Review of How to do Discourse Analysis

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Book Title: How to do Discourse Analysis
Book Author: James Paul Gee
Publisher: Routledge (Taylor and Francis)
Linguistic Field(s): Discourse Analysis
Discipline of Linguistics
Issue Number: 25.4900

Review:
Review's Editor: Helen Aristar-Dry

SUMMARY

It is evident that Discourse Analysis (henceforth DA) has enjoyed enormous growth in recent decades, as indicated by the swift increase of publications, conferences, and graduate programs in this field. Within less than 50 years, DA has not only acquired the integrity and significance of a well-established discipline, but also extended the conventional boundaries of linguistics to other disciplines such as communication, sociology, and political science (Bhatia, Flowerdew & Jones, 2008). The prevalence of DA, however, has also created numerous misunderstandings about this discipline, especially among young undergraduates who have just started their linguistic journeys. Meanwhile, there seems to be a common dilemma for many DA instructors: despite the abundance of DA textbooks in the market, most of them are essentially writing about "what is DA" rather than "how to do DA". As a result, many undergraduates complete a DA course with general knowledge of DA, but still don't know how to conduct effective DA research.

Given the above dilemma, it is heartening to see the publication of the updated edition of "How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit". As the author of one of the best-known DA textbooks, James Paul Gee offers a practical how-to guide in this book for advanced undergraduate and graduate students working in DA-related fields. As Gee explains the motivation of this book himself: "this book, while it has explanation and examples, does leave a lot for readers to do and does give detailed instructions of a 'how to' sort" (p. 1). For this reason, the book is not organized in the traditional chapter-based format: apart from the brief Introduction and Conclusion, the book is organized around 28 "tools" for doing DA, and these tools were categorized into four units.

Introduction

The introduction introduces the book's general aims and salient features. Gee highlights a very important distinction within DA: some DA approaches are tied closely to the study of grammar whereas others concentrate on ideas, issues, and themes expressed in talks and writings. This grammar/content distinction is probably the most significant factor dividing the DA research community, and it explains why DA is merely regarded as a research method in the eyes of social scientists. However, as Gee points out: "no one theory is universally right or
universally applicable. Each theory offers tools which work better for some kinds of
data than they do for others” (p.1). It is evident that Gee is trying to unify the
grammar/content distinction by putting their various approaches within the same
“toolbox”, but his efforts only achieve partial success (see Evaluation section for
detailed explanations).

Unit 1: Language and Context

This Unit focuses on the issue of linguistic context and offers several tools for
analyzing pragmatic factors (e.g. assumptions, implicatures, intonations). The Unit
starts with an overview of language acquisition, with a particular focus on
acquisition speed and clarity issues. Then, it moves into the discussion of linguistic
context and how it influences the meanings of our communications. It should be
noted that the “context” is defined as follows, following the tradition of “grammatical
DA analysis”:

“[T]he physical setting in which the communication takes place and everything in
it; the basics, eye gaze, gestures and movements of those present; what has
previously been said and done by those involved in the communication; any
shared knowledge those involved have, including shared cultural knowledge”
(p.12).

Based upon the definition above, this Unit offers the following “tools” for
deciphering pragmatic information embedded in talks and writings:

Tool #1 (The Deixis Tool): For any communication, ask how the deictics are being
used to tie what is said to context and to make assumptions about what listeners
already know or can figure out.

Tool #2 (The Fill in Tool): For any communication, ask what knowledge,
assumptions and inferences listeners/readers must bring to bear for clear and
understandable communications.

Tool #3 (The Making Strange Tool): For any communication, ask what aspects are
“strange” if someone is an “outsider” of that communication.

Tool #4 (The Subject Tool): For any communication, ask how the subjects are
chosen and why speakers/writers choose them.

Tool #5 (The Intonation Tool): For any communication, ask how a speaker’s
intonation contour contributes to the meaning of an utterance.

Tool #6 (The Frame Tool): Always double-check for missing aspects after
analyzing contextual information. DA should consider all aspects of context
relevant to the meaning of the data.

Unit 2: Saying, Doing, and Designing

This Unit follows the theoretical framework of “speech act” (Austin, 1975; Searle,
1979) and looks at how language, apart from conveying information, can perform
different functions and build structures/meanings in the world. In contrast to the
container/conduit view of language, Gee offers a “building/designing view”: “in
order to do things with language (including informing), we use grammar to build
and design structures and meanings” (p. 56). The “tools” discussed in this unit
include:

Tool #7 (The Doing and Not Just Saying Tool): For any communication, ask not
just what the speaker is saying, but what he/she is trying to do.

Tool #8 (The Vocabulary Tool): For any communication, ask what types of words
are being used and the purposes behind such usage.

Tool #9 (The Why This Way and Not That Way Tool): For any communication, ask
what types of grammatical structures are being used and why speakers/writers
build their messages in this way but not in some other ways.

Tool #10 (The Integration Tool): For any communication, ask how the clauses are
integrated or packaged into utterances or sentences.

Tool #11 (The Topic and Theme Tool): For any communication, ask what the topic
and theme is for each clause. When the theme is not the subject/topic, ask why
such choice is made.

Tool #12 (The Stanza Tool): For any communication (that is long enough), look for
groups of ideas and how they cluster into larger blocks of information.

Unit 3: Building Things in the World

This Unit revisits the topic of context from a reflexive perspective and discusses
how language contributes to building and rebuilding our worlds. Gee lists seven
major building tasks achieved by the combination of language-in-use and other
non-verbal tools: Significance, Activities, Identities, Relationships, Politics (the
distribution of social goods), Connections, and Sign Systems/Knowledge (pp. 95-
98). The “tools” for analyzing these building tasks are as follows:

Tool #13 (The Context is Reflexive Tool): when analyzing the context of discourse,
ask how the speakers/writers create or shape the relevant context, and whether
the replication, transformation, or change of content is achieved consciously or
unconsciously.

Tool #14 (The Significance Building Tool): For any communication, ask how the
words and grammatical devices are being used to build up or lessen the
significance of certain things.

Tool #15 (The Activities Building Tool): For any communication, ask what
activity/practice this communication is building or enacting.

Tool #16 (The Identities Building Tool): For any communication, ask what socially
recognizable identities the speaker is trying to enact or to get others to recognize.

Tool #17 (The Relationships Building Tool): For any communication, ask how the
words and grammatical devices are being used to build, sustain, or change social
relationships.

Tool #18 (The Politics Building Tool): For any communication, ask how the
words and grammatical devices are being used to construct what counts as a social good
and to distribute this good to, or withhold it from, others.

Tool #19 (The Connections Building Tool): For any communication, ask how the
words and grammatical devices connect or disconnect things.

Tool #20 (The Cohesion Tool): For any communication, ask how the cohesion
works in the text to connect pieces of information and in what ways.

Tool #21 (Systems and Knowledge Building Tool): For any communication, ask
how the words and grammatical devices are being used to privilege or de-privilege
specific sign systems or knowledge.

Tool #22 (The Topic Flow or Topic Chaining Tool): For any communication, ask
what the topics are of all main clauses and how these topics are linked to each
other.

Unit 4: Theoretical Tools

In the final Unit, Gee brings DA out of the boundaries of linguistics and discusses it
from the perspective of cultural/psychological anthropology, history, literary
criticism, sociolinguistics, philosophy, and cognitive/cultural psychology. The final
six “tools” discussed here are:

Tool #23 (The Situated Meaning Tool): For any communication, ask the situated
meanings of its words and phrases.

Tool #24 (Social Languages Tool): For any communication, ask how it uses words
and grammatical devices to signal and enact a given social language.

Tool #25 (The Intertextuality Tool): For any communication, ask how the words
and grammatical devices are used for interacting with (quoting, referring to, or
alluding to) other texts.

Tool #26 (Figured World Tool): For any communication, ask what prototypical
stories/worlds the communication is assuming and indicating.

Tool #27 (The Big “D” Discourse Tool): For any communication, ask how the
speaker/listener manipulates language and other semiotic devices to enact
particular social identities and social activities.

Tool #28 (The Big “C” Conversation Tool): For any communication, ask what
historical or social issues and discussions are assumed to be known by the
readers/listeners.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, Gee emphasizes that the 28 “tools” have no particular order and
their applications must be conditioned by the demands of the research. Gee
further offers his essential criteria for “valid” DA:

Convergence: A Valid DA should be able to offer persuasive answers to many or
all of the questions raised by the 28 “tools”.

Agreement: A valid DA should be able to convince “native speakers” of the data
and “members” of the analyzed discourses.
Coverage: A valid DA should be applicable to related sorts of data.

Linguistic Details: A valid DA should be tightly tied to details of linguistic structure.

EVALUATION

Compared with the 1st edition, the 2nd edition of How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit has added one more tool (Tool #28) and added many classical references in its recommended readings (Gee provides comments for many key texts, which is extremely helpful for DA beginners). Overall, this book is not a stand-alone textbook for undergraduate and even graduate students. To achieve the best outcome from reading this book, readers ought to have some basic knowledge of linguistics as well as DA. As a result, it is ideal to use this book as complementary reading with other DA textbooks, such as Gee (2011) and Johnstone (2008).

Gee’s purpose of summarizing essential DA methods in the book is well-achieved, and the series of study questions and suggestions can be a great help for DA instructors looking for effective in-class assignments. Meanwhile, the book’s Appendix offers a summary of the 28 “tools”, which also makes the book an ideal resource book for anyone interested in applying DA in their own research.

Unfortunately, the current version also has some minor limitations, which might be addressed in future editions. First, although Gee discusses the grammar/content divide in DA in the Introduction, throughout the book it becomes clear that Gee’s primary focus is DA on the “grammatical” side. It would be welcome to see more DA methods on the “content” side (e.g. methods used in critical discourse analysis), as this would further increase the book’s readership outside the conventional linguistic community. Second, most of the discourse examples in the book are utterances, and more examples of written texts would be preferred. Third, the book’s recommended readings are offered in the end of each section. It would be convenient if a complete reading list was given in the appendix, along with the “tool” list. Finally, considering that the book is not meant to be a main text for DA courses, the price of the book (list price: $32.95) is a bit high, especially given the number of digital books which have hit the textbook market in recent years.

Nonetheless, overall the book is an ideal companion to any DA textbook, and it is a substantive resource for anyone looking for DA readings.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE REVIEWER:
Sibo Chen is a PHD student in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University. He received his MA in Applied Linguistics from the Department of Linguistics, University of Victoria, Canada. His major research interests are language and communication, discourse analysis, and genre theories.

Versions:
Format: Paperback
Pages: 208
Prices: U.K. £ 25.99
Format: Hardback
Prices: U.K. £ 90.00

Discourse analysis is a method of studying and analyzing a text, be it in written or spoken form. This method does not really analyze a text when it comes to its structure and syntax, but the meaning behind these sentences, hence, the approach is often described as going "beyond the sentence." Not only is discourse analysis a useful method in the field of...
linguistics, but is also applied in other areas such as social studies, psychology, and anthropology. Even the little nuances such as how long a pause is in between sentences can convey a meaning or illicit a response. In this way, an analysis such as this also takes into consideration the context of the text and the environment where it was placed. Qualitative analysis is being described as a way of thinking that is active, interactive, systematic, organized and sustained. It is a process, often disorganized, that gradually focuses on the emerging themes in the study. The process has specific and common procedures to the methods. In this paper we focus on memos one of the common procedures th View.

Qualitative social research - Origins and approaches for research in family medicine - Part 2: Qualitative content analysis vs. grounded theory. Article. Jan 2009. A. Wollny. Gabriella Marx. Where does discourse analysis fit? Discourse analysis is an analytic technique rather than a theory, and its popularity has arisen from the growing interest, starting late in the last century, in qualitative research and ways of analysing the data it produces. There are a number of similar methods, for example, content analysis, which analyses content according to key variables, narrative analysis, which looks at the patterns people find in their lives and situations, and. conversational analysis, which looks at the structure of dialogue (for more information, see How to analyse qualitativ