behaviour, are conjured, with the notion that these ideas, far from being a minority view, have 'become the orthodoxy among social science researchers, public sector professionals and much of the chattering classes' (lines 07–09).

Two of the three groups singled out by Phillips are significant for being regarded as key loci of campaigns for 'political correctness' in the USA, while also being familiar targets of the right-wing press – identified as socialists or soft liberals positioned outside the 'real' world of business and enterprise. The climax of the three-part list, 'the chattering classes', is particularly rhetorically effective. Coined in the 1980s, part of the force of this categorization is its very inexplicitness. With no clear referent, it is an entirely flexible discursive category that generates impressions of an affluent elite, largely employed in education, the media and the 'helping professions', whose dinner-party chatter is simultaneously inconsequential while also constituting the voice of the liberal establishment.

The evocation of female supremacist ideas which have already become the orthodoxy among a significant – though derided – segment of the population conveys a powerful sense of threat. It constructs female supremacism as a political project only moments away from seizing 'state power', with dire consequences for fathers and men in general.

The nature of the threat: men and fatherhood under siege

So far, I have looked at how Phillips assembled a powerful rhetorical image of the people she deems responsible for threatening the 'death of the Dad'. Now I will turn to how she characterizes the nature of the threat itself. It is first alluded to in lines 5-7: a 'desire to eradicate sexual and gender differences in order to re-engineer men'. This is a fascinating construction because it *inverts* the logical order of most feminist accounts. The argument that men may have to change in order to bring about gender equality is one that would be familiar to most readers as recognizably feminist. However, Phillips attributes to female supremacists another project entirely – one whose *primary goal* is to 're-engineer men'. Rather than the challenge to some masculine behaviour being a means to a socially desirable end (gender equality), the re-engineering of men is cast as the end itself. The implication is that this project is born of nothing more noble than hatred of men. This is made explicit in lines 15-16: 'This female supremacism, rather than feminism, fundamentally despises, distrusts and dislikes men.' The use of another three-part list (shown by studies of political speeches to be a highly persuasive rhetorical format that generates particular audience appreciation), combined with the use of alliteration ('despises, distrusts and dislikes'), enhances the impact of the claim.

The nature of the threat to men is further elaborated in lines 17-25. One of the most striking features of this passage is its vagueness. I noted earlier that the identity of the 'female supremacists' is never made explicit; the same inexplicitness affects Phillips's discussion of the nature of the threat posed by this clandestine group. She writes of 'fatherhood under siege', of 'men and fathers increasingly viewed as superfluous to family life', and of masculinity being portrayed as 'unnecessary or undesirable', but she provides neither example of nor evidence for these claims. The force of her argument rests on rhetoric alone. The powerful sense of threat to men is conveyed by the use of metaphors of war ('under siege'), references to supremacist movements, and a language that is redolent of fascist discourse, with its views of some groups as 'unnecessary', 'undesirable' and 'superfluous'.

It is not that Phillips is deliberately or consciously plundering fascist discourse – and as a discourse analyst I am less interested in her internal motivation than in the effect of her constructions – but that it is perhaps the most powerful cultural resource available in Western democracies for conveying threat. The use of language like this to characterize feminist beliefs is not new: the notion of 'feminazis' has been circulating in the USA for at least a decade, popularized by right-wing commentators and 'shock jocks' like Howard Stern. So potent is this imagery, that it does not appear to need any explanation or justification. Indeed, part of its force is its very vagueness. As other discourse analysts have pointed out (Drew and Holt, 1989; Edwards and Potter, 1992), when it is systematically deployed, vagueness can constitute an important rhetorical defence precisely because it provides a barrier to easy challenges and to the initiation of rebuttals.

Moreover, if this fails and challenges are made, speakers can deny the particular meaning being attributed to them.

The effectiveness of the passage is also enhanced through the use of particular rhetorical formats such as contrast structures. In political discourse like this, a typical form is the rhetoric–reality contrast – when an opponent's action is compared unfavourably with their rhetoric, as in the following example: 'They *say* the health service is safe in their hands, but they have cut spending on it by 10 million pounds this year.' In our extract the contrast is rather different: in lines 22–25 a contrast is made between what 'female supremacism' says on some occasions and how this is 'undercut' by what it says on others: 'It tells us men are important as new fathers. But it undercuts this by claiming that lone parenthood is perfectly acceptable – and in some cases preferable.' This is a highly effective form of attack because it suggests simultaneously that female supremacists are inconsistent and contradictory, and that even apparently reasonable assertions should be treated with suspicion. A hidden agenda of hatred of men lies behind innocuous claims to welcome 'new fathers'.

Going against nature

In the final part of this case study I will look back to lines 5–7 and to Phillips's claim that this 'kind of feminism' aims to 're-engineer men'. The notion of 're-engineering' accomplishes considerable discursive work here. The word suggests not simply a desire to change men, but the view that men are to be treated like objects or machines to be re-engineered or reprogrammed. It suggests a desire for intervention that is aggressive and invasive, and that fundamentally dehumanizes men. A psychoanalytic reading might even suggest that castration is symbolically implied. In asserting that feminists seek to 're-engineer' men, Phillips presents feminists as harsh, cold and inhuman. The notion also reinforces the implication of fascist tendencies. In the context of discussion of supremacism it powerfully evokes images of Nazi eugenics or human re-engineering programmes.

A newer discourse of genetic experimentation and of reproductive technologies is also indexed: the phrase implicitly draws on popular fears about a variety of biomedical technologies from cloning to 'test-tube babies'. Although this is not spelled out explicitly in the article, debates about genetic engineering – and especially about the introduction of eugenics 'by the back door' – constitute a key discursive resource upon which Phillips draws. Later in the extract (lines 26–27) the idea of surrogacy is invoked, with the suggestion that the re-engineering has the ultimate goal of turning men into women (reinforcing once more the depiction of female supremacism).

Underlying this discourse is the implication that men are threatened not simply by an ordinary political organization, but by a movement that seeks nothing less than to overturn nature. Men will have to be re-engineered, fathers will have to become mothers: nature itself, as we know it, is under threat from these people. The idea that they are going against nature is

made explicit only towards the end of the extract (lines 28–33). Having constructed the nature of the threat facing men, Phillips argues: 'But most men and women don't want to be unisex parents.' This is a fairly standard rhetorical move, in which a speaker or writer claims to know and articulate the desires of another person or group. It is particularly effective, of course, in constructions of crisis or threat, since it also implies that the group (in this case men) are in danger of not being able to speak for themselves. Here, though, Phillips goes on to articulate *why* men and women do not want to become 'unisex' parents: 'That's because there are profound sexually based differences between mothers and fathers' of a biological, genetic and hormonal nature. What the 'female supremacists' want goes against this natural reality. In this way, then, feminists' putative attack on fatherhood becomes constructed as an attack on nature itself.

I hope that this brief case study has given some indication of the potential of discourse analysis for analysing language and social relations. In sum, the study has attempted to show that even a short passage extracted from a newspaper article is a complex rhetorical accomplishment. In this case, an apparently liberal article, which claimed explicitly that it was not anti-feminist, was shown to be highly ideological, constructing a society in which fathers, men in general and indeed nature itself are under siege from feminism. The powerful sense of threat generated by this passage was shown to be the outcome of a wide variety of different rhetorical strategies and formats.

Evaluating discourse analysis: questions and comments

In this final section, I turn to the evaluation of discourse analysis, which will be structured in terms of frequently asked questions, and their answers.

Does it produce broad empirical generalizations?

The short answer is no: for example, it does not seek to address questions such as why some people choose to become lone parents. Discourse analysis does not set out to identify universal processes, and, indeed, discourse analysts are critical of the notion that such generalizations are possible, arguing that discourse is always occasioned – constructed from particular interpretive resources and designed for particular contexts.

Is it representative?

There are occasions on which discourse analysts may want to make claims of representativeness for their analyses. For example, if I had done the necessary empirical research, I might have wanted to claim that Phillips's argument is representative of the kinds of discourses that are to be found in the literature of the contemporary UK men's movement (which, judging

from material available on its websites, seems to argue that women have achieved dominance in society and are victimizing men in various different ways).

Generally speaking, however, discourse analysts are less interested in the issue of representativeness than in the content, organization and functions of texts. While discourse analysts do not reject quantification altogether (and indeed question the idea of a straightforward quality–quantity distinction), a prerequisite for counting the instances of a particular category is a detailed explication of how to decide whether something is or is not an instance of the relevant phenomenon. This usually proves to be far more interesting and complex than apparently straightforward attempts at quantification.

Does it produce data that are reliable and valid?

Discourse analysts have been extremely critical of many existing methods for ensuring reliability and validity. In psychology, for example, much experimental and qualitative research depends upon the suppression of variability, or the marginalization of instances that do not fit the story being told by the researcher (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Discourse analysts themselves are committed to producing new and appropriate checks for ensuring validity and reliability. Jonathan Potter (1996b) argues that discourse analysts can make use of four considerations to assess the reliability and validity of analyses:

- 1 *Deviant case analysis* That is, detailed examination of cases that seem to go against the pattern identified. This may serve to disconfirm the pattern identified, or it may help to add greater sophistication to the analysis.
- 2 *Participants' understandings* As I noted earlier, one way of checking whether your analysis holds water is to examine how participants responded. This is most relevant, of course, in records of interaction, but, even in the case of newspaper articles, letters and responses can provide useful checks.
- 3 *Coherence* Discourse analytic work, like conversation analysis, is building increasingly upon the insights of earlier work. For example, knowledge about the effectiveness of three-part lists, contrast structures, extreme case formulations, and so on is developed from insights from earlier studies. As Potter (1996b) argues, there is a sense in which each new study provides a check upon the adequacy of earlier studies. Those that lend coherence by capturing something about the discourse can be developed, while others are likely to be ignored.
- 4 *Readers' evaluations* Perhaps the most important way for the validity of the analysis to be checked is by presentation of the materials being analysed, in order to allow readers to make their own evaluation and, if they choose, to put forward alternative interpretations. Where academic

publishers permit it, discourse analysts present full transcripts to readers. When this is not possible, extended passages will always be presented. In this sense discourse analysis is more open than almost all other research practices, which invariably present data 'pre-theorized' or, as in ethnographic research, ask us to take observation and interpretations on trust.

Discourse analysts, like other qualitative researchers, argue that 'validity is not a commodity that can be purchased with techniques . . . Rather validity is like integrity, character and quality, to be assessed relative to purposes and circumstances' (Brinberg and McGrath, 1985: 13). Researchers are beginning the difficult task of fashioning an approach to validity that does not rely upon the rhetoric or norm of objectivity for its justification (see Henwood, 1999 for discussion).

What then is the status of an analysis?

A discourse analysis is a careful, close reading that moves between text and context to examine the content, organization and functions of discourse. Discourse analysts tend to be quite humble people who dislike overblown claims and would never argue that their way is the only way of reading a text. In the final analysis, a discourse analysis is an *interpretation*, warranted by detailed argument and attention to the material being studied.

What about reflexivity?

Critics of discourse analysis enjoy a sport that is a variant of traditional academic competitiveness: this involves pouncing on analysts with a triumphant 'Ha! Got you!', and asserting that if all language is constructive, then discourse analysts' language is too, and therefore their analyses are mere constructions. Discourse analysts are well aware of this: in fact, we told our critics! But this does not undermine the discourse analytic case in any way. Indeed, it merely serves to highlight the inescapable fact of language as constructed and constructive. There is nothing *mere* about language! Some discourse analysts have become particularly interested in this reflexive point and have begun experimenting with different ways of writing which eschew the traditional disembodied, monologic authority of conventional academic texts, and are more playful and exploratory (see Ashmore, 1989; Woolgar, 1988; Gill, 1995; 1998; Potter, 1996b; Myers et al., 1995).

STEPS IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

- 1 Formulate your initial research questions.
- 2 Choose the texts to be analysed.
- 3 Transcribe the texts in detail. Some texts, such as archive material, newspaper articles, or parliamentary records, will not require transcription.

- 4 Sceptically read and interrogate the text.
- 5 Code – as inclusively as possible. You may want to revise your research questions, as patterns in the text emerge.
- 6 Analyse, (a) examining regularity and variability in the data, and (b) forming tentative hypotheses.
- 7 Check reliability and validity through: (a) deviant case analysis; (b) participants' understanding (when appropriate); and (c) analysis of coherence.
- 8 Write up.

Note

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