Learn to Analyze Written Text Using Discourse Analysis
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Student Guide

Introduction

Discourse analysis refers to a range of analytical approaches regarding how language is used in various modes in everyday encounters—spoken conversations, online communication, formal documents, and informal messaging. Discourses writ large can also refer to how language is combined with actions and ways of thinking to bring forth a particular identity or claim regarding values or meaning. Examples of discourse might include spoken gossip, letters to an advice columnist, personal ads on a dating site, a TED Talk, and city planning documents.

What Is Discourse Analysis?

Discourse analysis refers to a range of techniques to analyze language in use. Rather than focusing on the “objective” reality of what actually happened during an event, discourse analysis instead is concerned with language activated around an event and how that language differs based on who is sharing what to whom. Discursive analytic techniques may be used by linguists, social psychologists, literary critics, and social scientists to understand how language functions in everyday encounters. These encounters could be written, televised, spoken in conversation, or on an online platform. Some researchers would also consider discourse to include body language such as gestures and facial expressions as well as the material world which can activate language. For example, a recycling bin, though a material object, can generate discourse on “going green.” Hence, we
might say that discourse both reflects and reproduces social relations. Writ large, a discourse can include artifacts and the material world.

We should note that discourse analysis differs from conversation analysis, which focuses specifically on conversations, both casual conversation as well as transactional and institution-centered interactions, such as those occurring in a library or medical setting. It is an approach to studying social interaction, attentive to both verbal and nonverbal behavior, with a focus on how turns are taken in conversation and other communicative elements specific to everyday conversational encounters.

Discourses are “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (Gee, 2011, p. 201). We might analyze dating apps and how individuals use a personal profile, a photograph, and online messaging to portray themselves as attractive. In this case, we might refer to a “discourse community,” a community with an agreed upon communicative purpose and with established techniques, such as “ghosting,” which refers to suddenly ending communication with a potential date. Related to discourse community is a “community of practice,” which has three dimensions: regular interaction, shared goals, and shared repertoire (Waring, 2017). Another example is the State of the Union addresses of U.S. President George H. W. Bush. We might use discourse analysis to make sense of how he uses language to present an identity as a leader. We could also analyze the visual delivery of the address to assess his way of comporting, speaking (pausing, changing his tone), and occupying physical space.

The range of options for discourse analysis is wide. Discourse studies can focus on different components of language, called “standards of textuality,” such as intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality (de
Beaugrande, 1997).

*Intentionality* refers to what speakers intend.  
*Acceptability* refers to the degree to which hearers engage the discourse and whether the discourse meets with their approval and understanding.  
*Informativity* concerns how new or unexpected the information is  
*Situationally* refers to ongoing circumstances.  
*Intertextuality* refers to a text’s relations with other texts. (de Beaugrande, 1997, p. 53)

In the broadest sense, we might focus on parts, the whole, or how the parts and whole work together. With that in mind, we discuss *coherence* (de Beaugrande, 1997)—how the parts fit the whole, how the discourse as presented is plausible or unconvincing. This relates to constructivity, how parts of a discourse can be elements of a larger whole, such as a hierarchical relationship between them. Strategies refer to interactional strategies that accomplish a communicative goal, such as offering a gift to join a nonprofit organization or using a quotation from a historical figure to invoke past values.

In considering parts, we might be attentive to grammatical devices, use of tense, and other features that create emphasis. Analysis might also consider how the sequence of words, sentences, and metaphors provide a function. In linguistically driven analysis, we might be attentive to particular grammatical units, such as a transitive verb and its direct object. Hence, our analysis might have predetermined rules that guide our observation or, in other studies, it might be less rigid. For example, in analyzing U.S. President H. W. Bush’s speeches, we might *inductively* notice metaphors, folksy language, and references to an abstract collective (“we”). In an inductive approach, we would discern what discursive elements are evident in the data rather than relying on a pre-determined course of inquiry. For example, in analyzing political discourse, we might discern linguistic devices such as
repetition, parallelism, and conjuncts (e.g., “however,” “anyway,” “on the other hand”).

In analyzing written text, analysis can focus on numerous characteristics, such as textual formality, expression of attitude, assumed knowledge, and what is at risk (Eggins & Martin, 1997). In a personal ad, the risk is that no one will respond. In a presidential address, the risk is that critics will dismantle the speech. A discourse analysis might be used to focus on a particular text or to explain the differences among texts, such as comparing President Bush’s and President Obama’s language in their State of the Union Addresses. In this case, we might also draw attention to the difference in social contexts, for example, how political language in the United States changed after the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, New York.

Analyzing informal discourse, such as e-mails or conversations at a shopping mall, is different from analyzing formal documents. Informal documents and casual conversation might include references to “inside jokes” or a shorthand term, such as “BFF” (an acronym for “best friends forever”). A discourse community might have established rules and communicative techniques that are challenging for an outsider, such as a researcher, to decipher. Formal discourse has its own challenges. Political speeches or government documents might use obfuscating language aimed at satisfying a large array of people, quite different from a confessional e-mail intended for a single recipient. Instead of analyzing slang as we might do in casual encounters, an analysis of formal language might look for rhetorical devices that serve the objectives of the speaker or author(s). We should note that informal language can be as discursively sophisticated as formal language; our analysis can point to these complexities.

Discourse analysis can involve coding data. Coding refers to applying condensed topics to textual units and later analyzing these topics for larger patterns. Beyond
coding for content, we might also code for narrative or discursive strategies in data. There are numerous strategies for doing so (Burman & Parker, 1993; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). For example, discursive coding might pay attention to textual strategies such as primacy (what comes first in a narrative), negation (negative language), distortion (such as exaggerations), emphasis (text treated with more regard), isolation (expressions that stand out from the rest of a transcript), repetition (repeated phrases), incompletion (unfinished thoughts), and uniqueness (unusual expressions) (Alexander, 1988). This approach fits studies aimed at not only identifying what participants say but how they release information, how they structure their responses, and how they make claims using specific rhetorical techniques.

Discourse analysis provides insight into types of activities or genres. For example, we might look at the activity of nonprofit organizations sending letters asking for membership or donations. We might look at how these letters seek a common ground between the organization and the recipient. The analysis might point out the consequences of not joining (i.e., threats to the environment or world stability). Analysts would look at the logical relations these letters invoke and assumptions regarding the recipients’ level of interest and willingness to engage. We might consider also the field, tenor, and mode of discourse. The field refers to the social action, the tenor to the role structure (the status and roles of the participants), and mode refers to the symbolic organization, what part language is playing, such as persuasive, expository, didactic (Eggins & Martin, 1997).

**Illustrative Example: Written Narratives From the Survivors of Hurricane Floyd**

This example uses two “journals” written or typed by undergraduate students attending East Carolina University (Greenville, North Carolina, USA) in 1999 as part of a history assignment. Note that we had access to over 40 documents but
chose 2 for this dataset. For our purposes, we are interested in the discursive strategies of the journals and what these reveal about the hurricane as both a literal incident and a discursive one.

**Research question:** What discursive strategies are evident in journal entries written by survivors of a hurricane?

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**The Data**

The data were collected at East Carolina University (Greenville, NC) in a history class of undergraduate students who were asked to write about their experience of Hurricane Floyd. This dataset focuses on the accounts of two participants, Lana and Tylene (pseudonyms). The advantage of this type of data collection is that each participant focused on what mattered most to them; they told their account on their own terms with no probing from the researchers. Some students chose to address a particular person as their reader and used an epistolary mode in narration. Others used dates to indicate how circumstances changed from day to day, as in a typical diary. In this data collection approach, the researcher has less opportunity to probe, but he or she also has less opportunity to impose an agenda on what participants choose to write. All narratives were entered into a text analysis software program for coding and analysis. Software allows us to attach codes to text segments and generate summary reports based on those codes. It also provides analytical tools such as identifying code co-occurrences, which suggest conceptual relationships between codes.

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**Analyzing the Data**

In considering the many options for focusing our attention, such as intentionality, acceptability, informativity, and intertextuality, it became clear that particular components, such as *intertextuality*—relations with other texts—did not adequately pertain to the dataset. Though one participant mentions other events,
such as other hurricanes or the Titanic, we came to realize that the richness of the data does not lie in its intertextuality. Acceptability—the degree to which the audience accepts the discourse—is also not one of our objectives. We do not have access to the person(s) for whom the accounts were written; nor do we know what the instructions were for the assignment. Intentionality, on the other hand, is relevant to our objectives; the authors of the journal entries as written suggest an intent that we can analyze holistically and with particular uses of language. Informativity, how new or unexpected the information is, also pertains to our research question.

Other components such as the field, tenor, and mode of the discourse do have implications given our research question. The field refers to the social action that the discourse calls upon. We might say that the hurricane accounts invoke the social action of documenting community memory, but we decided to contain our analysis to other components of the discourse. For example, the mode, what part language is playing, is especially in line with our research question regarding discursive strategies. This means we will analyze whether the account is persuasive, expository, didactic, or something other than these.

We began our analysis by first coding textual segments with topics that came to mind during data review. In other words, our approach was largely inductive. For example, in the following paragraph, we noticed mentions of the media, reference to time, assessing the storm’s course, and use of the first-person. These eventually became codes.

Floyd was not suppose[d] to reach landfall until one or two o’clock this afternoon. But, the eye of the storm hit directly over top of us this morning around eleven o’clock. It was completely calm outside, almost unbelievable. Forecasters said not to be fooled, that the worst is yet to come. Mama made a pot of soup in case the current goes out. But, by
12:30 everything looked as if it was settling down, so we ate the soup. Now, at 1:15, we are sitting here with no current and no supper. Go figure. (Lana)

In our review of text, there are numerous directions we could have taken in coding. For example, we could have noted the use of to-be verbs versus active verbs. We could have looked for hypothetical language (use of the word “if”) as well as negation words (“didn’t,” “never,” “not”). We could have analyzed absolutist language (e.g., “extremely,” “always,” “never”). The decision to move in one direction versus another depends on the research question and whether we have a predetermined set of strategies that interest us, based on a literature review. In our primarily inductive approach, we noted language of interest in each paragraph and then later decided which codes would best serve our purpose. For example, hypothetical language was not frequent enough for it to be relevant for the discourse as a whole. Some codes, such as a code for absolutes, might be better used in analyzing a larger amount of data. Because we were focused on just two transcripts, we could not discern the larger meaning of absolutist words versus other language. In a larger dataset, we might be in a better position to compare transcripts that use absolutes and those that do not.

We developed the following code list:

- attitude
- coda
- disclaiming
- exposition
- external
- messaging
- others
- reflection
• requests
• sarcasm
• self-mentions
• third space
• timescale markers

Codes

*Attitude* refers to an evaluative statement regarding the hurricane; in other words, this code points to language not simply about what is happening but to the author’s assessment of her circumstance.

*Coda* refers to returning to the present time at the end of the journal entry (e.g., “Classes resumed today …”).

*Disclaiming* refers to refusing to acknowledge or denying what is happening or to resisting others’ assessment of the flood.

*Exposition* refers to contextual specificity; it is information, not an evaluative comment.

*External* refers to events outside of the hurricane, such as past hurricanes or references to other disasters, such as the sinking of the Titanic.

*Messaging* refers to various sources of information that the writer mentions, including ambiguous ones evident in the following: “There is word floating around of another hurricane headed our way.”

*Others* refer to general mentions of other, nameless people. (“People were outside on our porch.”)

*Reflection* refers to the use of cognitive verbs such as “thought” and “wondered.”

*Requests* refer to incidents where the writer receives a request for assistance from a friend, neighbor, or stranger.

*Sarcasm* refers to cynical statements about the media or the hurricane
itself. (“Forecasters are calling it the “Storm of the Century.” Yea, right. When has the Weather Channel ever predicted anything?”)

Self-mentions refer to the use of the words “I,” “me,” “myself,” and “my” to position the writer in the discourse and to establish a particular point of view.

Third space refers to spaces beyond those that the writer inhabits, such as mentions of houses and shelters seen on the news.

Timescale markers refer to language suggesting the passage of time, such as “when,” “before,” and “after.”

Note that our attention was not entirely inductive. We were also aware of the deductive “standards of textuality” (de Beaugrande, 1997) and hence discerned language that was primarily informational versus that which was more emotional or reflective. However, we did not have codes for larger discursive components, such as intentionality or informativity because these components do not apply to a sentence or paragraph. Rather, we used our codes to understand these more abstract discursive concepts, which are described in our final report. Note also that in a larger study for a dissertation or book, we would have many more codes. For purposes of this dataset, we decided on fewer, more focused codes to illustrate a discursive approach.

**Coding Examples**

**Lana**

Thursday, Sept. 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Floyd was not suppose[d] to reach landfall until one or two o’clock this afternoon. But, the eye of the storm hit directly over top of us this morning around eleven o’clock.</th>
<th>Messaging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was completely calm outside, almost unbelievable. Forecasters said not to be fooled, that the worst is yet to come. Mama made a pot of soup in case the current goes out. But, by 12:30 everything looked as if</td>
<td>Exposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
it was settling down, so we ate the soup.

Now, at 1:15, we are sitting here with no current and no supper. Go figure.

8:30 Our current is back on. My boyfriend returned home safe and sound, after making a thirty minute trip into an hour and a half because of flooded roads. The storm is over, and it wasn’t as bad as they said.

I would hardly call it the “Storm of the Century.” I called the university hotline and got good news: No Classes Friday.

Tylene

After Floyd had left Thursday afternoon the 16th my dad and I went riding around our neighborhood to see the damage. We went down every road around our house and our road.

There was a creek on both sides of my house that were completely covered by the overflowing creeks. This left only two roads that we could get to and both of them were completely flooded also. By Friday afternoon the 17th all the roads were clear except those roads that I got to see that had been washed out.

The asphalt, dirt, and the tubes that the water flows through was completely gone; there was nothing but rapidly flowing water for at least 30 feet.

The flooding in Kinston started that Friday. I didn’t get to see much of the flooding until the beginning of next week, when one of my mom’s friends, Ms. Janet, called and asked if we could bring our creek boat to help her move some of her things out of her house in Rivermont on Monday, September 20th.

We next ran reports on each code to compare their use in each transcript. For example, a report of self-mentions showed how Tylene uses the first person primarily as a way of conveying information, whereas Lana uses it as a way to share a more interactional voice—an emotional, reflective persona. An interactional voice refers to one where the writer comments on her own message, guiding the reader’s understanding of events (Hyland, 2013, p. 78).

Presenting Results

Below is a report of the results of our discourse analysis. We could have focused
on different discursive components such as timescale markers (“before,” “during,” “since”) or how information is released (informativity), but we instead focus on those components that we found the most relevant for this dataset.

Informativity and the Mode of Discourse

In addressing the informativity—how new or unexpected the information is—we discern that Tylene’s transcript is based primarily on information-focused discourse; that is, it enforces situationality, the ongoing circumstances of the flood. The author seems aware that this information is new. “The asphalt, dirt, and the tubes that the water flows through was completely gone.” This information is unexpected, which is why it is worth reporting. Paragraphs such as the opening one do not provide interactive discourse, one with a reflective voice. Rather, they are matter-of-fact information, reported flatly.

I live halfway between Kinston and Richlands right off of 258 South on Jessie Howard Road. I stay in White Hall by myself on the campus of East Carolina University. I live with both my mom and dad in the country. My brother lives in an apartment on Charles Boulevard here in Greenville. (Tylene)

Tylene generally does not rely on an explicit personal attitude or a narrative voice that generates compassion or understanding. Instead, her transcript is expository—a coherent, descriptive account of what has happened. She emphasizes materialization, a focus on the physical world and outcomes, rather than on emotional or ideational reflection.

Lana’s transcript, in contrast, represents an interactive discourse, one that seems to be constructed with a reader in mind, such as including a question (“so what’s a little wind and rain?”). Though she, like Tylene, is conveying information, she does so more interactively.
There is word floating around of another hurricane headed our way. Great, as if Dennis wasn’t enough fun for one hurricane season. Maybe we’ll at least get out of class for a few days. Probably not, ECU does stand for “Everybody Carries Umbrellas,” so what’s a little wind and rain? (Lana)

Self-Mentions

We use our discernment in analysis, which means that two different researchers might focus on somewhat different elements of the discourse; however, their respective studies would complement or mirror one another. In further reviewing the two transcripts, we recognize that self-mentions are common, but they fall in three types—action, reflection, and attitude. Action refers to physical activity, such as seeing something or touching something. Reflection refers to cognitive verbs such as “thinking” or “was convinced.” Attitudes refer to emotional states, such as being afraid or feeling grateful. (We did not have a code for action, but we were still able to discern it in the report for self-mentions.) These types are related to the mode of discourse, to what part language is playing in the document. Identifying and naming these types differs for any given discourse analysis. For example, in studying the discourse of city planning documents, we would not find “reflection” or explicit references to emotion.

The table below shows how Tylene’s transcript relies on active self-mentions while Lana’s relies on attitudinal self-mentions. These patterns become rhetorical expectations for the reader. We become accustomed to Tylene’s flat reportage just as we become accustomed to Lana’s irreverent and conflicted tone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of self-mentions</th>
<th>Tylene</th>
<th>Lana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>I live</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>I was sitting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I stay</td>
<td>I headed back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got to see</td>
<td>I come home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I rode in the boat to her house</td>
<td>I packed up my things</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I looked over the side and</td>
<td>I climb into my car</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could see the road</td>
<td>I flipped through the radio stations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I watched the tops of mail boxes</td>
<td>I grab my bags</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I couldn’t really hang on to it</td>
<td>I called</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got the anchor</td>
<td>I just got off the phone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sat in the boat</td>
<td>Reflective (mental verbs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could see gas floating</td>
<td>I think to myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought</td>
<td>I was convinced classes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I looked</td>
<td>I had made plans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could</td>
<td>I received word</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was able to make it</td>
<td>Attitudinal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I saw my dorm room</td>
<td>I became a little anxious and antsy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I left my dorm room to go home.</td>
<td>No way will I be caught here</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sat in my house late that night,</td>
<td>I would hardly call it the “Storm of the Century.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I arranged three twin mattresses</td>
<td>I was relaxed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>I have nothing to do … except study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t get to see much of the flooding</td>
<td>I was all right.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought</td>
<td>I’m willing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudinal</td>
<td>I just hope that’s enough</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I started to cry</td>
<td>I sure hope not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was terrified</td>
<td>I thank God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I would have been devastated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can’t imagine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intentionality
In addressing the intentionality of the discourse, we see that Lana’s discourse suggests a “speaker” or writer who transitions from skepticism to genuine concern. Her discourse is presented as a diary with dates as markers. Though her first entry (September 13) is redolent with sarcasm, this tone gradually diminishes, and by September 27, it is absent. Instead, she is reflective, conveying to the reader how we should make sense of the turn of events. She says that she would have been “devastated if the semester was canceled,” though earlier she says that “NO CLASS” is “good news.” Hers is a discourse of transformation; she herself calls attention to the shift in tone. In contrast, Tylene’s discourse stays in an informational mode. It is one of consistency, of the gradual release of information and contained reflection. For these reasons, we might say that Lana’s intentionality is to reflect and offer commentary, whereas Tylene’s apparent intentionality is to report. This is not to say that reportage is not also evident in Lana and reflection in Tylene but that the emphasis in each discourse is on one of these, steering the reader in a particular direction.

**Reportage Versus Reflection**

In further analyzing what part language is playing in the language of these accounts, we discern a difference between reporting on action and reflecting upon it. Tylene’s transcript has few reflective comments; she mostly reports on the physical world. Paragraphs such as the following provide a contextual understanding of the hurricane but not a cognitive or emotive sense of its effects.

> The flooding in Kinston started that Friday. I didn’t get to see much of the flooding until the beginning of next week, when one of my mom’s friends, Ms. Janet, called and asked if we could bring our creek boat to help her move some of her things out of her house in Rivermont on Monday, September 20th.

This expository mode creates a distance between Tylene’s experience and the
reader’s emotional awareness. She does, on occasion, slip into reflection, such as when she thinks hypothetically about communicating with children regarding the effects of the flood. “I thought about how you could tell a child that all of his or her toys were gone with the water.” She also thinks about how much money it would take to replace everything. Lana, in contrast, relies on reflection in every paragraph, triggering a cognitive pattern that the reader comes to expect.

No way will I be caught here if [Floyd] he does appear.

I would hardly call it the “Storm of the Century.”

Everyone seems kind of depressed and unenthusiastic about school. I’m willing to do anything to help. I just hope that’s enough… .

I would have been devastated if the semester was canceled, but I can’t imagine anyone being able to concentrate on classes after all that has happened.

Oh, man, what a slap in the face from reality.

In fact, Lana blends informational discourse with reflection, creating a more interactive mode, one that shapes the readers’ interpretation.

President Clinton did visit Tarboro this week, as if he was any help.

It was completely calm outside, almost unbelievable.

Lana makes internal references in her document. An internal reference is one that refers back to an earlier point made in the discourse. For example, she makes a comment about people being outside “our porch going crazy, ready to party” and then later says that “The air of the city is sad, nobody looks ready to party as they did when I left.” This kind of sentence helps guide the reader in understanding the author’s intent. By showing us how people have changed—no longer looking
ready to party—we also see that Lana has also changed. This makes the earlier description more salient and creates more cohesion in the overall discourse. Tylene’s transcript, in contrast, does not make use of internal references until the end when she says, “As of today Ms. Janet still lives in her office at the school gym, and many other people in many counties don’t have homes.” This reference to Ms. Janet calls back to earlier parts of the transcript.

External references, calls to incidents outside of the current discourse, are uncommon but present. For example, Tylene mentions Hurricane Fran (three years earlier) and Lana mentions the Titanic, which is also an example of intertextuality, a relation between this text and other “texts,” such as the implied discourse regarding the Titanic. In general, the hurricane discourse unfolds in chronological time without relying on external references to make its case.

Informativity and Messaging

Earlier in the report, we discussed how informativity is related to the mode of discourse, how Tylene uses information to report and Lana uses information to reflect. We turn our attention next to how informativity is related to the code messaging. The code report for messaging provides examples of whether and how the authors of the journals make reference to forms of messaging from various “authorities,” such as the media, parents, or a generalized “they.” For example, Lana’s journal mentions an abstract, third-person authority as well as media accounts that influence what she does. The owners of these voices are not named, but they nonetheless create an implied world of “reliable sources,” an ambiguous array of contextualized “voices.”

There is word floating around of another hurricane headed our way.

We received word today (from a friend who is a reliable source) that the dike that is holding up a canal bank nearby is about to break. If it is to do
this, then the water will come so quickly and so fast that the people living around it have no opportunity to think when it happens. Included in these people are all of my mama’s family.

The storm is over, and it wasn’t as bad as they said.

Floyd was not suppose[d] to reach landfall until one or two o’clock this afternoon.

The past tense is often used (“received,” “was”), but in some cases, the present is employed (“Floyd is the hot topic”), which gives a reference an immediacy, standing out from the rest of the past-tense narrative.

Lana also explicitly mentions the media.

The news said this morning that the hurricane is headed for us. But, as of 8:00 a.m., classes were still on the go. The rain has set in and the winds picked up a little more since yesterday.

Forecasters said not to be fooled, that the worst is yet to come.

Television reporters are saying that a flood like this happens once every five hundred years and this is the worst one of the century. It is an extremely sad situation. Homeless people who have nowhere to go … and the rivers aren’t supposed to crest until Monday or Tuesday.

The messaging also suggests an implied hierarchy of information—friends and family who have witnessed the damage have more clout than general claims from the media. Note the references to messaging (in bold) in the excerpt from Lana’s transcript below.

Wednesday, Sept. 15
The news said this morning that the hurricane is headed for us. But, as of 8:00 a.m., classes were still on the go. The rain has set in and the winds picked up a little more since yesterday. Everybody is talking about the storm and whether or not it’s actually gonna hit. During my 10:00 class, I received word that classes were canceled as of 2:00 today and tomorrow. After my 12:00 class I headed back to my apartment and called my mama to tell her the good news: NO CLASS. She insists that I come home because of the possibility of Floyd being as bad as forecasters say. Being that my mama worries so consistently about me, I packed up my things and began home.

Relieved of no class, I was relaxed as I climb into my car and begin my hour and forty-five minute ride home. As I flipped through the radio stations, Floyd is the hot topic and I became a little anxious and antsy. Immediately, turning into my driveway, the bottom fell out. “This is the kind of rain my Daddy calls a ‘frog strangler and a gully washer.’ It can’t last for long” I think to myself. I grab my bags, which are compiled of about three outfits because I was convinced classes would resume on Friday, and run inside. Around six o’clock (rains still coming down as heavily as three hours earlier) my boyfriend called to say he had to stay the night at a Relief Shelter in Suffolk, VA to help out. Great, it’s pouring down rain and I have nothing to do … except study.

In the following paragraph, Lana mentions the news, everybody talking, word from campus, her mother’s request, and her daddy’s colloquial expressions. Each of these sources provides information that Lana uses to build her account. The news seems to provide reliable information that is reinforced with other sources—the general gossip on campus, the university's cancellation of classes, and her mother’s insistence that she come home. In addition to the discourse providing an account of a hurricane, it is also one that shows Lana reconciling
various forms of “authority.”

Forecasters said not to be fooled. (Sept. 16)

I called the university hotline. (Sept. 16)

I just got off the phone with Mama. (Sept. 18)

Daddy … was told that … (Sept. 21)

Classes are still supposed to resume. (Sept. 27)

This informational hierarchy is absent in Tylene’s account. In her document, information comes solely from her first-person observations; her voice enforces its own authorial presence in tracking physical atmospherics—rising water, floating mail boxes, rocking porch furniture. The distinction between Tylene and Lana suggests not only that individuals describe information messaging differently but that messaging suggests a discourse world that some writers engage and others do not.

In addition to these informational sources, the transcripts also draw attention to spatial distribution beyond the physical space the writers inhabit. In general, the spaces in both Tylene and Lana’s transcripts are immediate spaces that the speakers inhabit. For this reason, the reader trusts the veracity of what is described. They are eyewitness accounts, not described second-hand. In contrast, third spaces are references to places that the author does not inhabit but that she brings into the discourse. For example, Lana mentions that “waters rose so fast that people were standing on top of their roof signaling helicopters.” This may be something she heard or saw on television and, as such, is part of the cumulative third space that readers construct as they read the transcripts. In Tylene’s transcript, she, in some cases, describes damaged homes from a distance:
I looked at the homes as we slowly went by them. Some of the blinds were open and I could see the furniture moving slightly inside the homes. Thinking about how much money it would take to replace almost everything in just one of those houses multiplied by all of the houses in all of the counties that had been flooded.

Because the authors are not far removed from the third spaces, these places, too, seem real to us, but they also create an implied spatial distribution. That is, the discourse does not take us outside of the hurricane and its effects—except briefly in mentions of Hurricane Fran and the Titanic. The reader’s spatial world is a narrow one bounded by what Tylene and Lana see and hear (or hear about).

Coherence

Coherence in discourse refers to how the parts fit the whole, how the discourse as presented is plausible or unconvincing. Some techniques for coherence in Lana’s transcript is the use of dates as markers. Paragraphs begin with a date as if the transcript is a diary, not just an assignment for a college project. Coherence can be thought of as being additive or causal (Taboada, 2009, p. 128). Additive means that one thing follows another but that the sequence is not one of causes and reactions. Causal relations, in contrast, suggest that the sequence is related to a ripple effect. Lana’s discourse is essentially additive. On September 16, she says that her electricity is back on. On September 17, rivers have risen an unbelievable amount. She and friends head to Salem. On September 18, classes are canceled. Though these are all related to the flooding, they are not causally related. They are conceptually connected with an “and.” This happened and then something else happened. In contrast, Tylene’s transcript suggests causal relations—a main and subordinating part. Tylene also uses dates, but they are blended into the exposition. “When East Carolina University announced that they would be closed the rest of the Wednesday, September 15th and the next day, I left my dorm room
to go home. The flooding in Kinston started that Friday.” In Tylene’s transcript, Ms. Janet calls on September 20 and asks Tylene whether Tylene’s family could bring their boat to help her move out some of her possessions. Tylene’s family tries to convince Ms. Janet to move even more things out of her house, but she does not think it is necessary. On September 22, Ms. Janet calls again. The water is now thigh high, and she wants the boat again to salvage more of her possessions. Here we have a primary request, the call on September 20 and a subordinating component, Tylene not wanting to argue with Ms. Janet about rescuing more of her belongings. This is followed by another request from Ms. Janet. We experience this chain of events as causal coherence. Coherence relations are sometimes indicated by conjunctions such as “if,” “though,” and “but,” though these are largely absent in both Tylene and Lana’s transcripts.

Summary Table

The table below is a condensed version of some of the discursive differences between Lana and Tylene’s transcripts. Though both writers have similar accounts of property loss, disarray, and sadness, the discursive strategies they use are markedly different. Using a table to condense discursive differences is not required of researchers, but it is a technique to efficiently share findings. For example, oncology researchers might be interested in the discourse of cancer as a battle or as a journey (Semino et al., 2017). They might be interested in finding out which discourse best “strengthens the alliance” between doctor and patient (Penson, Schapira, Daniels, Chabner, & Lynch, 2004). A table showing the difference between violence scenarios and journey scenarios can summarize how patients make use of these discourses and how each one aligns with their feeling empowered or disempowered.

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Tylene</th>
<th>Lana</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Resigned</td>
<td>Conflicted</td>
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This table condenses what we have gleaned from our codes. Tylene’s language suggests imparting an informational account of the hurricane, whereas Lana attempts to reflect on the events as well. The emotional tone mirrors the authors’ intentions. Tylene is not emotive, whereas Lana reveals conflicted emotions, including sarcasm and, toward the end of her account, compassion. As readers, we experience Tylene’s transcript as information, whereas in Lana’s, we perhaps sense a transformation; by the end she is no longer sarcastic and disconnected from the reality of the flooding. The “voices” of each author are distinctive; Tylene’s account seems flat in comparison to Lana’s account, which relies on frequent calls to attitude. These elements collectively suggest that the mode of discourse for each author differs. The symbolic organization of Tylene’s transcript, tied to the reader’s experience, is expository, whereas Lana’s is transformative.

Review

Discourse analysis is used to make sense of the content, linguistic elements, and rhetorical structure of language in use, such as a diary, formal speech, smartphone texting, or an online forum. After reading this dataset, you should be able to:
Define how and why discourse analysis is used in research.
Use discourse analytic coding techniques.
Write a discourse analysis report.

Reflective Questions

Here is a paragraph from a different participant in the hurricane data archive.

Later that night all of my friends and I ventured over to a friend’s apartment with some of our belongings. We took basic necessities—water, candles, and food were going to be prepared for Floyd or at least we hoped so. We ended up going to a big hurricane party and were having a blast for some time. We were oblivious to what was going on outside. Then the power went out which brought us back to reality. When the power went out I remember looking out the window and thinking this is really going to get worse and maybe we should figure out a way home. We didn’t want to get stuck there. At 10:50 that Wednesday night everyone that lived in Belk Hall decided it was time to go. We didn’t know at that time that Greenville had a curfew of 11:00. We tried to walk up 14th Street only to find policemen on the corner telling us that it was flooded and we couldn’t go that way.

2. What does the discourse suggest about the author or producer’s intent? Does the speaker present herself/himself as reliable?
3. What words (or kind of language) tend to show up repeatedly?

References

Alexander, I. (1988). Personality, psychological assessment, and


