

## **Comparing discourse analysis, interaction analysis, and conversation analysis**

Before proceeding with the main business of the chapter, I should like to address the distinction between discourse analysis, interaction analysis, and conversation analysis. In looking at the literature, it quickly becomes apparent that the distinction is by no means clear-cut, and in many instances, the distinction is one of emphasis rather than distinct categories. I have found it useful to distinguish between the different analytical methods in terms of four different factors: firstly, the means whereby the data have been collected; secondly, the mode of language which is admitted into the analysis; thirdly,

whether the researcher brings to the analysis a predetermined set of analytical categories; and finally, whether the focus of attention is essentially linguistic or non-linguistic.

In looking at the means whereby the data were collected, the salient question is whether the data were collected through some form of elicitation or whether the researcher has tried to obtain naturalistic samples for analysis. In general, in all forms of analysis, the preference is for naturally occurring language. However, while conversation analysts rigidly eschew the use of elicited or invented samples of language, both of these practices are acceptable to some discourse analysts. When considering studies based on natural samples of language, we need to keep Labov's observer's paradox in mind, and ask whether it is ever possible to obtain natural samples of language. In other words, is it ever possible, through observation, to collect the sort of language speakers use when they are not being observed? Interaction analysts do not use invented samples of language, and, like conversation analysts, generally favour the collection of naturally occurring, non-elicited language.

The second factor is the mode of language which is admitted into the analysis. Discourse analysis is carried out on both written and spoken language (although individual analysts generally favour one form rather than another). Conversation and interaction analysis, on the other hand, are both concerned exclusively with spoken language.

The third question concerns whether or not the analyst brings to the analytical task a predetermined set of categories. Once again, discourse analysis is distinguished from conversation and interaction analysis in the use of predetermined analytical categories. Conversation and interaction analysts favour a discursive, interpretive type of analysis.

The final distinction I should like to draw here concerns the substantive focus of analysis. Discourse analysis has developed within linguistics, and it is therefore hardly surprising that the analysis is generally carried out in linguistic terms. In the same way as sentence grammarians are concerned with what makes a well-formed sentence or utterance, the discourse analyst investigates what it is that makes for well-formed discourse. Discourse analysts have studied textual factors such as the use of reference and conjunction, which contribute to cohesive discourse, as well as the ways in which speech acts such as 'inviting', 'apologising' and 'denying' are performed and interpreted within coherent discourse (see, for example, Brown and Yule 1983). Conversation analysis, on the other hand, has emerged from a school of sociology known as ethnomethodology, and the rules and procedures employed are sociological rather than linguistic in character. Substantively, this form of analysis investigates such things as the management of turn-taking, repair strategies, the resolution of ambiguity, speaker selection, and topical relevance. It also investigates the way certain speech acts, such as question-answer and offer-decline, combine as adjacency pairs; in this regard, conversation analysis overlaps with discourse analysis. The essential difference is

TABLE 8.1 DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF DISCOURSE, CONVERSATION, AND INTERACTION ANALYSIS

	<i>Discourse analysis</i>	<i>Conversation analysis</i>	<i>Interaction analysis</i>
Method of generating data	Invented Elicited Naturalistic	Naturalistic	Elicited Naturalistic
Mode	Spoken Written	Spoken	Spoken
Type of analysis	Categorical	Interpretive	Interpretive
Units of analysis	Linguistic	Non-linguistic	Both linguistic and non-linguistic

that the discourse analyst is concerned with the rhetorical routines realised in speech, while the conversation analyst is interested in the social routines (for an extended discussion with examples, see Aston 1986). Interaction analysts are concerned with both the linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of spoken language, and attempt to articulate links between the linguistically focused rhetorical routines and social aspects of interaction.

The various features and characteristics which I have discussed are set out in summary form in Table 8.1, and this should make clear points of similarity and divergence between the three approaches.

Which of these is the preferred type of analysis? In his book on pragmatics, Levinson (1983) synthesises the debate in the following manner.

DA [discourse analysis] theorists can accuse CA [conversation analysts] of being inexplicit, or worse, plain muddled, about the theories and conceptual categories they are actually employing in analysis . . . CA practitioners can retort that DA theorists are so busy with premature formalization that they pay scant attention to the nature of the data. The main strength of the DA approach is that it promises to integrate linguistic findings about intrasentential organization with discourse structure; while the strength of the CA position is that the procedures employed have already proved themselves capable of yielding by far the most substantial insights that have yet been gained into the organization of conversation. (Levinson 1983: 287)

From the foregoing discussion, you can see that interaction analysis shares characteristics both with discourse and conversation analysis. It is narrower than discourse analysis in terms of mode and method of generating data, but somewhat broader when it comes to analysis. While it shares the same broad, interpretive approach to the analysis of data as conversation analysis, it is broader in terms of the range of features subjected to analysis. I have chosen the term *interaction analysis* as the title for this chapter because of its breadth

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of focus. This will allow me, in parts of the chapter, to stray into the domains of discourse and conversation analysis. For an alternative approach, which subsumes interaction and conversation analysis under discourse analysis, see Hatch (1992).