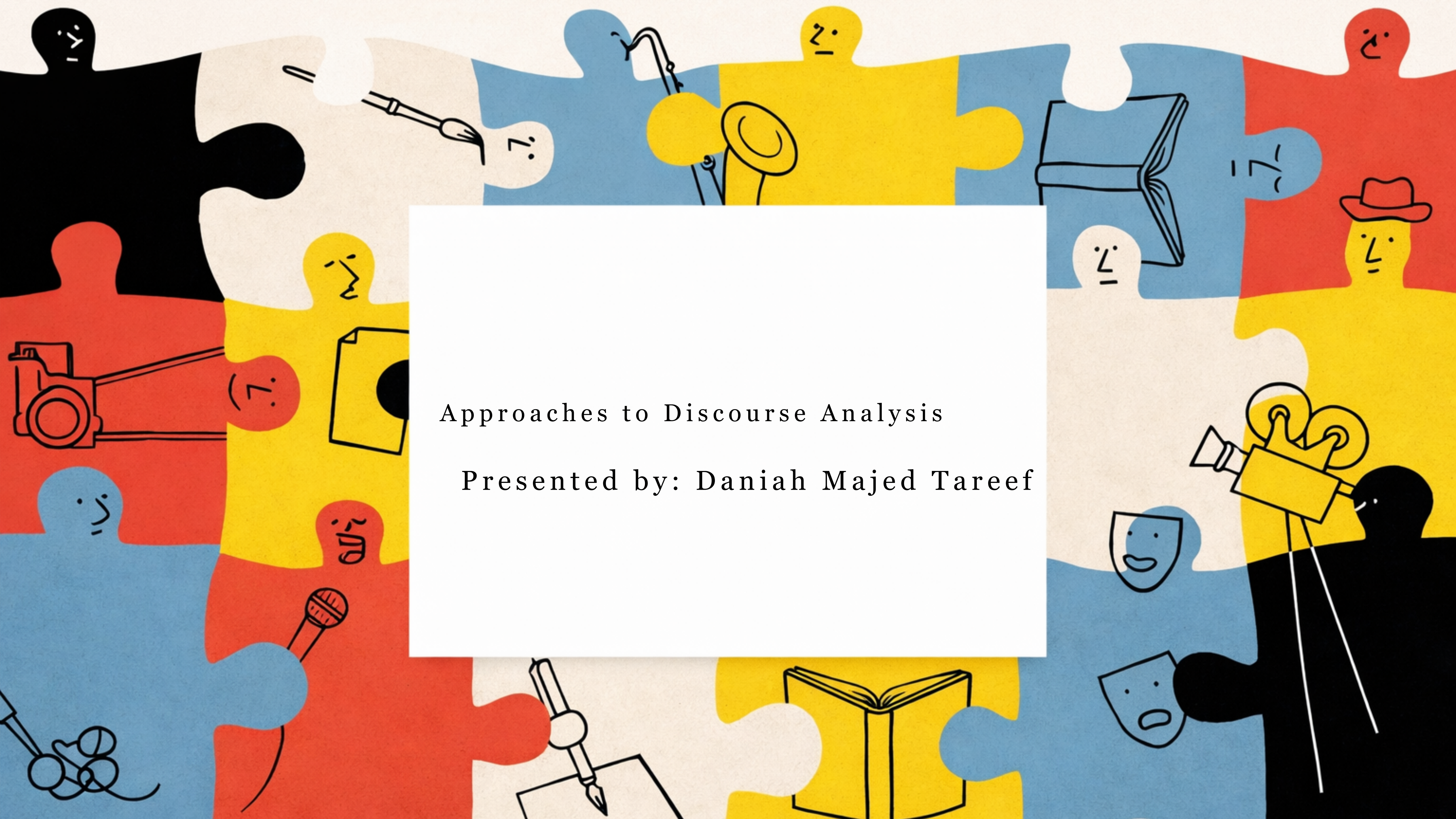

Approaches to Discourse Analysis
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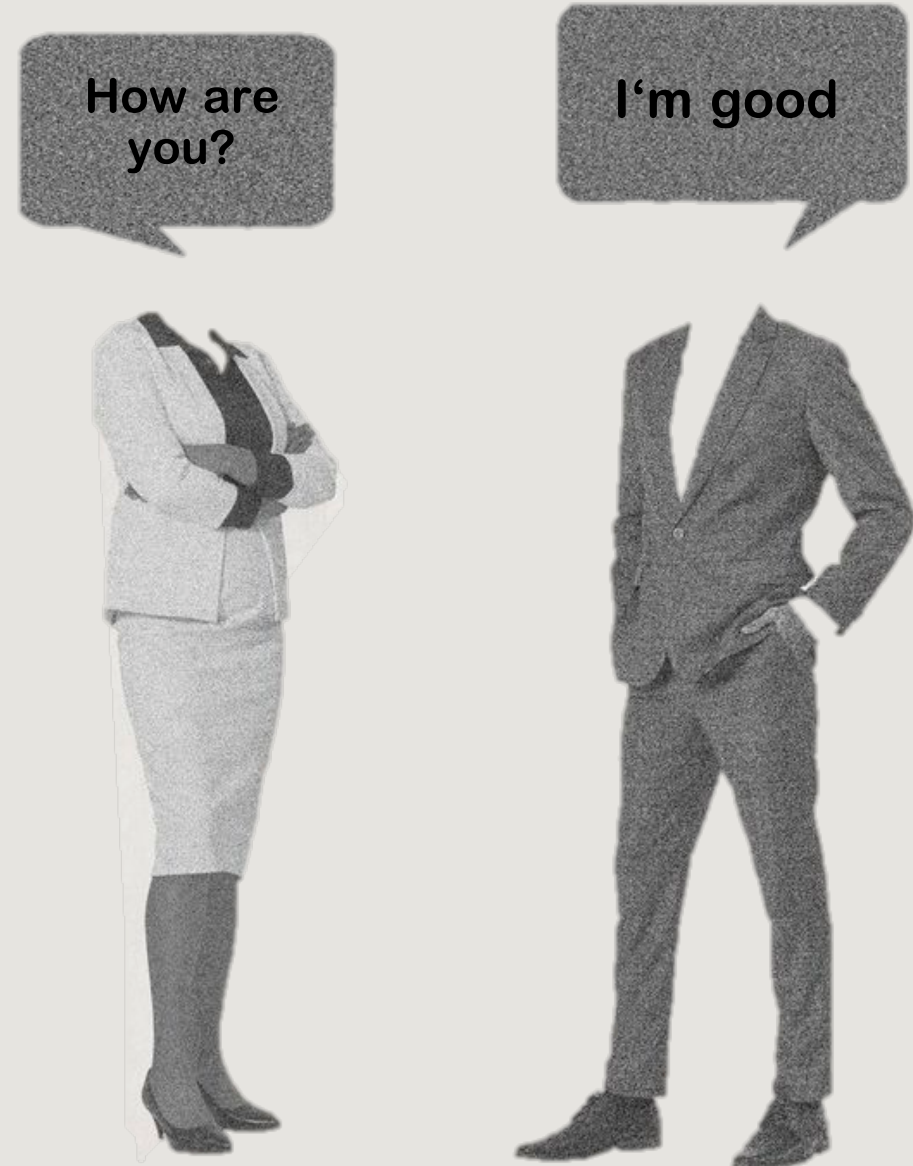
Sense and sequencing: conversation analysis

Pragmatics assumes conversations are logical, while conversation analysis views them as orderly, meaning they follow predictable patterns in which certain utterances typically precede or follow specific types of responses.

Conversation analysts view utterances as actions, but differ from Austin's followers in explaining how meaning gains force. Rather than prioritizing speaker intention and contextual conditions, they emphasize sequence, arguing that utterances are chiefly interpreted through their placement and fit within preceding and subsequent turns in conversation.

The core of conversation analysis is examining sequential structure. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) argue that interaction is organized in paired utterances, where one turn shapes the next.
These "adjacency pairs" include patterns like question–answer, invitation–acceptance, and greeting–greeting.



Sense and sequencing: conversation analysis

The key feature of adjacency pairs is their relationship of conditional relevance: each utterance depends on the other. The first turn limits what the second can appropriately be, such as a question requiring an answer or a greeting prompting a greeting. At the same time, the second turn confirms how the first was understood. If someone provides an answer, this shows the prior utterance was treated as a question.

Conversation analysis examines how speakers rely on shared structural expectations to create meaning. When the response matches expectations, it is called preferred; when it does not, the preferred response is heard as absent, creating implicature. For example, “I love you” conventionally invites a reciprocal declaration. Preferred responses are efficient and require little explanation, whereas dispreferred responses demand additional conversational work, such as apologies or excuses, to soften unintended implications.

Sense and sequencing: conversation analysis

Conversation analysis suggests that most talk can be divided into adjacency pairs, even when these pairs overlap or are embedded within one another but it f follows a basic pairwise organization that allows participants to perform actions in an orderly way.

Beyond individual pairs, conversations also have predictable phases:
Openings typically include greetings and ritual exchanges that establish rapport and create opportunities to introduce topics.
Closings, however, often require pre-closing signals and repeated exchanges to ensure no new topic is introduced. Because conversation is interactive and slot-based, endings can be difficult; even a simple “Goodbye” may reopen interaction.

For example:
A: “Anyway, I should let you study.”
B: “Oh right, yes.”
A: “Okay then.”
B: “Okay.”
A: “Bye.”
B: “Bye.”
Multiple pairs work together to gently accomplish closure.

Power and Politeness

Whenever we interact, we communicate something about our relationship through discursive strategies. These fall into two types: involvement strategies, which express friendliness and solidarity, and independence strategies, which signal respect and deference. Typically, both participants share an understanding of their relative closeness and adjust their language accordingly.

Participants may share assumptions about closeness and power, but sometimes they must negotiate their relationship, especially when growing closer or challenging another's authority or dominance.

In interaction, people rely on expectations about how involvement and independence strategies express power and intimacy; these expectations are known as face systems. Although they vary across cultures, three general patterns exist.

In socially distant but equal relationships, independence strategies dominate (deference system).

In close, equal relationships, involvement strategies prevail (solidarity system).

In unequal relationships, the more powerful person tends to use involvement strategies, while the less powerful relies on independence strategies (hierarchical system). These systems guide expectations about appropriate relational behavior.

Framing and contextualization cues

Conversational strategies such as involvement and independence do more than manage relationships; they also signal what we believe we are doing in an interaction, such as imposing, joking, arguing, or making small talk. Whenever we speak, we communicate not only the content of our words but also cues about how those words should be interpreted. These signals, which frame the meaning and intent of our talk, are called contextualization cues.

There are two types of frames:
primary frameworks, which are stable expectations linked to specific situations like lectures or consultations, and
interactive frames, which are negotiated and shift during conversation.
Contextualization cues help signal primary frameworks but are especially important in managing and negotiating these dynamic interactive frames.

Contextualization cues can be verbal, especially when speakers explicitly signal shifts in interactional frames. A common way to mark such shifts is through discourse markers, which indicate the end of one activity and the beginning of another. For example, a lecturer may move from informal chatting to formal instruction by saying, “Okay, let’s get started,” Discourse markers include words like okay, so, well, and anyway, as well as connectors such as first or however. However, they do not always signal frame shifts.

Framing and contextualization cues

Frame shifts can also be signaled through changes in topic, vocabulary, grammar, or language choice. Angel Lin (1996) found that Hong Kong teachers used English for instruction but switched to Cantonese when reprimanding students.

Verbal cues can signal frame shifts through changes in register or genre. For example, a professor may begin chatting informally about campus life, then shift into academic language and technical terminology when formally starting a lecture discussion.

Verbal strategies are not the only, or even the primary, means of signaling what we are doing in interaction. Contextualization cues also include non-verbal elements such as gestures, facial expressions, gaze, posture, and use of space, as well as paralinguistic features like pitch, speed, rhythm, and intonation. Because these signals shape meaning, researchers analyzing frames carefully transcribe details such as stress, pauses, intonation patterns, and bodily movements to capture how interactions are structured and interpreted.

Framing and contextualization cues

Non-verbal and paralinguistic cues can easily be misinterpreted because their meanings depend on cultural expectations. For instance, in some cultures, maintaining strong eye contact signals confidence and attentiveness. In others, especially in hierarchical settings, prolonged eye contact may be interpreted as disrespectful or confrontational. A student who avoids eye contact with a professor might believe they are showing respect, while the professor might interpret the same behavior as disinterest or dishonesty. This shows that contextualization cues do not carry fixed meanings; they activate culturally shaped assumptions about power, intention, and relational stance.

People shift frames in interaction for various reasons, such as managing multiple tasks or addressing different audiences. However, reframing can also be strategic, allowing someone to redefine the situation in order to gain advantage or challenge another's position. Disagreements often arise when participants interpret "what's going on" differently. One person may impose a frame that conflicts with the other's expectations. In response, the other may accept it, attempt to reframe the interaction through contextualization cues, or initiate a meta-conversation to question the situation itself.

*Reframing can also be used as a way to manage face

speech acts, speech events, speech situations

In the ethnography of speaking, the main unit of analysis is the speech event, a communicative activity with a clear beginning and ending in which participants share stable understandings of relevant contextual features. Examples include lectures, religious ceremonies, debates, and conversations. Speech events occur within broader speech situations and are composed of smaller **speech acts** such as greeting, questioning, promising, or joking. For example, a university lecture takes place within a school day and includes acts like explaining and answering questions. Similarly, a conversation at a party is a speech event within a social gathering and may involve joking or storytelling.

Speech events	**Speech situation**
1- Clear beginning and ending	1- Broader social context
2- High coherence	2- Variable coherence
3- Stable expectations	3- Changing expectations
4- Same speaking rules apply throughout	4- Different speaking rules may apply across activities

Speaking

A potentially confusing aspect of the ethnography of speaking is that it focuses less on rules about speaking itself and more on the circumstances in which certain kinds of speaking occur—or do not occur. For example, Basso's (1970) study of the Western Apache examined situations where silence, rather than speech, was considered the most appropriate behavior.

Ron and Suzanne Wong Scollon use the term *grammar of context* to describe a model similar to Hymes's SPEAKING framework. They compare contextual rules to grammatical rules for two reasons. First, just as grammar distinguishes between competence and performance, contextual expectations also involve gaps between what people believe should occur and what actually happens in speech events. Second, they apply the concept of markedness to context, suggesting that certain contextual behaviors stand out when they deviate from expected norms.

The distinction between "unmarked" (the usual way of saying or doing something) and "marked" (a deviant or unusual way) was introduced by the Prague School, including Roman Jakobson. Although complex, the core idea is that when speakers depart from default linguistic forms, they often create additional or more specific meanings. Applied to context, this concept suggests that communicative competence is not about rigid rules but shared expectations. Skilled speakers can strategically manipulate these expectations, using marked choices to influence interpretation, manage relationships, and shape the outcomes of speech events.

Speaking

Hymes's SPEAKING model is not an objective checklist of contextual elements but a flexible guide for analysts to identify which aspects of context participants consider relevant. In any speech event, different elements carry different importance, and some may be insignificant.

1- The first component of Hymes's SPEAKING model is SETTING, referring to the time, place, and physical circumstances of a speech event. It also includes the psychological or cultural definition of the scene.

2- In Hymes's model, PARTICIPANTS include more than just speakers and hearers; speech events involve multiple roles shaped by cultural expectations. These roles, rights, and identities vary by context and may shift during the event, influencing communication patterns.

3- The third component, ENDS, refers to the goals and outcomes of a speech event, which may differ among participants, such as a manager seeking efficiency and employees seeking flexibility.

4- The fourth component, ACT SEQUENCE, concerns the event's unfolding structure, including speech act order, shaped by participant roles and genre expectations.

5- The fifth component, KEY, refers to the overall tone or mood of a speech event. It shapes how speech acts are interpreted and can significantly change meaning, as in sarcasm. Key is often conveyed subtly through voice, facial expression, and posture.

6- The sixth component, INSTRUMENTALITIES, refers to the form and medium through which messages are conveyed. Speech may be spoken, sung, written, amplified, or broadcast, and speech events often combine multiple channels. These instrumentalities interact with other components of the event, influencing how meaning is produced and interpreted.

7- The seventh component, NORMS, includes norms of interaction and interpretation—shared expectations about appropriate behavior and meaning. These norms may differ among participants and are often shaped by power relations and underlying ideologies.

8- The eighth component, GENRE, refers to the recognizable type of speech event. Members of a speech community identify events such as lectures, interviews, or sermons based on shared expectations about purpose, structure, and style. Once an event is labeled as a particular genre, many other components—such as goals, act sequence, participant roles, and tone—are assumed and understood accordingly. Genre therefore guides how participants interpret and organize communication.

The components of the SPEAKING model cannot be analyzed in isolation, as each interacts with the others in shaping communication. An analyst's task is not only to identify the knowledge participants need for each component, but also to examine how these elements connect within specific speech events. The relationships among participants, genre, setting, purpose, tone, and medium reveal deeper cultural assumptions about power, values, roles, and communication practices within a speech community.

Cultural tools

Mediated discourse analysis begins with mediation, meaning communication transmitted through a medium between participants. Media such as newspapers, television, and computers shape messages rather than merely carrying them. Different media enable different meanings, so communication changes depending on its channel. This idea is captured in McLuhan's statement, "The medium is the message."

Mediated discourse analysis adopts a broad view of mediation inspired by Vygotsky, who argued that all human action is shaped through cultural tools. These include not only technological media like televisions or computers, but also abstract tools such as language, symbols, diagrams, and mental frameworks that mediate how people act and communicate in the world.

All tools involve both affordances and constraints, shaping what actions and meanings are possible. Writing an email, for instance, allows revision and careful editing, but makes it harder to gauge immediate reactions. In contrast, face-to-face conversation enables real-time feedback through expressions and tone, yet offers less opportunity to revise what has been said. A microphone amplifies speech to reach large audiences but limits privacy. Messaging apps like WhatsApp allow instant written interaction, yet they restrict interruption and spontaneous overlap typical of in-person conversation. Thus, each medium enables certain possibilities while constraining others.

Cultural tools

The concept of affordances and constraints shows that available discourse tools shape the actions we can perform. Different genres, such as Tinder profiles and job application letters, enable some purposes while limiting others. Similarly, modes and media influence action: images, gestures, mobile phones, and landlines each allow different communicative possibilities and restrictions.

In mediated discourse analysis, we begin by identifying the actions important to a social actor in a specific situation, then examine how cultural tools—such as language, media, genres, and modes—enable or constrain those actions. However, not all tools are discursive. For example, assembling furniture may require instructions and conversation, but without physical tools like a screwdriver or hammer, the task cannot be completed, regardless of communication.

Access to different tools shapes not only what we think but what we can actually do. Mediated discourse analysis shows that without appropriate languages, genres, or technologies, certain actions become impossible. Those who control such tools can exercise concrete power over others. Since social identities are formed through the actions we are able to perform, the tools available to us—and how we use them—help determine both our capabilities and who we can become.

Humans creatively adapt tools despite their constraints. If a screwdriver is unavailable, someone might use a butter knife instead. If a résumé genre limits self-presentation, a person may reshape or blend genres. Mediated discourse analysis examines this tension between built-in constraints and creative appropriation to achieve goals.

Thank you for listening