

REVIEW OF *DISCOURSE AND DIGITAL PRACTICES: DOING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN THE DIGITAL AGE*

Discourse and digital practices: Doing discourse analysis in the digital age

Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik, & Christopher Hafner (Eds.)

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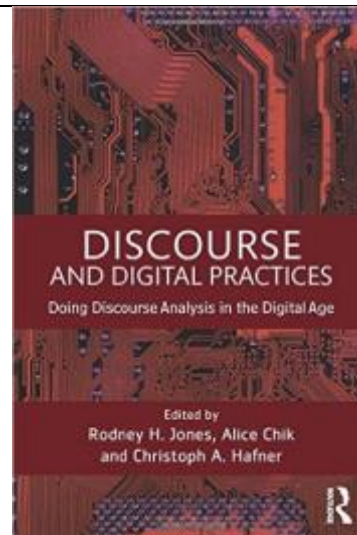
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With the rapid expansion of technology and digital media, the boundaries between online and offline discourse are becoming increasingly blurry, allowing new forms and uses of language to emerge. These changes have important ramifications for research on discourse, not only in what can be taken as the focus of study, but also in how such research can and should be carried out. The edited collection *Discourse and digital practices: Doing discourse analysis in the digital age* offers a timely and comprehensive look at these shifts in the practice of discourse analysis.

The chapters in this volume, which cover a broad range of both online and offline research locations and subjects, are united by a focus on how emergent uses of both language in digital spaces and language influenced by digital discourse necessitate new research practices. Each chapter grapples with ethical and methodological questions raised by the new sites of research, making the volume useful for both experienced researchers and for students of digital literacy.

In their introduction, Jones, Chik, and Hafner point out that given the rapidly changing digital landscape and the ever expanding range of social practices now conducted online, discourse analysts cannot rely on one single framework, but must instead integrate previously established methodologies with innovative approaches. The strength of this collection lies in how the chapters showcase a variety of ways in which scholars of digital discourse have done exactly that. In particular, the contributors follow the recent emphasis in applied linguistics on practices rather than products (e.g., Pennycook, 2010; Canagarajah, 2014), defining *digital practices* as fundamentally social in nature—actions which are aimed towards social goals and enact identities (p. 3). As a result, the analysis throughout the book tends towards the ethnographic, often making use of both actors' perceptions of their own activity and the understandings of observers and participants. This data ranges from intimate—as with Jones' auto-ethnographic reflections on self-tracking apps and Hafner's observations of his children's play in an online virtual world—to more anonymous—as with Lee's brief interviews with passersby on responses to advertising. The contributors' use of these and other ethnographic methods, including video and photographic records, to complement more quantitative investigations of texts and discourse illustrates the importance of interpreting textual data within “the context of its use” (p. 15). The consistent use of these types of data throughout the

collection models an expanded range of both possibilities and necessities for researchers of digital discourse, while keeping the focus on the social consequences—both positive and negative—of the deep integration of digital media into all aspects of our lives.

The collection offers many useful challenges to previously held notions of what constitutes texts, contexts, and interactions. In his opening chapter, Gee encourages the application of discourse analysis to the *texts* of video games. Gee argues that, as players attempt to accomplish goals through the characters' affordances, meaning is co-created by the player and the game itself. The player participates in a cycle of searching for affordances, testing them through action, and then interpreting the results before acting again. Ultimately, Gee concludes that all human activity consists of a series of conversational interactions, and that discourse analysis could be much more broadly applied.

Like Gee, Hafner argues that online virtual worlds should be understood as conversations between the designers and users of the sites. Through structured observation of children's use of the site Moshi Monsters, in which players adopt a monster character, Hafner finds that the sites offer a variety of tools for creating, displaying, and negotiating identities and that the discourse of the sites position users as either the owners of the monsters or as the monsters themselves. He models how observation, stimulated recall, and screen capture technology can be combined to investigate sensitive questions of identity creation online.

Chik also explores the positioning of users online, through the affordances and discourse of the language learning social network sites (LLSNSs) Duolingo and Busuu. While previous research has focused on the usability and effectiveness of these sites, Chik uses auto-ethnographic methods to examine how LLSNSs position themselves as scientifically-based and sympathetic providers of language learning and simultaneously position learners as consumers through emphasis on for-pay premium memberships. The affordances of these sites also limit users' interactions with each other, following a strictly linear pedagogy with only some discussion spaces for users to express creativity and negotiate bilingual categorizations.

In his chapter, Jones contests the classic definitions of reading and writing through an examination of *self-tracking apps* which collect data such as what a person eats and how much he or she sleeps or exercises. Reversing the traditional concern of discourse analysis on how writers construct texts, he finds that such apps construct us as readers by entextualizing our physical activity. He considers how such apps distribute agency between the tool and the human user and push the act of writing even further from "the traditional act of inscription" (p. 35). Jones warns that these apps use algorithms over which users have little control, highlighting the danger inherent in the pervasive reflexivity of digital texts.

Breaking down traditional distinctions between online and offline contexts, Lee analyzes examples of online discourse, such as the @ symbol and the Facebook *Like*, found in texts in physical public spaces in Hong Kong. Combining traditional linguistic landscape photographic data collection, organized and tagged through a Flickr account, with interviews focusing on interpretations of the texts, Lee finds that the display of netspeak in these spaces indexes globalized commercial identities. She demonstrates that these writing practices contribute to the enregisterment of netspeak and highlight how discourse practices flow between online and offline domains.

In addition to these themes, some chapters focus on expanding and developing digital discourse analysis methodology. In contrast to previous work which treated photo tags solely as metadata, Barton uses surveys and interviews with Flickr users to understand how tags are used creatively for both communal and personal purposes. He demonstrates that when read within the context of their Flickr pages, tags have both a narrative function and a grammar in which the order of tags is part of the meaning-making process. Barton's chapter offers an important methodological model for how webpages might be analyzed as multimodal texts divided into distinct "writing spaces" (p. 49).

King's chapter uses a novel digital locus of study, queer chatrooms, to re-examine a methodology, corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADA). King first discusses the ethical issues of compiling chatroom data, including the complexity of attaining informed consent for this type of interactive, anonymous, and ambiguously public writing. He then considers how grouping less common tokens of word use into categories according to their social functions can offer useful insights into discursive patterns, but can also conceal the finer nuances of the words' use, arguing that CADA should work not only towards objective, quantitative findings, but also towards "critical insight via deepened subjectivity" (p. 141).

Benson's chapter, *YouTube as text: Spoken interaction analysis and digital discourse*, develops a framework for analyzing interaction on YouTube pages, drawing from both multimodal discourse analysis and tools for analyzing spoken interactions. Using familiar labels of initiation, response, and follow-up, Benson finds that YouTube comments typically function as response moves to the initiation move of the video posting, but notes that these turns are deeply shaped by the affordances of the YouTube interface, such as display of the most popular and most recent comments first, rather than comments in sequential order. He concludes that despite its "participatory spectacle" nature (Androutsopoulos, 2013), YouTube remains a product of communicative interaction, open to discourse analysis tools.

Marsh's chapter also argues that online discourse can be productively explored through traditional tools, specifically Foucaultian analyses which expose how power and identity are created and maintained. She examines a variety of data, from YouTube pages to email interviews to a Twitter steam, to trace the performance of celebrity in an online world for young people, Club Penguin Music Videos. She identifies the self-promotion and fan behaviors in this community which contribute to discourses of recognition and status, suggesting that these communities enable young people not only to engage with new media but also to develop strategies for deploying social capital.

Merchant's chapter investigating the use of iPads as literacy tools with very young children suggests that a single methodological approach to complex technology-based literacy practices is insufficient; instead, he combines a broad descriptive narrative with a more detailed examination of gesture. He considers how the iPad used in a daycare both initiates and organizes literacy activity: the iPad functions as a book within a pedagogical story-reading routine while also socializing children into the specific motions required by a touch screen. He calls for literacy education to respond to these emergent practices by recognizing how culture and technology are bound together in making meaning.

Carrington introduces another methodology, that of the object ethnography, to understand one young woman's use of her smart phone, considering how the technological artefact functions in her social relationships, identity work, and literacy practices. Carrington finds that 16-year-old Roxie has both a pragmatic and emotional connection to her phone and that like other young people, she lives in a dynamic *polymedia* context with access to a range of devices and communicative platforms. The iPhone organizes Roxie's communication through its affordances, promoting a sense of constant interconnectedness and access to information and mediating her everyday experiences—as when a map function on the phone alters what it means to navigate space. Roxie's iPhone, far from a neutral object, shapes how she produces and interprets texts, a trend that will only increase with the further spread of this technology.

Some chapters further encourage the re-examination of forms of digital discourse. Vasquez' chapter, *Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in online reviews*, challenges previous understandings of online reviews as isolated texts. Using a specialized corpus of reviews from sites such as Amazon and TripAdvisor, Vasquez finds that online reviews demonstrate both hybridity in genre and diverse types of intertextuality, including references to other reviews and to offline texts, drawing upon wider, shared discourses to create a sense of community from people who may interact solely online. She emphasizes that the writing of reviews is a new literacy practice, emerging from the democratizing ability of any user to essentially self-publish reviews.

Snyder traces the evolution of the term curation from its exclusive association with museum art

exhibitions to its current meaning in digital spaces of editorially selecting materials and thereby adding value to them. Through careful review of literature, she distinguishes curation from the creation or aggrandizement of content and defends the use of the term to describe non-scholarly activity on the web, concluding that content curation is an essential skill for 21st century students to master.

Finally, Selwyn's chapter, *The discursive construction of education in the digital age*, uses critical discourse analysis to critique the deeply neo-liberal underpinnings of the discourses around digital education. In particular, he exposes how the now common-sense discourses which frame digital technology as productively and playfully disrupting traditional education reinforce an understanding of education as individualized, privatized, and competitive. Selwyn urges us first to be conscious of the tension between these values and the conception of education as a public good, and then to contest the easy acceptance of these discourses.

Altogether, this volume provides an important snapshot of how digital media is rapidly changing language and literacy practices and demonstrates how these shifts necessitate novel and creative approaches to discourse analysis. For language teachers, these chapters work to inform our understanding of how technology is used—and might be used—in writing, learning, and forming identities. The overall effect of the book is to shine a light on the digital discourses in which we swim in our increasingly intertwined online and offline lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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